

# IT IS SAFE FOR US TO GO TO HEAVEN

by

JOHN EARL BROWN SPIERS

(Under the Direction of Reginald McKnight)

## ABSTRACT

My creative dissertation is a collection of fifteen stories that describe the interior turmoil of characters paralyzed by the world they find themselves forced to navigate. The world manifests itself in several different forms: at times it is ambiguous and sinister; at other times, it is a bounty of possibilities that leaves a character entirely unable to know how to choose, much less what to. Though set in the present, the collection is unconcerned with technological and cultural details and seeks instead to convey the elusive but strong sense of fear that dominates American life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

INDEX WORDS: Fiction, flash fiction, novella, anxiety, depression, interiority, America

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BA, University of Georgia, 2005

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2014

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

There is no way to thank everyone properly on the page. I will be thanking all of these people and many others in person for a long time to come. First of all, thanks to the editors of the following publications, in which some of the stories in this dissertation first appeared: *A Bad Penny Review*, *Extract(s)*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Passages North*, *Phantom Drift*, *Red Rock Review*, *Retort*, *SLAB*, *Solstice*, *Toad the Journal*, and *Yemassee*.

Thank you to Doctors McKnight, Anderson, and Rasula, who have all been amazing teachers and who are all a part of this collection both figuratively and literally. To C. J. Bartunek, Lily Brown, Liz Cunningham, Johnny Damm, James Gregory, Nicole Higgins, Josh Hussey, Brian Karfunkel, Rachel Mahan, Dan Rosenberg, Ida Stewart, and Caroline Young, all of whom have had a profound influence on these stories' trajectory and outcome. To my family, for a grand swath of reasons.

To Miriam, without whom none of this would exist, at all.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

I have something of an uneasy relationship with the genre of the craft essay. To put it bluntly, I would rather do the thing the essay is supposed to spend its time examining than talk about the thing. It is always interesting to me to hear about other writers' logistics: when they get up in the morning; how they work up to the act of writing; what they do to get warmed up; what goals (word count, page number, number of scenes, number of ideas) they set for themselves, and force themselves to complete, before stopping for the day; how often they refrain from forcing themselves to complete anything. Interesting in a quaint, just-passing-the-time sort of way; but interesting nonetheless. Talking about “craft,” though, has to me always felt and sounded like talking about magic. If you spend all of your time (or any time) analyzing a magic trick, you have removed the magic from the equation. Or a joke: spend more than a few seconds examining why it's funny, and you will kill the comedy inherent to it.

This line of thinking runs directly counter to a graduate education in English, to an academic career in English, and I know that because of two pieces of evidence. The first is: This education, this career, is for people who want to spend the rest of their lives examining, studying, questioning. We do these things to a hellacious extent in our professional and personal lives. And sometimes that examination and study, those questions, can be immensely rewarding. They are most rewarding for me when, in revealing how much work it takes to understand anything at all, they also make the work seem worthwhile. This is one way to define the creation of worthwhile fiction. But, for me, the



line has to be drawn at an artistic endeavor. I don't think it's very useful or helpful to interrogate an artist as to how the art comes to be. For either the artist or the observer. Because most of the time the artist doesn't know where it comes from—it just does. Even when the influence behind a story or a painting or a statue or a film or whatever other work of art you can conceive is as clear as an auto wreck, the influence is only a small part of the thing itself. It's just the initial conception. If I tell you that I wrote “It Is Getting Very Crowded” because I was fantastically depressed and I wanted to try and convey something of what the experience of fantastic depression is like for me, all I've really told you is that there was a specific reason for me trying to write the story in the first place. I haven't said anything about the experience of writing the story, or the more specific connections between my emotions and the words on the page. I'm not sure I could say anything about that. So much of the connectivity happens outside the capacity of language to interpret it, I think. There isn't any way for me to explain how it came about that is any clearer than the story itself. This is another way to define fiction. You can hear an explanation of where the idea came from, but that doesn't mean that you have any clearer an understanding of how the idea came to be. How it was brought into existence and made real. You might think that you do; if so, I submit that a trick has been played on you and the artist both.

And the second reason is that in order to receive a doctoral degree in English from the University of Georgia, one must write a critical introduction to a creative dissertation. So. This particular piece of writing has to exist. It simply must. I am reminded of something that Dr. Anderson said—to the class—in the last course I ever took: “I'd like us to be critics just long enough to get jobs. And, even then, only reluctantly.” That strikes me as sound enough advice.

One of the occasional advantages to craft essay comes if the writer lets his guard down a

little bit—or, more likely, has his guard elevated too high to see down. Because there is also the matter of self-importance. Writing fiction is a nebulous and specific activity: difficult to explain, unique to each person doing it. Writing about writing fiction is a chance for someone starved for attention, particularly from people who have any idea what he goes through, to stand up straight and flex his muscles a little bit. It is often full of ego. Writing about writing is not generally good writing; ego-filled writing about writing is most definitely not good writing. Good writing sacrifices ego for itself. Occasionally, in a craft essay, a little bit of the writer will sneak out. A little bit of who he is, and how he really feels about something, and how he really tries to present himself. Not how he really works, or how his ideas come to fruition, or anything like that. I am talking about the kinds of startling admissions that you sometimes hear people make, in moments of unrealized weakness, and in spite of themselves. A good craft essay should be a series of accidental admissions.

So, that is my goal, for this particular piece. I will try to say a few things about the stories collected in this dissertation: what seems most relevant about how and why they came to be. If I'm lucky, by simply talking around the standard approaches, I will be able to say things about how I think and approach this particular art without realizing that I'm doing so. Talking around is certainly how a fair number of these stories came into existence. “By Happy Accident” would be an acceptable title for this essay, though “By Accident” would be more accurate.

A lot of these stories started with just a simple premise. Or something even simpler than a premise. A question. The simplest thing in the world, at first. The idea for “The Beginning of Something, or the End,” the very first story in the collection, came from an observation on the DVD commentary for the 2000 British crime film *Sexy Beast*. The story in that film, the director muses, is what happens when you take the happiest man in the world, and insert into his life the

unhappiest. Hmmm, I thought. The unhappiest man in the world. There is an interesting idea. What would that look like? This was years ago. Well before any of the other ideas for the other stories had emerged, or were even fragments. And then, some years later, from somewhere, came the opening line “Every thing that could have possibly gone wrong over the course of a single day did.” It just appeared. And with that, in a flash, the two ideas merged. Not to tell the story of the unhappiest man, but of the least happy day. The wrongest day. What would the wrongest day look like? I would like to try and find out. The result is the story. I think it is a pretty rotten day. Though George Carlin once remarked that no matter how bad your day is, it could always be worse: you could have a headache. There is no headache in this particular story. So, in that sense, I failed to create the worst day. In another, I would counter with the argument that the entire story is the story of a headache.

Which idea—the story as a headache, as being about something intangible—is related to I think the most important single piece of advice about writing that I have gotten. It is: Make your stories about people. Make them about characters. Feature characters, and tell the story through them. Write character-driven fiction. This is the cornerstone of literary fiction. It is the simplest piece of advice there is. I came to it rather late. I don't think I knew how to write a story, really, until two or three years ago. My literary education has been rather backward. I can't say that any of my professors are to blame. (Reg has always taught the importance of character-driven fiction, meaning that it took me approximately seven years to both realize that one of the first lessons I received in a writing workshop was also one of the most important and to absorb that lesson. I remain a poor student.) As a child, I read loads and loads of popular fiction. I didn't really know what literary fiction was until I was an upperclassman in college. Meaning that I both didn't know that there was a distinction to be drawn between it and popular fiction, nor did I know where such a distinction

might be drawn. I still have a lot of Michael Crichton and Stephen King and Mario Puzo on my bookshelves. A fair amount of pulp. These books aren't bad for you. But what they often are is situational. They are scenario-driven; generally, their characters are only there so the incredible scenarios can play out. None of the people trapped on Isla Nebula are more than archetypes of resourcefulness; with a couple of exceptions, none of the people in Don Corleone's sphere of influence are much more than puppets designed to be influenced by him. Again: these are not criticisms of *Jurassic Park* and *The Godfather* in particular or popular fiction in general. Those books are a hell of a lot of fun! They are also not particularly inspiring if you want to write something more than popular fiction. And they are downright frustrating if you are young and just starting to realize that you want to write something more than popular fiction, but aren't sure what that thing might look like, or where you might find templates for it.

My first two English classes at UGA, though, were on *Ulysses* (with Dr. Parkes—a class in which we for good measure also read *Lolita* and *Swann's Way*) and, with Dr. Rasula, *Gravity's Rainbow*. I would never have taken those two classes at the time if I had had I any idea what I was getting into. I doubt I would take those two classes at the same time now. *Ulysses* and *Gravity's Rainbow* are are wonderfully rich books. I enjoy both of them to varying degrees, and appreciate their achievement and their influence. But you can see how, for me, they swung the pendulum too far away from what I was for the most part used to reading. Now, instead of the broad characters and meticulous situations of popular fiction, I had the meticulous, situation-driven, hysteria-drenched historical re-imagining of Pynchon, with enough broad comedy thrown in to keep me stimulated, though bewildered; and, with Joyce, such overmeticulation that I found myself intoxicated by his style and imitating it without anything more than the most cursory understanding of how the style of

*Ulysses* came to be, or of how the style and content of that novel influence each other. Which is just a long-winded way of saying that those two particular novels are as staunchly “literary” as King and Crichton are clearly “popular.” They are both too far along their ends of the spectrum to be helpful for someone looking to orient himself simply and move out from there. I didn't realize any of this until much later; in certain ways, both helpful and un-, I will probably always remain disoriented from that first semester's jump into the deep end of the pool of really heavy-duty reading and thinking.

I think back to my earliest attempts at serious fiction—the things I wrote when I was starting to think about maybe taking fiction writing seriously, potentially. I say “think back” because I don't think I have copies of the attempts, anymore, physical or otherwise. (That is for the best.) They came during a Maymester workshop with Philip Lee Williams in the summer of 2004, and during a standard 4800 with Reg the following fall. There was a story called “Glam Rot” about adult film actress Jenna Jameson getting elected Governor of California; there was one about a slacker artist duping an oblivious benefactor into bankrolling a trip to Eastern Europe, which I don't recall the title of. There was a story called “Dials Will Exist,” about a young woman, increasingly terrified of her responsibilities as a first-time mother and of the world into which she has brought a child, shuffling from room to room in her house, adjusting the thermometer, the oven, the volume and channels of the television, the angle of the shutters, all in minor attempts at having something to control. One called “Two Birds” that I thought was just the coolest thing, filled with all this gaudy, cascading, Pynchonian language, and all these attractive, bizarre images of wandering alone through the city in a daze, in the euphoria of having finished a major project and feeling like you've just saved your own life in the process. It took me a stunningly, embarrassingly long time to realize that the

“story” was nothing more than a disjointed essay on procrastination, and not a very good one at that.

There were other stories. And, while some of them did indeed have characters, none of them were really about those characters. They were all aloof: above. This was the period when I wrote from the point of view of the situation that got me interested in the story in the first place, instead of applying that situation to the characters who found themselves faced with it, unexpectedly. Those stories almost invariably took a God-like point of view that described the surface of things, but neglected to consider any activity beneath the surface. In order to get beneath the surface of something, a fiction writer has to demonstrate the consequences of the thing. He has to be willing to speak on behalf of someone else—a someone else he, himself, has created. It's the most frightening part of the whole ordeal. I think this is why it took me so long to figure it out. It's much easier to just be intoxicated by a cool idea, or a funny one, or a horrifying one, and so on, than to take a really deep and sustaining breath and try the idea out. Mr. King himself, when explaining the genesis of his story “Survivor Type” (a story about a man shipwrecked on a deserted island and forced to amputate parts of his own body in order to have a decent meal), put it this way: “This idea was so utterly and perfectly revolting that I was too overawed with delight to do more than think about it for days—I was reluctant to write it down because I thought I could only fuck it up. Finally, when my wife asked me what I was laughing at one day when we were eating hamburgers on the back deck, I decided I ought to at least take it for a testdrive.”<sup>1</sup>

And so on like that for a little while. Broadly speaking, the first few years I was at UGA, I fumbled around with bad stories, wondering why they were so unsatisfying, but not feeling

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<sup>1</sup> King, Stephen. *Skeleton Crew*. New York: Signet, 1986; pp. 572.

committed enough to the stories or the discipline to figure out the reason. The next few years—the beginning of grad school, more or less—were the long diagnosis and the beginnings of a cure. Only in the last couple-three years that I mentioned above did I start to both figure out how to actually write an honest to God story and to actually, hand-to-God, write a few of them. I think it's accurate to say that the stories in this dissertation are the only ones I've ever written that are worth anyone's time. And I think it's also accurate to say that the headache of “The Beginning of Something, or the End” is not the story's, but the story's character's. He is not finely-detailed, but neither is it important, for the story, that we know everything there is to know about him in the world. Hopefully, the construction of his story and the chain of events that quite literally pushes and pulls him through to the end together make it clear that you know everything about him that you need to. And hopefully the absence of other facts about him, ones you might expect or think you need (his job; his name) increases the unease swirling around him.

I think that that distinction—the details a reader might expect versus the ones that are actually important—is the thing I spend the most time thinking about when working on a story. When you can figure out for a certainty which details your invisible audience is going to expect, and then explain to your own satisfaction why the story doesn't need any of them, you've figured out how to write the story around those absences. And when you've done that, you're telling the story according to its own logic. There isn't any trickery about that. With luck it's an unusual way of concocting. I think the best stories are the ones that tell themselves differently but don't rely on trickery or gimmicks to do it. Donald Barthelme and Lydia Davis (on whom I will have more to say shortly) are the two writers who have had the most profound influence on me where the self-contained logic of a story is concerned. Barthelme's story “Me and Miss Mandible” is a perfect

example of what I am talking about and what I try to achieve. It explores a very straightforward notion: a thirty-five year-old man, due to a clerical error, is forced to repeat the sixth grade. That's it. There is nothing more complicated at work than that. Barthelme clings to his notion with the ardent grip of a drowning man to a piece of driftwood. He wrings every drop of absurdity from the situation, plays things absolutely straight. It's his straight face that I try to emulate. It throws students into a tizzy at every level that I have taught. "But," they ask me, "is the main character really eleven. Is he delusional? Is Miss Mandible, the teacher with whom he is in love, really a student? Is this all some crazy person's fantasy?" Their reactions would be frustrating if they weren't so hilarious. "You are looking too closely," I tell them. "Stop thinking of a story as a thing to be decoded and remember that it is a series of interactions. Much like the ones you yourselves have, most days." That is a difficult lesson to get across. But I think it's good that some people believe the world to be so ordered that they have difficulty understanding a story that wants nothing more than to explore what might happen when a moment of disorder comes to be. It means that fiction about disorder, about absence, about silence, about seeking and finding solace in the commonly bizarre has a real and necessary place in the world. It justifies and elevates the whole exercise.

I think that "Ben Is Dead," the second story in the dissertation, is a suitable example of what I'm talking about in relation to my own work. It started with just a title. I owe a great debt to Dan Rosenberg, of our program; Adam Fell, the poet, of Madison Wisconsin; and Ben Kopel, the poet of New Orleans, with whom I roomed at AWP in Chicago several years ago. Ben is the Ben of the title. The last night was a late one. And so the last morning was sluggish. We couldn't wake Ben. Dan said, "Ben won't wake up." And Adam, from the other bed, said—barely—"Ben is dead." He said, "Cut him up." I thought: Ben is dead. Hmmm. There is that Hmmm, again. I thought, I like



those words. Those words are a title. And the drama of the story is right there in the title. It's not any big secret. There is a dead body. OK. What do you do with that? I transcribed the efforts to wake Ben. There was a loony cadence to them, like two madmen looking for a prize in a box of corn flakes. Well: there's an interesting turn. What if the story has nothing to do with the body, and everything to do with the people who discover it? You can call Ben a metaphorical body, if you must, or a symbolic one; those distinctions aren't important to me. In my mind, it's a physical being. A corpse. One that you can prod with pillows and thwack with lamps and do whatever else you like. And, in my mind, the body is not important. What is important is the reaction of the two people who find it. Their follow-through (their lack of it). What do they do, when they can't make sense of what's happened? I'm only interested in the people. The body is just another thing in their hotel room. If I have told the story well, I can get you to forget about it just enough so that you'll grant the narrator his point of view, which is attached to the two nameless living bodies in the story. But not so much that you aren't interested in the body, either. It ought to be a magnet, pulling your mind back in the direction of the hotel room while you're following the two madmen. What happens to the body? Where does Ben go at the end? Who cares? Why does that matter? The story isn't about Ben. You might as well ask what happens to the missing furniture. If the idea behind "The Beginning..." is "What would the wrongest day look like," the one behind "Ben Is Dead" is "So what?"

I don't intend to go through every single story in the dissertation like this; I only want to show some of the assumptions about storytelling that underlie each story. A lot of the stories in here are "questions" in the sense that I've been trying to describe. Maybe the only other thing to clarify regarding that point is some questions are more serious than others, and the "others" often more

fun. The question behind “Premier” is “Can you dramatize a toilet seat conundrum?” I am often torn between staying inside a character’s head, trying to illuminate the tension there, and venturing outside of the character, to try and balance interior tensions with physical demands. In the case of “Premier,” the demand was a long reach across the bathroom for toilet paper. But there was no way that I could see to dramatize a toilet paper reach without a) crossing well beyond the threshold of toilet humor, after which poop jokes become both inevitable and rather eye-rollingly silly, and b) spoiling the reveal of the story, which is that the character doing all of this maddeningly self-involved and self-important thinking is sitting on the toilet in the first place. The reveal needs to be the final deflation of the ego he has tried in vain to puff up. So, in the case of this particular story, I thought it a better idea to stay inside of his head, and leave the physical things out completely. It is never an easy thing, to leave poop jokes on the cutting room floor. Paradoxically, then, one mark of a writer’s maturity may well be the ease with which he makes those cuts, and trusts instead his own editorial instinct.

Probably the least fun of this type of story, or anyway the one with the least humor in its visage, is “The Contortionist,” which wants to interrogate the moment that a person chooses to fall in love with someone else and asks a lot of serious questions about belief and acceptance in order to do so. (It also asks a lot of a reader's endurance.) It has to follow the story “Belief,” because of that. They are two permutations of a related experiment. One is a much more absurd and comical look at that moment; the other one tries to use the same point of decision as the prism through which an entire life is viewed. I don't know when or how I decided that the entirety of “The Contortionist” had to be a series of questions. The premise came very quickly, and nestled in it was the format. I never tried any other approach, or thought of one. It is—by a pretty huge margin—the most

rejected out of all of the stories in this collection, so maybe the fidelity I paid my initial impulse was a foolish one. But, then, in a collection of stories that are themselves filled with self-interrogation and second-guessing, I don't know if there is another way to tell that particular story. Just as I don't know if "Belief" would work if it wasn't a game of absurd point-counterpoint between rational questions and goofy answers. I owe a tremendous debt to Lydia Davis for some of the stories in this collection, and nowhere is that debt more obvious than with "Belief." I owe Dr. Cofer a debt, too, for both insisting at the outset of her Spring 2011 workshop that I purchase the recently-issued *Collected Stories*, and reminding me that very short stories will often benefit from an identifiable pattern in either their language or their structure. They give the reader something to hold on to and study in lieu of a standard narrative arc. "We Are Not Medical Experts" is another example of blatant Lydia Davis worship. All three of the stories I mention in this paragraph form a kind of vague triptych of romantic relationships. "Belief" is set at the moment a relationship might begin; "The Contortionist" is a lifetime long, but depicts a life that spends itself in infinite retrograde, stuck on the question of how sincerely it has been spent; "We Are Not Medical Experts" is a quiet moment of strangeness and intimacy between two people. They aren't attempting to "say" something, in sequence like that. I thought lining them up three in a row would make for a nice chronological exploration of the sacrifices and possibilities and smiles that come when you decide to share yourself with someone else, and of the uncomfortable positions you find yourself in, often knowing precisely how you got there but still unable to explain why.

"It Is Getting Very Crowded" is the opposite of any of the stories I've mentioned so far. It didn't begin with a question, or an idea; it began with an event, one that remains in the story but is not as important to it as I first thought it would be. I think it is the story that ended up the farthest

away from where I thought it was going to go and also the farthest away from anything else. The most isolated. It began with a guy who loses his hand when it is dangling out the window of his car and another car crashes into him. It wasn't a story about that guy. That was just the first thing that I thought of when thinking of that story. I was thinking about the crosswalk between Park Hall and the Fine Arts building and how easy it is to almost run down a pedestrian when traffic is backed up in one lane and they (the pedestrians) don't poke their heads out into the other lane to make sure no one is coming. I got hit several years ago, crossing on my bike. I wasn't hurt, and that experience didn't have any direct bearing on this story. I have also had to brake hard to keep from smashing into tentative people, people who walk slowly, and at almost the last possible second before a hard stop would not be enough to keep them from danger. I see people sitting in that traffic sometimes, holding cigarettes out of their car windows. Sometimes with very long arms. I think I just started wondering whether or not anyone had ever lost a hand or an arm that way, in an accident like the one the young man in the next bed is involved in.

In any case the story ended up being about the other guy in the hospital room with him. For the longest time I had no idea how to start it. It was an elaborate idea, and then a collection of scenes, and a rough idea of what order to put them in, but nothing more than that. I was getting very frustrated and I decided, without any idea of what would happen to it, to write out a violent screed of self-hatred. As an exercise for taking out frustration. Nothing more than that. This became the one that appears at the story's climax. It was apparent almost immediately that this was the ending to the story. I think I knew a little bit, before that, that it wasn't the story of the young man who'd lost his hand. At any rate I never wrote any scenes from his point of view, or thought of doing so. But when you are depressed and angry with yourself the way that Chuck is, I think the

only place that his story can end is with the full reveal of that anger and depression. So his story was told somewhat backward, in that regard. I knew that I had, if not the last scene, almost the last scene, and that gave me a specific point to work toward. Sometimes I will think thematically—“What kind of theme is this story tending toward; what things is the character doing that will reinforce some of that; how can I take some of the scaffolding away, to make the theme less apparent”—but I think that those are almost always the weaker stories artistically. And for the same reason that none of the things I wrote before around two or three years ago were any good: they put something before a character, and keep the character in service to it. Then it becomes a wrestling match, to see whether the character can win out. With “It Is Getting Very Crowded,” I found myself writing scenes: entire scenes built around a specific image. The flowers; Chuck's asshole; his parasite in a jar; the flowers some more. There was always, in my mind, a purpose for the scene, and the purpose was Chuck's interaction with or interpretation of some image. Something beautiful or strange. Something that struck him, for some reason. He isn't aware of the reason. Until he tries to get rid of the flowers, he is barely aware of anything.

What all this amounts to is a story that I think might be the least successful as far as making obvious sense goes, but the most successful in terms of creating and then following its own logic. It is long and maybe somewhat creaky, but I think that everything in there needs to be in there. I am a big fan of stories that are either quick bursts of engaging irregularity, or a long, slow burn. “It Is Getting Very Crowded” is the longest short story, where that particular classification is concerned, in the collection; unlike “The Uncomfortable Millionaire,” whose premise is somewhat apparent from the early pages, or “The Contortionist,” where the catch is visible immediately, this one doesn't unfold completely until the final page. So it's a balancing act, and something of a test of patience,

just like “The Contortionist.” Are you interested enough in this passive little guy to stick beside him to the end? And, based on what you know of him, do you buy the transformation that comes at the end, and the shift in point of view that accompanies it? I don't mean to suggest that those concerns, which are somewhat commercial, are the driving force behind this or any other plot propulsion. I think they offer a useful alternate way of thinking about both plot and structure. By anticipating what a story “needs” at a given point, I can do one of two things: fulfill the need in such a way that traditional expectations are subverted, or edit the story such that the need is either altered or eliminated. I would point to the tirade of the final few pages of this story as evidence of the former. Standard short literary fiction dictates a kind of Carveresque epiphany in the final pages of a story, or at the very end of the story: a reveal that illuminates the true growth of the character you've just been reading about, while underscoring his weaknesses or the importance of setting to his growth or any number of other things. Chuck's tirade ought to be an epiphany for the reader alone. And “epiphany” is probably too strong a word. Another use of “reveal” might be more appropriate. When we meet him, Chuck is hospitalized, sedated, dazed. He spends the first twenty or so pages of the story either hallucinating or sleeping. He comes out of his daze slowly, and not steadily: he is not really any more acclimated to the world by the time of his discharge than he is at the beginning of the story. But, he is in motion; the motion is happening for him. He carries with him something from the hospital, which he feels he has to pass along; his inability to do that aggravates what has been in him all along, though hidden from the reader's view. The result is nothing new for Chuck, but totally new for the reader. It plays a bit like an epiphany, but only if you forget to remember that you've probably been expecting one for a page or two by the time it happens.

There is no trick to “The Beekeeper's Ambition.” It is my best Norm MacDonald

impression.

As far as zombies go, “Should You Never Hear From Me Again” is a pretty poor representation. But then that is in keeping with a collection of stories that uses absences and voids as a major part of its M.O. What happened was several years ago for the EGO auction I volunteered a story. I believe the listing was something like “One story, for the audience of the winning bidder's choosing, written with any constraints or requirements that the winning bidder sees fit to impose.” James Gregory, who just graduated from this same program with his Ph.D a couple of years ago here, was the winner, and he gave a scant three requirements: “Zombies, muscle cars, and shotguns.” I don't know anything about cars or guns, but I have always been a believer in the idea that it's crucially important to start a project by just writing the thing, that research can be added later. I wrote a couple of somewhat bloody but also abstract pages about a man hiding in a bunker from the zombie apocalypse who accidentally blows his arm off with a hand grenade. The pages reminded me of my earliest work: all idea, no heart. No essence. So I tried to write “zombie stories” as an exercise in voice. Those were more successful. Little experiments, largely frivolous, but a lot of fun, and with overtones that I found much more interesting than the blood-and-guts stuff. When I mention “absences and voids” at the start of this paragraph what I mean specifically is that it was a real challenge to put zombies into these zombie stories, because I don't think they are particularly interesting by themselves. Popular fiction (I am rolling movies into that definition) teaches us that Nazis and zombies are the two things you can kill indiscriminately. This results in hedonistic slaughter, and showers of gore, and is amusing for thirty or so seconds. What is interesting to me is the idea that we, as a culture, have become so incapable of distinguishing between the serious and the mundane that we might be largely incapable of dealing with a scenario whereby zombies are real

and walk among us. Let alone a zombie apocalypse. “Zombie apocalypse” is a fun phrase, but overused. Every zombie story is the story of the zombie apocalypse. That's not interesting. What if zombies were just another thing we had to deal with? What if we had the War on Poverty and the War on Drugs and the War on Crime and then also the War on Zombies? And if it were just as bloated and protracted (and prolapsed) and ineffectual as the real-life Wars? With supporters on either side? What would people who support the right of zombies to exist sound like? What would they say?

You ask enough questions like that and you start to come up with zombie stories that have only have shotguns and muscle cars in the story where the speaker is based directly on James Ryan Gregory, who is an enthusiast of both. And zombie stories with almost no zombies in them, but whose speakers have all been influenced by them to such a degree that they hardly need mention what it is that has affected them so. They are talking to each other: there's no need for a shorthand, no need for the Exposition Fairy to come along and clog up the page with needlessness. I still think that maybe the preface to the stories is a little labor-intensive, a little breathless from all the work it has to do, but with luck it is more its own voice than a thing you have to slog through for everything that follows it to make sense. I did find out fairly early in the writing of this story that the framing device I came up with is somewhat similar to that of Max Brooks' novel *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War*. This was incredibly discouraging. For about six months I just abandoned the project, convinced that I had been beaten to the idea before even getting my own. Then I read a little bit of Brooks' novel, and I discovered two key differences: One, that his is a worldwide story, and thus broader, whereas mine is specific to America; Two, that his is indeed the story of how the entire zombie apocalypse came about, and how we dealt with it and continue to deal with the fallout



and massive casualties from it. So. If those differences are actually not as big as I make them out to be, and I am just a cheerfully naïve copycat, I suppose I'm all right with that. To me, they are massive differences in approach and outlook, and they result in very different stories.

I suppose that is as succinct a way to encapsulate the stories in this dissertation as I am likely to find. Some of them are variations on a theme; most of them are not immediately identifiable family members; but they all emerged from a period of intense focus on small differences, small notations, and attempts at seeing the vast in the banal. To me, the speaker monologuing in “Situation” really is having a minor crisis all by his lonesome. And it isn't too much different from the one that Chuck has at the end of “It Is Getting Very Crowded,” or the moment of minor confusion and disunity in “The Strangers,” or any of the other like moments in any of the other stories here. They are all about people who feel estranged from each other, for one reason or another. They aren't all especially bleak, though; small moments of light can have big consequences, too. The title of the collection isn't meant to be ironic. It's true: for as long as we can accept its possibility.

There is a poem by Frank O'Hara that perhaps says in a few dozen lines everything I have needed about 7000 words to get across, and perhaps says a great deal more. It is my favorite poem. I think of it often when writing. It is almost—almost—a piece of writing that it is itself about the act of writing. But it is really about many things, and one of those is art, and how art comes to be. (“About” is a pesky word, when used this way. I will continue working hard to be shed of it.) By way of comparison, I close by offering the poem in its entirety. I wouldn't quite call it the best craft essay, because that cheapens it. It can speak for itself:

“Why I Am Not A Painter”

I am not a painter, I am a poet.  
Why? I think I would rather be  
a painter, but I am not. Well,

for instance, Mike Goldberg  
is starting a painting. I drop in.  
“Sit down and have a drink” he  
says. I drink; we drink. I look  
up. “You have SARDINES” in it.”  
“Yes, it needed something there.”  
“Oh.” I go and the days go by  
and I drop in again. The painting  
is going on, and I go, and the days  
go by. I drop in. The painting is  
finished. “Where's SARDINES?”  
All that's left is just  
letters, “It was too much,” Mike says.

But me? One day I am thinking of  
a color: orange. I write a line  
about orange. Pretty soon it is a  
whole page of words, not lines.  
Then another page. There should be  
so much more, not of orange, of  
words, of how terrible orange is  
and life. Days go by. It is even in  
prose, I am a real poet. My poem  
is finished and I haven't mentioned  
orange yet. It's twelve poems, I call  
it ORANGES. And one day in a gallery  
I see Mike's painting, called SARDINES.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> O' Hara, Frank. *The Collected Poems of Frank O' Hara*. Donald Allen, ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995; pp. 261-62.

## CHAPTER 2

It Is Safe For Us To Go To Heaven

## The Beginning of Something, or the End

Everything that could have possibly gone wrong over the course of a single day did. The bed was cramped and bumpy. I lost a pillow out the window trying to silence birds. The water in the shower was lukewarm. Then so hot it singed the hair from my legs as I backed into a corner. My shirts had missing buttons. My pants bore definite stains. My dog cowed under the kitchen table and refused to eat.

The coffee maker would not start. When I examined it it shocked me and the shock stuck a legendary ballad in my head. I tried to make eggs but the shells were empty. I checked the coffee maker's wires and shocked myself again and the song grew louder. When I tried to get a third shock and be rid of the song, the machine shuddered and died in my hands.

My car refused to accelerate. The other cars pushed me into a ravine and I entered the city on foot. The bus cruised through a puddle on its way to the stop, covering me in a thin layer of grime. The grime was grime, but was flavored like cotton candy, but didn't resemble cotton candy in any other way, and I couldn't determine, despite licking my fingers and sucking my sleeves, how it managed to taste the way it did. I had inexact change and paid for a ride and a half. There were no seats and there was no space along the handrail and I could only make apologetic faces at the other travelers as the laws of motion jostled me about the bus like a brain in a child's skull. We came to an abrupt stop and someone hit me in the neck with a toy truck. An adult dropped a can of soda on me. The bus driver insisted I hadn't paid upon entering, and made me pay again before my exit.

When I tried to explain, his eyes narrowed.

I stubbed my toe in a revolving door. I pushed through crowds, headed opposite their direction, and found myself pulled through something. I received only bills and threats in my mail. One read: “You will never be finished.” I was out of quarters for the community coffee pot. Against my better judgment I asked for a loan from a taciturn co-worker, who gave me a washer instead. Its jagged point drew blood from my thumb. The blood tasted awful.

My pen was empty. I shook it and a healthy jet of ink leapt from the tip to stain my jaw and spread across my collar and chest. By the time I ran the shifting gauntlet of co-workers and maintenance men and reached the bathroom to wash myself, the stain was the width and height of a human face. As it settled upon a look of critical disbelief there seemed to be no point in trying to dab it out or even smear the face and it took a great deal more energy and positive self-reinforcement than I suspected myself capable of, in that moment, to neither curl into a ball beneath the sink and hope to remain dry for the rest of the day; nor to lock myself in a stall and crouch atop a toilet until the janitor turned out the lights, taking my chances that, this time, no one would wait for me; but to stuff a wad of paper towels between my undershirt and skin, limiting the second stain upon myself, and pass from the bathroom—around the door to which were clustered several of my colleagues, who, upon seeing me emerge, erupted into braying laughter, bra-stuffing wisecracks, and simple open scorn—returning to my desk, at my cubicle, with the presence of mind to brush most of the tacks from my seat as I took it.

My other pen had no ink. My supervisors shook their heads. The delivery boy tricked me with a riddle and claimed my desk lamp as his prize. My vending machine sandwich tasted like tobacco. I was seized by a fit of coughing and sneezing. On my way to the elevator I was knocked

down by an enormous man I did not know. The elevator operator told me the car was full. I fell down the final flights of stairs and into the lobby. The elevator car disgorged itself as I leaned against the wall.

A policeman who mistook my identity had me in his patrol car before discovering his mistake. It started raining and when I asked a salesman for an umbrella he stared at me until I walked away. The bus stops were closed for repairs. I couldn't catch my breath. A lion backed me down an alley and I cut my shoulder on a brick wall. A religious man carrying a placard opened the ground beneath my feet. When I emerged it was dark out and every other person on the streets bore a torch and the noises that they made were not noises that I understood.

I ran and they chased me; and when I ran for a train it chased me; and when I hid under a bridge they found me; and when I fled the city something kept after me, too close for me to glance, or turn outright, so I ran, knowing I was without a sense of direction, and my keys; but running was all I could do, so I did it.

I dashed up the stairs. The front door was gone. The bedroom door had no lock but I slammed it and leapt across the open floor to avoid what lurked under the bed and I pinned myself under the covers and closed my eyes tight.

When I awoke, in the still-dark room, I had ample time to consider. And I knew that while I did live, while the day had not culminated with my tortured death at the hands of a mob, while whatever had been pulling me out of itself seemed at last to be finished but in no anguish over the missing piece, this had, in fact, been the worst day. Everything that could have gone wrong had.

Because, when I tried, with my stringy arms, my wobbly legs, my tattered brain, my crackling skin, my certain feelings, my doubts, my haircut, my unexplored consciousness, to raise myself from

my bed, I was able to.

## Ben Is Dead

We woke up on time and something was incorrect. The door remained intact. Nothing was broken or stuck to the ceiling. Nothing stolen or stored here by thieves. We looked to each other across the room. Peered over the edge of our mattresses. Ben was dead. He'd gone to sleep when we had. Snuggled in the hollow between twin beds. "Ben," I said. There he was. A rumpled shell. "Ben," you said. "Wake up." His face obscured by the ruffled edge of a blanket made of the same cloth as the curtains. "Ben is dead," I said. "What?" "Ben." I pointed. "He's dead." You rolled your eyes. "He's sleeping," you said. We prodded him with loose shoes. Tapped him on the shoulder with tentative pillows. "Ben." The curtains didn't meet and a suggestion of light shone on our efforts. "Get the lamp," you said. I turned the switch. "No; not like that." You smacked him across the shoulders with the heavy base. He made a noise. Gently. "See?" you said. "Just groggy." "An involuntary reflex," I said. "Dead people don't have reflexes," you pointed out. "Escaping gasses," I said. "Gasses vacate a dead person's body well before rigor mortis sets in," you countered. "It takes twenty-four hours for rigor mortis to set in," I said. "What time did we go to sleep?" you asked. "You're making things up," I replied. "Even if I were it's important to be certain." We waited for something to change. "Ben is dead," I said. "The lamp proves it." You took the lamp and thwacked him. There was a sinking sound. The base separated from the stem. You grabbed your coat. "This needs more thought."

We walked through farmers' markets and public squares. Gulped the wares of streetvendors.



Chewing and sucking at ice creams and meat while children played in nearby fountains. Our feet without a path. The sun heavy on our heads. The city vigorous around us. We watched each other over sausage and fermented drinks. Our eyes together. Our coats flapped as we circled new blocks. Our feet drawn to the same place. "He's there," I said. "He's shifted," you said. "Has he?" You drew a line on the floor with a red marker and waited for movement to justify it. "The human body shifts hundreds of times a night," I whispered. "That isn't true," you whispered. "You'll prove he's asleep," I whispered. I asked, "What does it mean, if he's dead?" "I like this fabric as a curtain much more than as a blanket," you said; "there's something amoebic about paisley that I don't want covering my body though I don't mind it keeping the lights of the parking lot from disturbing my sleep." "I agree with all of that, plus this particular shade lends the room a cozy serenity in the late afternoon sun," I said. "The lamp is different," you said. "Is it?" I said. "Someone has repaired it," I added. "I'd rather not think about that right now," you said. "You should touch him with your hand," I suggested. "Either he's dead or he isn't," you said. You dropped the lamp on his skull. "He winced," I said. "His face contorted." "Unless it was the force imparted to his face by the falling object," you said. "You aren't a physicist," I replied. "I don't feel an intimate knowledge of the discipline is necessary to understand the basic mechanics at work," you said. "Try it again," I suggested. You dropped the lamp again. It shattered into large fragments. And the lampshade. The lampshade rolled under the bedside table. "Is he bleeding?" I asked. "Turn on the light," I said. "It's broken." "Touch him." "He might not like that." "We need gloves." "We need instruments," you said. "Which instruments?" You rolled the fragments up in the curtain. You reached for your coat. "We need to get rid of this lamp."

Somehow the day had gotten away. The markets were closed, the squares empty. The

fountains gushed but their children were at dinner. We wavered. We wanted wind to direct us. There was no wind. There was no ice cream. "We should have been able to smell him," I said. "The air-conditioning is very good," you pointed out. "I'm afraid we may have misunderstood the situation," I said. "The situation is still developing," you responded; "we won't know what it is until we know what it was." "That's very level-headed of you," I commented. "Is that an Eastern idea?" You dropped the swaddled lamp into a trash receptacle. Our eyes met. The remains landed with a heavy thud. "We aren't sure about our present state," you said. The echo of the thud followed us across a pavilion. "The choices we make now reflect who we are and indicate who we become." No one waited at the crosswalk. "I'm afraid I can't replicate your brand of detached stoicism," I said. "I apologize if my analysis is confusing or otherwise disturbing," you said; "when the lampshade separated from the lamp, did you have to ignore the perverse urge to put it on his head like a hat?" "I did," I replied. "If we both shared the urge it can't be perverse," you noted. "Do you want to cut him up?" "That might be appropriate." "Our mistake would be immediately evident." "We have a tub." "Do you want to cut him up?" "We'd better cut him up."

We returned. Ben was gone. "Ben is dead," we said. "His blanket is here," we said. Its tassels like rolled cookies. Its paisley a challenging thing. "The beds are made." The pillows fluffed. "We didn't make the beds." The mattresses in order. "Did we make the beds?" The skirts unruffled. "Did we sleep in them?" The sink pristine. The tub a spotless recess. "Is this our room?" The soap still wrapped. "Is he in the curtains?" There were no curtains. "That proves something." Our television was a radio. "What does that prove?" The writing desk bore pamphlets. "Did we gather these pamphlets?" We looked at each other. "Is that our lamp?" Looked at each other. "Whose room is this?" There was no lamp. The table bare. Its grooves vague and menacing. We stepped into his

nest. “Is the pillow warm?” Studied it for traces of blood. “It might not have been warm to begin with.” We discovered a hair. Squinted into it. “Do you want to touch it?” “Do you?” We crawled under his blanket. Curled into most of a ball. And asked ourselves “Where?” We considered other positions. Asked ourselves, “What?” We cupped the hair in trembling palms. The sun a creeping bulb. Its coming light blue and indifferent. We spent time. Breathed variably. Said, “This is happening. This is happening.” We waited for it.

## The Uncomfortable Millionaire

Claude Charles is an uncomfortable millionaire. He works hard to hide what he calls his “creeping suspicion—that something is not right.” Whether he means with himself, or with the world, Charles does not say. He breakfasts each dawn in a diner he owns, where he jiggles his legs under the table, full of nerves and energy and unsure whether he is using them correctly. By mid-morning, he is in the funeral parlor offices of Happy Afterlife LLC, the business he made famous with the low-budget late night television commercials the waking world mocks during the wide light of day. He fills out paperwork, talks on the telephone to distributors, stands at the window, and chats, almost always easily, with his secretary, his 1-800 operators, his troubleshooters, and whichever of his technicians are around. Then, surprised without fail at how little actual, real work there is for the ambitionless founder and CEO of a multi-million dollar funeral technology company to do, he either returns to his diner, sketch pad in hand, or walks from his townhouse to the campus of the nearby technical high school, which has a maple grove he is fond of. He goes to bed early and rises early, drinks very little alcohol, keeps few close friends. He speaks often with his mother, who lives in a suburb half an hour away, and visits her most weekends. They often watch televised sports. Their comments demonstrate a general appreciation for the sudden, the brutal, the sublime.

Charles says he hopes to be the first person he knows “who money doesn't change,” and that he has “always been like this.” He doesn't explain these terms. He appears to be very much like the person he was twenty-six months ago, when he was the overnight manager at a local big box

retailer, and produced and starred in an ad for the Steady Grip, his Afterlife Communication Device, which has become for the “survived by” what the Ouija board is for enthusiasts of the paranormal, what séances were at the turn of the last century: a partly daring, partly hopeful glimpse into the one realm no one has two-way access to. Since then, Charles has gone from an object of local interest to one of regional and then national curiosity; been the second guest on all five major late-night talk shows; spawned imitators in a dozen countries that he knows of; and, most significantly for him, become rich. The cliché “more money than he knows what to do with” applies neatly and accurately to Claude Charles. Yet his life is care-free not in its wild hedonism but in the total lack of it.

He lives and works in Schiller Park, Illinois, a town on the north-central edge of the broad metropolitan area known merrily as “Chicagoland.” It is pleasant and transitional in the manner of all suburbs. Sprawling industrial parks belie the skyscrapers to come, and the most prominent feature is O’Hare International Airport, from which the town is separated only by the Interstate and a chain of gas stations and long-term parking lots. From an airplane, the thin fog that shrouds the land is cause for a collar-pulling shiver, but the weather is balmy, more reminiscent of a seaside resort long after Labor Day than the snow-encrusted Middle-West of popular imagination.

The Sunrise Diner services a cross-section of bleary-eyed commuters and sedate, cheerful residents whose daily activities have little to do with the city proper. His is the rightmost rear booth, nestled between the server stand and the swinging door to the kitchen. Shaped like a distended C, the booth could easily seat six—which is why each morning Charles arrives before the posted open hour of five AM. “I’ll move once the morning rush starts and they really need the space—I just like to get in a couple of hours at the booth,” he says, while pouring the last of his hoddle of coffee into

one of the oversized mugs the diner offers, and then checking himself in the act of getting up for more. Without being asked or signaled, his waitress brings a fresh hoddle a moment later.

“I don't want to give the impression that I don't appreciate these people,” he offers, while twisting a packet of sugar into the coffee, and stirring meticulously. “Or that I can just come in and do whatever I want. I don't think I'm very good at that.” He starts to say more; then, with an expression that looks like a smile inspired by a grimace, stops himself. He appears grateful for the fresh coffee, nearly knocking over the salt with an unbuttoned cuff as he reaches for it.

Might he prefer decaffeinated coffee, or water, instead?

He shakes his head, and a dribble of liquid, so thin it would go unseen in dim light, escapes his mouth and trickles down his lower lip before disappearing into his goatee. “I don't do very well without a lot of energy.” Rather than use the last of his Dutch baby to sop up his egg yolks, Charles waits for the yolks to dry, then scoops them with the flat side of his fork. “I tend to brood. I'm a very 'curtains drawn'-type of guy. Coffee helps me be more the person I think I should be.” He guzzles the dregs of his cup. “When I'm here,” he says, “about half the time, I want to walk around and ask everyone how their meals are. The other half, I think, no, no, just sit here. And...and sit here. Be cool.” Then he laughs. “And I haven't been cool for a day in my life.”

The colleagues he formerly managed say much the same thing:

“He wasn't always approachable, but I never felt like I couldn't go talk to him. About work.”

“He's not a bad guy. Not by any means. But I tell you what, I'm glad I don't have to spend Thanksgivings with him.”

“He's got a thousand-yard stare like my father.”

“Sometimes we'd all go have breakfast after work. We didn't usually ask him. He'd just kind

of slink away before we got the chance.”

Indeed, by any colloquial use of the word “cool,” Charles’ statement is accurate. After graduating two-hundred and seventy-third from James R. Edgar High School’s 2003 class of three ninety-two, he attended DeVry University for a full semester, withdrawing when his car refused to start each morning during finals week. (“It had run really well, up to that point,” Charles says. “So I took it as a sign.”) He secured a job as a stock clerk, joined the overnight crew for the higher hourly pay, became assistant overnight manager when the man who had the job retired following a seven-figure settlement in the now-famous workplace safety case *Davidson v. Caterpillar Equipment*. He saved a third of every paycheck, refused to turn on his heat before November or his air conditioning at all, frequented block parties and Episcopalian mixers, and was without concrete long-term goals other than one day owning the 1978 Corvette Stingray he’d coveted since first seeing a picture of one on a poster in a boyhood friend’s bedroom.

“It was orange,” Charles adds.

And then there is a silence so intense that one can’t help but wonder if he is making all this up, buying time while he concocts another detail. But no: his eyes are cast down, intense, mirrors of a mind lost in all the thought that “orange,” for him, represents. Burnt leaves, perhaps, or the peculiar sense of rust and melancholy that accompanies the late autumn sun struggling past the jeweler, the psychic, the tire sales store across the street, the spindly branches of the naked trees behind these establishments. He will do this—not often, but at unexpected moments: the coffee loses some of its potency, or is washed away by the tide of introspection rising within Charles, and what had been a persistent stream of words ceases completely, while he navigates the flow.

Why did he buy the Sunrise Diner? Was it another long-standing dream? Some romantic

notion of camaraderie and free breakfasts?

“There was a For Sale sign out front one morning. I used to come here to eat after work all the time, so I checked it out. The story I got was the owner had a heart attack and his son wanted to buy part of a golf course in Arizona. He was going to strip it out—auction off all the kitchen equipment, the tables. Everything. I thought I could buy it and just keep it open.”

He looks into his mug. Around him, his waitresses bustle, his cooks holler: it is the morning rush; Charles will vacate his booth soon.

Was the continued employment of so many people—some of whom no doubt knew him well from his days as an overnight manager—important to him? Did he feel a sense of community leadership, of local pride, when he, out of a protective instinct, reached for his checkbook and ballpoint pen?

“They didn't know me.” He holds the mug in both hands. “I guess I bought it because...it serves its purpose. I didn't see any reason for that to go away. And I pay for my meals,” he adds. “I always do that.”

He presents something of a conundrum for the staff, not all of whom know for sure that the kind, flighty man who sits in the same booth every morning, and every morning throws off the coffee rotation with his prodigious consumption, is their boss. One waitress, with whom he shared the secret on his first day of ownership, has been sworn to secrecy. Meaning she had to construct an entire identity for him—one that she soon found out was in conflict with other lies that other waitresses, who had themselves been sworn to secrecy by the overeager owner, were telling to new employees, or those not observant enough to have pieced together the truth on their own.

What they think about him:



“Nice enough guy. He's kind of weird. But he's harmless.”

“He's nice, but he's real particular. Like, he says not to refill his cup any more often than anyone else's cup, even though he drinks enough coffee for a whole table. And he always spills something, but he'll use all the napkins to clean it up, and then he tries to hide the napkins when he sees me coming with a rag. Basically he can just be a real pain in the ass to wait on.”

“Sometimes he stares off, and I think he's staring at me. But then I'll move aside, and I can see he's just staring into the wall, or out the window.”

“I don't mind when he leaves after breakfast. When he stays all day, then I get nervous about him. I don't know why.”

What he does, when he stays all day:

“Sits, mostly.”

“Sits and thinks. It looks like he just thinks. He must think a lot.”

“He'll talk to us about stuff. He asks me about my art.”

“He's got a little notebook that he sketches in.”

What he sketches:

“I've never seen. He puts his hand over it if you get close.”

“It looked kind of weird. But I was looking at it upside-down.”

“Nothing in particular. I think he just likes to doodle.”

“Shapes, mostly. They're kind of abstract. Swirls. Sometimes it looks like he's drawing flowers. But—weird flowers.”

Despite his thriving business and minor celebrity outside the diner, inside it, none of his employees appear to recognize him. They are all asleep when his commercials air, and work in a

high-stress, hands-full environment, where the lure of a video clip on a portable telephone screen is minimal. To them he is only “a quiet guy,” “okay,” “not much trouble,” “sort of troubled looking.” It is to the outside world—when that world thinks of him at all—that he is snake oil salesman, cryptkeeper, millionaire.

He tips well.

Despite glee and fervent wishing to the contrary, it is an urban legend that all of the corpses in his commercials are real. Nor is it true, if truth be told, that his commercials are particularly entertaining. As unintentional acts of kitsch they make a strange sort of sense, but it's otherwise hard to understand how they've become objects of such widespread attention. They do exactly what they were created to do, which is explain and promote what has become popularly known as “a walkie-talkie for the dead.” The latest advertisement began running this past September, and is almost naïvely similar to its antecedents in tone, execution, and approach. Somber, wide-angle shots of families in various stages of grief as they sit in an assortment of funeral parlors (most of which, true to life, don't appear to have been redecorated since the early nineteen-eighties) are followed by equally somber, proportionally close-angled shots of mourners filing out, coffin lids closing. Before each lid shuts, a slow-motion montage reveals a familiar item laying on each coffin's pillow, next to the deceased's ear. Later, the same mourners stand graveside, stone-faced, as a priest intones and the coffin is lowered into the ground. And in each group is someone holding the same familiar item, which, in a second montage, each person switches to “On.”

Then comes the meat of the commercial, little more than a single, bizarrely juicy morsel: the Steady Grip is a hand-held, two-way radio you keep one unit of in your loved one's coffin after

burial, for whenever you have something you want to say, and a trip out to the cemetery is inconvenient, or too public. The voice-over actor serving the meat sounds as trustworthy now as the President of the United States did in the long ago, and gives the impression of someone you feel like you'd very much welcome a warm embrace from at a funeral even if you and he have never met. Hand model shots demonstrating the device's simple operation are followed by seven brief testimonials from seven different regions of the country, though five each of the testifiers are either female or what it is reasonable to estimate is over sixty-five years of age. Interspersed throughout their stories are clips of Charles: walking through a graveyard, sitting riverside, and waist-up at his office desk, offering his own evenly-paced words of comfort. He wears black jeans and a black button-up dress shirt with a black undershirt, and the harsh lights make his skin look paler and his hair thinner than they are.

Commercials for the Steady Grip appear on television in all fifty states, plus Canada; print ads are only ever half- or full-page, and can be found in three hundred different magazines continent-wide; internet marketing is copious. Happy Afterlife shipped just under three million units of the Steady Grip last year, at \$38.95 each. Aspen Marketing Services, the thirteenth-largest ad agency in the world, is based in West Chicago, handles Happy Afterlife since a takeover of its previous agency, and does not include Charles' company among the major clients in its own promotional materials.

Most of the places where Claude Charles lives his life are drab. And not interestingly drab, covered in cracked, lead-based paint; illuminated barely, by low-hanging forty-watt bulbs with a pull-cord, with high corners criss-crossed by spiderwebs full of decaying matter. But typically drab. The

smell of his diner is the grease, fatigue, and syrup smell of all diners, so heavy on the air that you carry it in your pores when you go. Charles' offices, with their fluorescent bulbs, acoustic tile ceiling, and vomit spray-patterned carpet, are the stuff of corporate nightmares. Northern Illinois itself looks, in early December, like late Cold War footage of Eastern Europe with the Soviet housing projects removed. And there is an ill-defined but nonetheless strongly embarrassed presence to Charles—as though he can sense the oppressive drabness, but isn't sure how to apologize for it, or what else he might say.

His home is a single-floor townhouse, smack in the middle of a row, covered in fading wooden shingles reminiscent of the Contemporary style. The front door is heavily scuffed, though sturdy. Inside are modest furnishings—two floor lamps, an entertainment center the height of a man. The walls are the gray and beige of eternity. The sofa and two easy chairs are upholstered in matching plaid, and the cloth has faded evenly.

Does Charles entertain often?

“I do a lot of sitting,” he says, not humorously.

The best way to describe the space—the living room, two bedrooms, more kitchenette than kitchen—is “lived-in.” Like a person lives and functions there. Though it is comfortable enough, and Charles, any secret collections notwithstanding, does not need more space, one's first thought is of Scofield's essay “Contemporary Exceptionalism and Consumer Logic,” currently undergoing its third popular resurgence and total reinterpretation. “What to do with our money,” the thinker reminds us, “will be the quintessential problem of the twenty-first century—which, more than any other in our history, will further be remembered as *our* century.” And the more money has on hand, the truer Scofield's maxim becomes—which means that Claude Charles is a man with a very

exclusive problem indeed. The state of his home is on his mind: “I haven't thought much about moving,” he says, shuffling around the room to gather loose sketches, stacks of unidentifiable forms. “I don't really have the time to do anything but what I do.”

On the walls: framed art. Mostly sketches of birds, a handful of movie posters.

“I think of myself as a worker foremost, anyway.”

The floor dotted with unremarkable stains of ownership, the odd sock.

“And I don't have too much, you know. Too many things.”

Across the room, on the counter next to the refrigerator, a coffee maker of indeterminate model—a nice one, light blue, with many buttons.

“So if I were to move, it would probably be to some place even smaller. For my own sanity. But I feel pretty good, here, already.”

A single dish in the sink; the dish drainer full; the dishwasher empty, dry. On the kitchen table, the hardback reissue of D. B. Harriman's foundational *A History of Burial Practices in Britain and the United States*. Behind it, the open pantry bereft of food save a single shelf, packed with energy bars and boxes of pasta. A sliding glass door to a narrow porch. Most of the man presents an outward self: he is not made of surfaces, but exists on them, among them. He is not guarded, but nonetheless protects something. The story of his success is well-known, the well-known image of him readily accepted. The toilet flushes. On the countertop, his consolidated materials list casually, like a tower in the wind.

It's easy to understand why most of the outcry about Happy Afterlife's supposedly predatory product has been directed at Charles, who is simply the sole visible member of his company. By

contrast, in the two years that the Steady Grip has been available for purchase, only seven people have filed complaints against Happy Afterlife with the Better Business Bureau. Of these, six dealt with faulty wiring and reached the Bureau only because of early kinks in Charles' customer service system. The seventh, he claims, was desperation, from an old high school acquaintance fallen on hard times, whose name Charles claims he can't remember.

He hasn't been on live television since the summer, and, in the wake of his last appearance, public venom appears to have turned away from Charles and toward the people who buy his product, for whom the anonymous critics in the digital world have particularly savage words:

“If you think this thing actually does what it's supposed to, you don't deserve your money or to live. So go ahead and throw your money and your life away on it.”

“People who buy these stupid things are stupid themselves, also. Why don't they just kill themselves and see if the stupid radio really works.”

“I wish I had one of those things, so I could beat the idiots who buys [sic] them to death with it.”

“Never underestimate the imbecility of the American consumer.”

Nonetheless, there is nothing illegal about the item Charles sells. Just as rumors about the actually dead “stars” of the Steady Grip commercials have made their way into popular lore, so has the belief that the Grip is meant to help its user communicate with the dead. Such a promise has never appeared on the Steady Grip's cardboard packaging, nor in any of its advertisements...but the idea is simple enough to invite the implication. It is in this way that judgments are made.

And there is the product's inventor to account for. His serious girlfriend Linda, whose picture sits in a gilded frame on Charles' desk beneath the funeral parlor, suggests that his reputation

is inaccurate. “It's an easy story, the morbid salesman. He's just an introspective guy who got lucky. If he wasn't rich, people would think nothing of it that he wears black all the time. You put a few commercials on the air, and all of a sudden everyone has something they can laugh at for a few minutes. Claude knows that. He just doesn't much care. And why should he? Most people aren't amazing. You know, you read about someone in a magazine and you think you know that person intimately. You don't know that person at all. It would be like saying you know all about love because you saw a photograph of people having sex.”

As regards public perception, Linda has a point. But, if she is right, then it also deserves to be pointed out that during each of his television appearances and photographed interviews, Charles cultivates an air of detached, almost eerie calm—like he's simultaneously talking to you, as an individual, and communicating with another plane of existence. His personality on camera is different enough from his “normal,” coffee-jazzed self, that the man is either a talented actor or possessed of phenomenal self-control. Even the main page of Happy Afterlife's web site, which features a welcome video shot in a park near Charles' house, reinforces this persona. It's a cloudy day, and he's once again clad from head to toe in sober black. His only smile comes with the mention of the “eternal tranquility” his device might bring to your dearly departed, and will certainly bring to you. The footage is faded, and scrubbed out—it has the look of a horror film produced as the final project for an undergraduate film class.

Linda is as protective of Claude as most people who know him are polite. There is a quiet energy to her, which she gathers and focuses into statements: “I'm not distrustful. But I don't think that most people can understand what drives him. He's an unusual type of person, and their interaction with him is too limited, or they're all too conventionally-minded, for people to look at

him and see him.” She has the mousey features that make her thick-rimmed glasses natural, rather than a hip nod to grandmotherhood. She insists she can't explain him: “All I can do is tell you that he is not put on.” Though she never drinks more than a sip at a time, she goes through her own mug of coffee before the waitress can take her food order—then switches to water, and places a hand over her mug when the waitress tries to refill it. Her words are a mix of simple plea and gentle warning. “It's maybe a weird thing to do for a living,” she offers, and the wince that crosses her face as she uses the W-word suggests that she has in fact been holding it in. “But it gives some people hope. Anyone who would knowingly overlook that is not a good person.”

She takes the bus to work, stumbling on the high first step before rising with poise, and forgoing windows for the aisle.

How much does it matter, the story behind his millions?

He insists that his inspiration is less important than its result. But it is nonetheless his inspiration, his story, one more ridiculed than heard.

“I used to go out to the cemetery once a week, when I was younger, with my grandmother and mom. And we'd get ice cream along the way and then go up through the gates and in. We spent a while just, just talking to him, telling him the news. Keeping him updated. It wasn't a, like a grim thing, even when I got older and figured out the real reason we were there. We never cried or asked for advice or anything like that. We were just saying hello. And then eventually I started to notice...this isn't totally related, but it's kind of important. But it was a little bit on account of all the girls, to be honest. I started noticing how many other people came to the graveyard after church. A young woman in her Sunday best was a real treat, for me. So there were all these different sorts of



levels of noticing, that I went through, that influenced the idea. Ice cream, and then aging a little bit, and then girls, and then their families, and all of a sudden you start to think, 'Hang on. There are a bunch of people here to pay their respects.' Only it isn't just respect. There was a whole lot of chatter, it seemed like. It was like almost everyone there was always talking out loud.”

The smile he grants himself is small and warm.

“And so that all just struck me, one by one. Just as things I noticed. Then I did what you do. Finished high school, tried college, that whole thing. I worked a few jobs, same as anybody. I stayed around home—not because I was afraid to leave; I like it here. So the Sunday visits, they more or less continued. And one day on the walk back to the car, it just sort of popped in there.”

Unmentioned are a multiplicity of technical details, internal deliberations—the sorts of things talk show hosts overlook in their search for the expected awkwardness, the sure laugh. What did Charles' original business model look like? How many steps were in it? How many drafts of his idea did he have to go through before working out all the device's kinks? How did he muster the courage to ask someone—even a relative—for startup funds? Did he ever feel like his was a stupid thought—one better left unexpressed? Did he ever sense that people felt like he was trying to dupe them? Has he ever felt like he is duping them?

“One thing I learned at some point was about all these elaborate contraptions people used to have in their coffins to let people above ground know if they had come back to life. If you were poor you'd stick a tube down in the ground to yell into. But people of means used to invest their whole fortunes in all kinds of pulleys and bells and tripwires, stuff like that, so if they made the slightest move inside the coffin, you could dig the live body back up. Your family might hire a commoner to sit at your grave day and night, waiting for a sign. Just in case. It kind of seemed like

that all kind of related to a general fear of death, but also of going unheard. And now, with all the advances in medical technology that we have, you know, you're probably going to be dead when they bury you. But everyone visiting cemeteries, they have a real fear. They want to make sure their loved ones still know about them. Still care. But how can you be sure that your words are getting through? They could be floating away on the breeze, for all you know. What I thought, was, I could make sure that you're being heard. I knew there were people who would be interested in that. I did not think there would be as many as there have been. I have a hard time thinking like that. On a really big scale.”

When he shares it, he is suspended between the hopefulness of childhood and the uncertainty of the present. The suspension transforms him; the unconsidered questions vanish. He is neither a tinkerer, nor a marketer, nor a moneymaker. He is a caretaker: almost at peace. There is no one else around.

Saturday evening, before the gallery opening, Claude visits Ms. Charles. His mother is a slump-shouldered, high-spirited woman who greets him at the door with hugs. As soon as Claude heads for the restroom, she retreats, shutting the door against the humidity, acknowledging, “This isn't where Claude grew up, but it's got a lot of him hanging around.”

The hallway between the kitchen and bathroom contains several hundred square feet of wall space. It provides a rough chronology of the Charles family, beginning with abundantly brown photos from Fran and David's courtship, continuing on to their marriage, and accelerating with Claude's midwinter birth and the major events of his life. Among the prominent eight-by-ten photographs are Halloweens and family reunions. The most recent shot is near the floor, at the very

edge of the half-hallway that affords the user of the bathroom a nudge of privacy, and is of Claude and Fran, bundled tightly against a wind visible only on their chapped cheeks, in the Soldier Field parking lot. There are no photos of Mr. Charles from the last two decades. “Pulmonary embolism,” Fran says, as her son flushes and the sink begins to run. The anniversary is June fifteenth. “He was a good man. But very silent, in life. Almost like a ghost. So he's not exactly conspicuous by his absence.” And she beams.

Mother and son settle into the living room, to watch college football. Charles takes the couch, a bowl of chips on the middle cushion; Fran rests in her easy chair, directly in front of the television set, an afghan across her lap and the clicker upon it. Neither she nor her son are interested in specific teams. They exchange information pleasantly, about their lives and about the game, and find a new one at every commercial break. There is a Christmas tree laden with forty years' worth of ornaments on the opposite side of the couch and a tray of bread for croutons on the dining room table and no walkie-talkies on display. The atmosphere is perfect for a nap. In this room, with this tired afternoon light filing past the branches of the tree, the time-honored and time-beaten furniture supporting calm buttocks, the delectable vice of artificially-flavored tortilla chips only half an arm's length away, exact reasons are irrelevant.

On the screen, a player breaks away from the scrum at midfield and sprints for the end zone, chased by hulking defenders, and is shoved out of bounds at the three yard line. His team's fans roar.

“Ho, boy,” says Ms. Charles. “That was a nice run.”

“That was a good one,” says Claude. He fidgets, though his posture is relaxed. After the team scores on its next possession, mother and son clap, then look for the next game.

At the gallery, Claude buys an up-and-coming Russian artist's gigantic oil painting of the solar system for thirty-six thousand dollars. He does this only after finding out that the first painting he is interested in, a two-by-one-foot watercolor of sportsmen at a picnic and their horses dancing behind their backs, does not come in a larger size. There's nothing stilted about the transaction. The woman who makes the sale answers Claude's questions about insurance and installation without once looking down at his wrinkled slacks or the faint discoloration on his collar. He writes her a check. Back in the Stingray, with the delivery scheduled and the heater strangely silent, he thinks aloud: "I wanted something nice, for the office. I saw a commercial a few weeks ago for an art show at the Holiday Inn. The prices they showed on TV were more reasonable than the ones here."

After merging onto the interstate: "None of it looked really good, though. The art. It was a lot of pastels. And more animals. Mostly animals. Or trees. A tree, next to a pond. Nature. That kind of stuff. It didn't look right."

Then: "I saw an ad for this show in the newspaper. It was part of a story on openings, opening nights. I thought, I bet on opening night you could get a pretty good deal. Especially if one guy's selling real well, but the guy next to him isn't."

He did manage to negotiate the purchase price of his solar system down from a less reasonable figure. The saleswoman spoke of the certainty of the Russian's future success. Charles acknowledged its likelihood, which she, in her vehemence, seemed to want more than her commission.

He drives in silence. Only after several more minutes does he say: "I probably would have gone to the Holiday Inn, years ago."

“If I'd of had a business, then.

“But it wasn't as successful.”

He debates telling his employees where the painting came from. “I know it was a good price,” he says, to himself. “No one would ask me the price. Someone might ask about the gallery. And I couldn't not say, and then they could look it up.”

His grip on the steering wheel is loose; it is his face that carries tension. “It would just be hard to explain.”

The four-drawer filing cabinet in Charles' office has been in the same spot for nearly sixty years. Cornelius McRae, the second McRae to run his family's funeral parlor, put it there after inheriting his father's company and turning it into an empire—he drove two competitors out of business, establishing the McRae name in the upper echelon of the Chicago funeral industry. Hank, Cornelius' son, kept it there, and the cabinet full. He sold the parlor to Charles, on the condition that he keep the name, when his youngest grandson entered veterinary school.

Charles keeps a cardboard box in the top drawer. The drawer is unlocked; he pulls it open without getting up from his desk, then has to stand to lift out the box. Inside are several rows of microcassettes, neatly filed.

“There are a lot of showings that almost no one comes to,” he says, picking out one cassette and twiddling with it. “Or someone dies, no one claims the body, and there's no identification. The fingerprints might be bad, or the teeth have decayed—there are a lot of ways to go unnoticed. I try to give those people a service and a burial. Just a simple thing. It's better than going in a big unmarked grave. Plus it takes some of the burden off the county.

“The worse ones are when the family pays for the showing and everything, and they put an obituary in the paper, but no one comes. If it's an especially old person, a lot of times what happens is their friends all died before them. They're the last of their group. Or the old friends can't get around so well. Or they all moved away. Into homes. Then you've got the whole family sitting there, with no one to talk to. A couple times the family couldn't even make it. We had some people last winter get snowed out. Couldn't land. Their plane diverted to Urbana and they rented a car, but it was a morning service, the whole building was booked through the weekend and I couldn't reschedule it. So they missed the viewing.

“When these things happen, I leave a little cassette recorder in with the body. The night before. And the day of. I like to have a record of the day's events. So they can know. If someone were ever to come by and ask about the person, I could say, 'I'm sorry you couldn't be here. It was peaceful; it was all very peaceful.' I could tell them, 'This is what happened, on this day.' It's mostly silence, you know. But they have a record. And I leave a Steady Grip in the coffin, too. No charge.”

The cassettes are labeled: Last name, First name, Parlor Number, Date. They are ordered chronologically. There are perhaps four dozen of them in the box. “I'll listen to them, sometimes,” Charles says, putting the loose tape back in its slot. “I don't do it regularly. Just, if there's time, at the end of the day. If there's nothing else going on. The way some people listen to waves crashing when they want to fall asleep. They make me feel that sense of understanding. Or you know the way pet owners will say they wish they had a farm, so they could adopt a hundred dogs and cats. It's my farm.” He spreads his arms. “This is where anybody can come and be put to rest. Not only the dearly beloved. People without a lot of family, a lot of friends. That's what I do. I operate at a loss, because that's what happens when you have as many charity cases as I do. But I can afford it. And—

I'm happy to do it. I'm watching out for these people. I can do that much. They don't know it, but I do."

For a minor cultural phenomenon, Claude Charles travels in few vectors, most of them quite short. There is a mortuarist's conference in Prague this March that he is excited about, and the occasional large trade show that he feels obliged to attend. ("Miami is all about hob-nobbing, seeing and being seen," he says, referring to the AAMFPD Conference held at the Fontainebleau Hotel every summer. "Vegas, the technology expo—that's where people exchange ideas.") He sometimes attends athletic events; when he offered to buy his mother a car, Fran declined, and thanked him for not simply surprising her with one. She agreed to a set of new tires. Nor are he and Linda avid vacationers. They have, peripherally, discussed children. "On the one hand," she says, hers placed firmly in his, "We each own our own houses. But, on the other, neither one is very big. Maybe before long we could move together. The schools are good here." She looks at Charles as he looks away.

It isn't a smile he's wearing. More like the beginnings of a tremor of a smile. He is not given to wild displays of the heart: a smile means just that. By all outward appearances and inward glimpses he is that rarest of successes, the person thrust into a spotlight he never sought and would turn off if he knew how. Until the bulb burns out, he will walk patiently away from its tracking glare. There is something under his discomfort, hard to sense, impossible to see. He has, without knowing it, and not in spite but because of his millions of dollars, ordered his life just it needs to be. His routines are no different from those of many people. The difference comes past the evening and into the night, when he might otherwise be at the mercy of a hundred minor entertainments, and

instead sits with his feet up in his office, or lays in his bed, listening through padded headphones to the silence of waves breaking on a distant shore.



## Situation

What do I do in this situation?

It seems like a little thing but it's not a little thing.

I'm pretty sure it's not.

Stop and look at it a minute. Be willing to entertain another notion.

This is a decision.

These items are the same price. Within a single cent they are the same price.

That might be important; it might not.

But they cost the same amount.

OK; that's one thing. And they'd be traveling basically the same distance, no matter which one I choose. It'll take each one the same amount of time to get here.

And, even if it doesn't, the length of time is not a factor, for me.

These aren't pacemakers I'm looking at.

I don't have to have the thing as soon as possible.

My well-being, my livelihood don't depend on it. It's just a thing I want.

It arrives when it arrives.

So that's another thing.

One's "in great shape."

One is "factory sealed."

But they're both new. They say so.

So aren't they both in great shape, too?

Shouldn't they both be factory sealed?

If one isn't, does that make it somehow less new?

You can take something out of the box and take all the packaging off of it and it's still new.

When does the newness end? When you use it?

Ideally, I would want the new-est one, of the two.

Right?

The newest one for the cheapest price. That's the idea.

"Newest" and "best" are the same thing, here. "Highest quality."

So if I had some way of knowing which one is the newest. Like, which one was made first.

Which of the two was literally created earlier in the day.

Then that could, potentially, answer my question.

Maybe.

Maybe if they offered pictures.

I could decide based on a picture. I don't think that would be irresponsible.

But then a picture isn't the thing. It's just what the thing looks like.

Say the person who took the picture is a terrible photographer.

His camera's old.

And then my equipment, on this end, also isn't state-of-the-art.

Well, that's foolish. A bad photo isn't a bad product.

Or a bad person. I can't punish a guy for taking poor photographs.

I don't feel silly.

What makes it okay for this decision to be meaningless?

I get to sit here and push a button and a thing comes to my house.

In a padded box.

That's a big deal.

This isn't lesser than any of the “important” decisions I make.

It shouldn't be okay for me to decide in such a quick and thoughtless way.

Just because these things cost almost the same amount of money. And have about the same distance to travel.

And are frivolous.

It would be almost reckless, to act like that.

No: I'll say it. It is reckless. It's a reckless decision on my part, to not put the right thought into this.

It's not a huge, overwhelming deal. But, it's also not no deal.

I don't think I should feel like I'm doing it wrong.

I don't think I necessarily am.

You know? You do things a specific way so you don't have to question why you don't do them a different way.

I don't go ice fishing, because it's dangerous.

That's sensible, to me.

I do my fishing in warm weather. That's just how I do that.

That's always been the decision.

You can't just look at it and go “OK—that one.” Can you?

Somebody distinguished it for a reason.

And it's not about the penny either. I'm not sweating the one extra cent.

Well, what about the price difference? It's so small.

You might not even notice it.

You pay the extra cent one time and it's no big deal. You do it a few times—you don't even remember them.

The thing comes in the mail and you go “Oh. I got that last week. Look: it lights up. Isn't that interesting.”

Instances...do add up, though.

Tendencies.

Well. If it doesn't matter, then it doesn't matter. But if it does matter, then I don't want to form a habit.

I don't think someone's out there trying to take advantage of stupid me.

Everyone can see the higher price. It's right there. The seller with the higher price knows his price is higher.

So he must think the difference is negligible, too.

But if a penny is negligible, then why does he have a higher price at all, though?

Doesn't everyone buy the cheaper item, always? Everything else being equal?

Is it that there isn't a difference, and it doesn't matter which one I get; or, is it that you always get the cheaper of the two, even if the difference is just one cent?

If the more expensive thing was a day closer in the mail, I'd get that. Sure. I'd pay a penny

for a day.

That seems reasonable enough.

Maybe the seller with the higher price has the superior product. That could be.

It might have hidden features.

These descriptions say they're identical but maybe the guy selling it is inept. And he doesn't know about the hidden things he could be advertising.

It could be a Japanese version, or something.

Or maybe the cheaper one just looks cheap to the guy selling it. If he doesn't know what they're supposed to look like, he might think his looks wrong.

That's also a possibility.

Maybe—maybe the cheaper one is being sold by someone with a better heart.

They're the exact same product, and the person selling for a penny less does it because while he's still making a profit, he sees no reason to be obscene about it.

Yeah?

That's not so implausible to me.

That's not impossible.

How important is a penny. How important is it.

I don't know anything about these people. I can't tell who I'm helping and who I'm not.

All I'm getting is my own enjoyment.

I'm going to be fine. If I never get this thing, my life will continue to be just fine.

So since everything else about these items is almost exactly the same, then why not buy based on who's a better person?

How is that a strange method.

I think it makes the same amount of sense as any other process.

It could be that the person with the cheaper item really needs the money. Couldn't it?

He needs a, his aunt is having a kidney transplant, or something.

He's selling off everything in his house.

But it's a tight budget. He can't afford to go any lower. So he's stuck hoping I'll trust the sacrifice he's already made.

Or maybe the cheaper one isn't being sold by a person at all.

Maybe it's just a company, and the company runs a program that checks to make sure it has the lowest prices on all its items, and the program adjusts those prices all the time.

That doesn't sound like that hard a thing to set up. I bet a marginally talented person could do that in an afternoon.

Now, that's fun.

It would be fun to cheat that program. I would get a big kick out of manipulating it.

I could strike a quiet blow for humanity.

They expect me to buy the cheaper item. But I buy the more expensive one, and thumb my noses at them while doing it.

Wouldn't that be a self-righteous little thrill.

Maybe I should contact each seller. That couldn't hurt.

I could ask how they arrive at their prices. How they maintain them.

I could say, "Does anyone in your family have a terminal disease, and is it because of the costly treatment of that disease that you are selling your product at the price you chose?"

As opposed to some other price.

No—they'd think it was a joke.

I wouldn't know what to say anyway.

This is becoming a doomsday scenario.

It's a little ridiculous. It might not really matter.

Not much.

Probably.

Eventually I'll decide.

Still. I wonder.

It can be hard to get what you want. That much is true.

I don't want to be so dismissive about what I want. That would be like...that wouldn't be good.

To me.

What's the protocol here?

I'm kind of at a loss, here.

## Premier

But is the thought as innocent as he wants it to be: because while the issue is semantic—whether the first word on the banner across the upper right corner of the magazine cover is in fact the correct one, or whether the magazine, by leaving the “e” off of the end of the word, is referring not to its first issue but to an issue dedicated for some reason to the head of state of a foreign nation—the magazine itself is still devoted to hunting, trapping, and, judging by the rest of the cover's promises of interior treats, other outdoorsy-type activities that themselves further imply hazy but unquestionable notions of masculinity, nationality, and apocalyptic nightmare scenario survival-worthiness; and, while he very much enjoys the company of his hosts and is happy to come up for the weekend even though it's more than just a hop skip and a jump and also the hosts aren't direct relations, but his through marriage, there's for him no escaping the fact that all the people invited for the holiday weekend were long ago cut from a completely different socioeconomic and educational cloth than himself (his girlfriend of just under two years having long since abandoned what she conceded to him were the family's “obsolete notions” about the way the world worked, despite or perhaps in spite of having been brought up in the closest possible proximity to such values, during a childhood she freely admitted was just about as pain-free and cotton candy-filled as she could've wished it to be); so while it is true that he doesn't judge or think ill or less of or in any way condescend to his wife's gathered extra-extended family in either speech or thought or any other to him conscious or unconscious mode of expression, it would nonetheless seem to him very much like



an ill-meaning and selfish and cruelly condescending act to go over to the computer and find the first available internet dictionary and look up the exact right spelling and precise definition of each meaning of the word, even if his intent was benign and merely for his own intellectual enrichment and not to point out that the magazine devoted to laser scopes and gutting freshly caught fish and better camouflaging one's deer stand and an untold but no doubt obscene number of other activities as unnecessary as they were frankly indefensible in a sophisticated modern capitalist democracy was so far behind even the back of the pack in every measurable cultural criteria that it just plumb couldn't be bothered to pick out the proper adjective to describe its first issue, emblazoning its own willful ignorance in the form of the simplest, most easily correctible possible mistake, the one most plainly representative of fractures in the underlying systemic order right in the middle of a god damn yellow banner that then stretched the diagonal length of the cover for all the thinking world to see; and thus that his hosts, no matter how good-natured or gracious they might appear to or really in real truth be, were, as supporters of this magazine and the lifestyle it celebrated, blind and uneducated and behind the pack, and contributed willfully and cheerfully and totally to the fractures cracking up the ideas on which they all stood, as well.

And in any case the word probably has acceptable alternate spellings, he thinks, his head cocked nearly to the shoulder to better study the magazine propped up in the white wicker basket hanging from the doorknob of the linen closet across the nook from his seat on the toilet there.

## The Strangers

What he said to me—what he actually, literally said, to me, was “I bet we could get tickets to that.” But what I heard him say—I was watching the ad panel on a moving bus—was “My mother's got a marvelous ass.” And as I turned my head toward him, and was greeted by the excited smile of this man, hopping from foot to foot with his hands jammed into the pockets of an old windbreaker I gave him, hair and eyes stiff with grease and weariness, his whole body tensed inward against the cold—like a faulty coil—who was there to say that my ears had deceived me? how could I know that I was wrong?

## Note

She asked me did I want to read it and without thinking I said no and nothing more but then on my way home I said of course you do you idiot you idiot what fool wouldn't but then upon returning home and not being kissed by my wife dog and children I still did but felt that I could live with myself for having not—but, soon, this, too, troubled me.

## Things Are Happening

I don't know the people in our room. I don't know who they are, or where they came from. But: here they are. They embrace me. And their greetings are effusive. I understand perfectly all the words they use when they speak. I can't make any sense of them. Because I am thinking: Who are these people in our room? Why are they here? Why are they talking to me? I came in here to do something. Now there are people here. What did I want to do? Why did I come in here?

You look as though you have an idea. But you aren't saying.

The people continue to talk and they continue to arrive. There are an awful lot of people. They crowd into our room through the doors and open windows and fill it. They sit in our chairs. Atop our desks. They mount the dresser and straddle the wardrobe and hang from the blades of the ceiling fan. All the while talking, sharing, gesturing. Everything they say they say with great vigor. Even as their gestures shrink. To create new space for all the new people. Who drop their knapsacks onto the floor. I was going to do that. There were words I wanted to say. Now there is no room on the floor for my things. No room in the air for my words.

I watch their postures and movements. I think that if I watch long enough, I might start to understand. I watch you share with them our photographs and objects. You share our history. Your words fit easily with theirs.

It is very cold. But there are more people. There are more people than there is cold. Their breath appears in happy puffs. The air becomes clogged with happy puffs and it is hard to see

beyond the puffs and into the people themselves. The people wear heavy clothing. Their hands are firm and precise. They discuss the use of tools to shape and craft. They are like a body of water. With a soft undulation and a delicate balance and a slowly advancing wave. The room accepts them. How can all of them be? What can each of them be for? I want to understand. It seems important that I understand. But I am forced to marvel. At all of the adept, delighted people.

They spill over onto our bed. They coo and stroke your hair. You close your eyes. I don't know what will happen if I look away. I don't want to look away. But there is so much to see.

I have the last blanket. I clench my fist after it when it is gone. The room is cold, impossibly cold. It cannot be this cold. Without the light bulbs shattering. The air freezing into a block. Who among us can explain it? The people look to me for answers. Each one of them has a face and each face its own expectation. No one could ever have guessed that there were this many people. I ask if they have come because of the cold. Their responses are so sensible and so strange. It must have taken so much to produce all of these people. So many combinations of chemicals and chemical reactions. Experiences and experiences folded into other experiences, and lost there. And so many other people. I wish that I could know the consequences of the things that are happening. I wish I could tell them everything.

The people in the room open up the quilt chest. There are more blankets there, and there is dried fruit. We gather under the quilts and pass the bags from huddle to huddle. This is what we are doing. It is an adventure. I am handed a bag. I bite into an apple. It is almost sweet enough.

## It Is Getting Very Crowded

There was a young man in the bed behind the dividing curtain who had somehow lost his hand. That was all Chuck knew for sure. He didn't know which hand, or how much forearm. Or how. Chuck was on a hospital high. Completely without responsibility. As worry-free as he had been since birth. His job was to lie in bed and sleep.

At first he was bad at it. The air was filled with boops and beeps of monitors and machinery. The rustles and scrapings of skilled people at work. Putting things where they were needed. Trailing cords that hummed on the floor. The occasional rush of response to a crisis. And scents. Always strong scents where before there had been absences. There was lemon, and iron, and sterility and foreboding. And he was unable to express anything. Too groggy to ask someone to please shut the door. He tasted bad breath and the lights were attached to switches he couldn't swat and the distance between himself and his constant dislike made the feeling hotter and broader as it pushed it further away. All he could do was pout. Slowly. At no one.

But only at first. His medicine came regularly. And the sedatives. Both of them so strong. And good. Like everything was. The good skilled people brought him round after round of viscous, wonderful medication. Liquids and pills. They looked just like the chemicals that they were. Chuck gobbled them with his little waking energy. He had been a patient for three days. Perhaps four. It was perfectly acceptable to shut his eyes against anything he didn't want to see. All of his senses. He had given up trying. It had nothing to do with him.

They wheeled the young man in. He had a drawn face. A fish's fat lips. Under the sheet, his gaunt body protruded at unconscious angles. He was balding gently. Young. Very young. Recklessly. To Chuck he looked like an impossible newborn. A thought arose, unbidden; he spoke it: "Bar fight." It was a mumble. As he laughed he projected a thin drool. Someone drew the curtain. And he fell back to sleep.

There was a surgeon, standing there. He held a clipboard. He was ticking items off a list. He looked like a surgeon. Chuck tried to ask him a question. The surgeon said that they'd intended to reattach the hand, but something something tendon damage, and as it happened they had a perfectly good left hand arriving that afternoon. From a firefighter. So what the surgeon had done instead was clean up the area as best he could. Somebody asked if a fireman's hand was the wisest choice for a young man with unblemished skin. The surgeon said there'd been an accident with a ladder.

Chuck looked for his hands. He felt a presence. Their waxiness. But he couldn't see them. He couldn't see anything. But there were the voices. He wondered whether this was a memory, or a dream. Or the memory of one. He opened his eyes. Well—there was the surgeon. He wore a lab coat. He wore green scrubs underneath it. He looked like a surgeon. He was checking off items from his list. Chuck tried to ask him a question. The words were a distant echo in his skull. He tried to pinch himself. Nothing happened. He tried to grow a third arm. He could see it—gray and scaly. Like a Greek statue. Extending from his chest. Except it wasn't there. Chuck put blue scrubs on the surgeon. Then he slept.

He had a bet going with one of the nurses. As to how the young man lost his hand. The

nurse didn't know about the bet. Chuck thought the young man had himself made a wild wager.

“Uh-huh,” she said. She was changing tubes.

“He wagered that he could draw the short cigarette out of a full pack.” He tried to give her the flowers. “And then....And then he couldn't.” He held the vase and dropped it. A little water sloshed over the lip and wetted his lap.

“Okay.” The nurse took the lip between thumb and forefinger and set it back on the bedside table as she reached across him to cover his shoulders with the sheet.

“You have such beautiful movements.”

She shrugged. She had big shoulders.

“So...economical.” Chuck was filled with awe. And love. They brimmed up inside of him and threatened his heart. He reached for her. He could not move.

“What happened next.”

“Next. Next, everybody shouted. They were all good-natured about it. They all bought him drinks.”

“They wanted him to feel good.”

“Sure they did. They all...they all had mustaches. And they clapped him on the back. And then they took him to the back room, and held him in place. They're all very strong.”

“Uh-huh.” She held him up with one hand and swapped out his pillow with the other and gave the flowers fresh water from an old pink spout.

“But he wouldn't run. Not from a wager. He's an honest man.”

“That's a good quality to have.”

“No. Not him. He stayed in place, and he tensed himself. And then they chopped off his



hand with a knife as wide as a phone book.”

“That sounds barbaric.” Chuck didn't know her name. He called her Nurse Spirulina. It had just come to him. She pulled the cord to close the blinds when she came to it.

“No. No; don't you see. It's...noble. It's a noble thing, what he did. They appreciate that.”

She handed him his water and his medicine and he took them. Then he leaned back. “In Little Istanbul,” he said.

She struck the lights and looked back at him as she wheeled out the cart. “Keep resting,” she said.

“They do,” Chuck said. He snuggled into the bed. “They really do. They know how to treat you right.” He sagged harder against the mattress.

There was running in the hallway. There were two policemen at the foot of the young man's bed. Chuck could see all of one of them and the hat and half the face and the left arm of the other. They were taking a statement. The policeman without a hat looked sympathetic. He nodded a lot. He was younger than his partner. But his partner took the statement. It had to do with a girl at a crosswalk. On the college campus. She was walking against traffic and the car in the leftmost eastbound lane swerved at the last second to avoid hitting her and crashed into the car idling peacefully at the crosswalk in the rightmost eastbound lane instead. The driver of the idle car had been dangling his arm out the window with a cigarette in his fingers at the time. Chuck thought of the hand and some percentage of the forearm twisted around and back upon itself in the pressure of the wreck. He shuddered. It came out a bubbly mewl. He laughed. There were bubbles in his throat. He wanted to clear it. But his coughs were weak and aggravated the bubbles. The bubbles tickled his

throat and the tickles produced more bubbles and he wasn't strong enough to stop any of it from happening. Most of what he did happened to him. The policemen were staring at him. The younger policeman wore the same sympathetic expression. It was frozen in place. Chuck wondered what he looked like to them. He pictured a stick figure, prodded by ghosts.

The laughs continued. They sounded like a very old man in a dust storm. Chuck's stomach ached. All of him ached. Laughing was a full-body exercise. The laughter was gaining strength. He started to worry that it could sustain itself indefinitely. That he had become a vessel for it. Then hands appeared. Beautiful, confident hands. Hands that bore a small paper cup filled with cool water and smaller paper cups full of color. Their appearance righted him. He sucked at the cups. One of the hands patted him on the forehead. There was a face. Kind. It said something. Chuck smiled. He had the paper cups in a little stack. He held out the stack. The face repeated its words. One of the hands patted him on the forehead. It was gone. Only an impression. Chuck's head was filled with impressions. He tried each one.

The running continued, accompanied by shouting. People were shouting at one another, through the corridors. The policemen ran. As they went the older policeman turned to Chuck and spoke. He could have said anything. It sounded like "Nice flowers." Chuck turned. There was the squat vase, filled with a growing spray of orange and yellow flowers. And purples. Their petals were round and thin. In the evening light they looked otherworldly. All of the flowers were turned away from him. Except one. Its middle was black and ringed with gold. It looked like something. Chuck watched it. When the flower became a face he knew he was dreaming. He watched it anyway—watched it ascend, take flight.

There was light but it was brighter than it should be. A haze of it. His eyes wouldn't focus. When he opened them he swam in blurry white light and when he closed them the light turned flesh-red and got blurrier but didn't go away. There was a noise—a faraway thump. He made a face and tasted chemical mint and then realized he was tasting it and then realized his face was one of discomfort. He was making the face he made when he felt great discomfort. But he didn't feel discomfort. But he was not comfortable. Everything he thought about happened before he thought of it but after he knew it was happening. He shut his eyes and moved his tongue.

Someone said something.

He was hungry but he didn't want any food. Not at all. Just the thing that the food represented. For nourishment to have appeared inside of him without him having to get it there.

Someone said, “Chuck.”

He opened his eyes. Everything was blurry light in different shades of blue. Of light. He unstuck his tongue from the roof of his mouth, over and over.

Someone said, “Chuck. We're going to remove your asshole now.”

He unstuck his tongue from the roof of his mouth. Squinted. Something wasn't right. He thought about it for a moment. He tried to say, “What?”

“Your asshole,” someone said. “We're going to remove it. Like we talked about.”

Carefully, with only fingers and no large gestures, Chuck felt for his asshole. He lifted one side of himself ever so slightly. It was important that whoever was there not see what he was doing. He prodded. There it was. Round and small. And present. Like it always had been.

Chuck frowned. He weighed his words. There were so many of them. He searched. His hand was still beneath himself. He double-checked for his asshole, and then, patiently, curling the fingers

into a fist, withdrawing the fist, rolling his arm out from under himself, lowering himself back to the surface, waiting to sense the reaction of his surroundings in the wake of these movements, he smiled. He thought he was probably smiling. He said, "That can't be what you're really saying to me."

There were whirrings. Then murmurs. From behind him. The light had a pulse. Chuck thought that maybe the pulse was the blood in his body. Dimly, imperceptibly, he reached for his asshole.

Someone said, "That's fine." And someone put something over his nose and mouth, and held it in place. "You're going to be just fine," someone said. "Just fine." All there was was the flesh-red presence; then less of it; then nothing.

The first thing Chuck did was check for his asshole. It was there. It felt solid. He found himself sighing. He was awake. Wide awake. Nothing in front of his thoughts. He blinked. The world had gone quiet. The stillness of a pleasant evening. Neither beeps nor boops. He listened hard and thought that maybe there were padded feet shuffling past the room.

The curtain was drawn halfway. He blinked. There was a presence with him. Sitting at the foot of the young man's bed. A faintly smiling older man in a tan trench coat and a black hat. The hat was a fedora. It looked like a fedora. He sat at the young man's feet and cupped one set of his toes. His smile didn't change. He noticed Chuck and waved. "Hello."

Chuck blinked. "Hi."

"I'm sorry if I woke you." His voice was deep, and even. But kind.

"I don't think it was that." He blinked. "I don't know." He sat up. "I'm not used to feeling

awake.” He moved his tongue around. Blinked, deeply. He asked, “Is that your son?”

“No.”

“Oh,” Chuck said.

He stood up and brought his chair to Chuck's bedside and sat down.

Chuck said, “OK.”

The man did not respond. He just smiled his small smile. The seat of the chair was lower than the bed but the man seemed to look down upon him. They stayed like that.

Chuck asked, “Are you...are you Death?”

The man threw back his head and laughed. His laugh was hearty and full. It sounded like companionship. A long companionship. He laughed with his belly and with that magical part of a person that could only be roused by circumstance. He laughed until Chuck started to feel all right about things, and then he laughed a little more. Then there was unease. Then the laughter began to trail off. But it was still there.

“No,” he said, finally. “I’m visiting. I’m a visitor. ”

Chuck nodded. “Oh.”

“Tell me about yourself.”

“What?”

“What are you doing here?”

“In the hospital?”

The man laughed again. There was a feather in his hatband. A short white feather mottled with red. The tip was all red. When he laughed the tip caught the light and looked like thin skin. He said, “That's where we are, aren't we?”

“No. Sure. Okay. Well. I was feeling pretty lousy—”

“You were feeling pretty lousy.”

“Yeah. Just after the holidays.”

“The holidays!”

“Yeah, sort of at the very end of the year—”

“Wonderful things, holidays.”

Chuck squinted at this man. He repeated things as if feeling for the truth in them. He was holding Chuck's hand in both his own. Sitting on his chair and waiting. He gave Chuck a small nod.

“And so I thought maybe I had a bug, a twenty-four hour bug, or something, but it lasted a week. And on the morning of the eighth day I couldn't get out of bed.”

He put one hand to his mouth. “Goodness.”

“Yeah—it was pretty surprising to me, too.”

Someone had brought a pitcher of water and a pair of plastic cups on a tray. The man followed his eyes and got up and went for the pitcher. “Please; continue.”

“Well, so I woke up on the eighth day, completely soaked. Actually wet. Not moist, the way you sometimes get over the summer. Just, disgusting and drenched. My pajamas; the bedsheets; the pillowcases. The comforter. Wet to the touch.”

“You mean drenched.”

“I thought—this is going to sound gross.”

He held up a hand. “I promise I've heard a lot.”

“I thought—I thought I had wet the bed. The cleaning lady came in and asked if I wanted her to strip the bed, and I was mortified.”

“Of course you were.”

“And I couldn't answer her. I was so tired. I felt like—I had never felt like that before. And I didn't want her to touch me. Or any of it. I tried to think of what to say. I probably looked like I was having a heart attack. Or anyway something terrible. This poor woman's staring at me, and I'm just squirming. After a couple minutes, she called an ambulance.”

He clapped his hands. “A wonderful woman. A thoughtful woman.”

“Yeah. She may have saved my life. And—”

“Perhaps she did. But it was the right thing. The prudent thing.”

“And in the ambulance the guy said he had never seen a human body sweat that much.”

A series of laughs and claps. “You were spared a crippling humiliation.”

“I don't know about spared.”

“You were spared.”

“I was spared the worst of it, probably; let's put it that way.”

The man leaned in. “What next?”

“Well, so, they brought me here, and asked me how I was doing; they ran a bunch of tests; they gave me a bunch of morphine, or something great, to keep me under—although, who knows? I could have been that knocked out from all the different stuff going on inside—”

“Yes? Yes?”

“But, what they found was, I have early onset pneumonia. And, an infection in the lining of my stomach.”

The man stopped.

Chuck nodded. “So.”

The man said, "Oh." He leaned back.

"Yeah." Chuck clasped his hands. "It's pretty bad."

"Yes." The man looked away. "I suppose."

"Oh." Chuck rolled his eyes. "And, an intestinal parasite."

"An intestinal parasite?" He lurched forward, grasping the bar on the side of the bed. "Are you sincere?"

"I know; it's weird. It's...unusual."

"It is *bizarre*. What a bizarre thing to happen to you. Do you know what caused it?"

"I...do not."

"You have no suspicions?"

"Maybe some bad cheese."

"You must have an idea. An inkling."

"I don't know; it could've been—"

"It could have been any number of things. You ought to be re-tracing your steps."

"I've been sleeping."

"Of course. But: upon first rejuvenation of your energy."

"They keep me pretty doped up."

"Have you been deducing?"

"I've been trying to eat a little bit. They removed the parasite a couple, a day or two ago. Maybe. I don't know, when."

The man put a hand to his chest. "That sounds dramatic."

"It could have been today. Do you know what time—"



“Are you in pain?”

“Pain? No; they put me under. They did it—”

“I said are you in a great deal of pain.”

“No; they did it—they did it in surgery. I wasn't conscious for it.”

The man brought his hands together in a terrific clap. “Bravo. Then you are cured.”

Chuck looked around him, to what he could see of the sleeping young man in the next bed.

“Well, I don't know about—hey, we should probably be keeping it down. Are we going to wake him?”

“Keep it down? Keep what down? Don't you feel jubilant?”

“Jubilant?”

“Jubilant!” He brought his hands together. The sound exploded outward, bounced off of the walls, shot through the open doorway into the world, where nothing greeted it.

“I don't know. I guess I feel...pretty good?”

“Pretty good?” The man was agape. “Have you got a scar?”

“A scar?”

“Yes—a scar!” The word had the same explosion behind it. Around it.

He was standing now. Chuck said, “You know, I don't know.”

“Well—lift up your gown.”

“My—lift up my gown?”

“Lift it up, man. That's something to be proud of.”

Chuck hesitated. “You mean a scar.”

The man reached for the gown. Chuck recoiled. The man laughed his same laugh. At the fun he was having. He lunged again. Chuck recoiled again and fell off the other side of the bed. He

knocked a machine to the ground and sent his cup of water flying. He was splayed out on his belly on the tile floor, his gown around his hips, face-to-face with a ball of cotton. He groaned. "Ow," he said.

The man came around to his side of the bed and stopped short at the foot of it. He said, "Oh." He said it like a man who's just discovered he is eating dirt. Chuck heard him turn and then turn back and say "Oh" again and turn back again. The mirth reentered his voice. He cackled as if the two of them were old, old friends. "You've got a scar, but it isn't where you want it," he said. "And it isn't where you can show it off." He held on to the wall for support. "Not in polite company."

Chuck stared at the cotton ball.

The man laughed. "Did your parasite have a twin?" He cackled. "Were there *two* parasites?" His laughter was persistent. But not unkind. Focused.

He was back in bed. The man was back in his chair. He looked happy. Expectant. "So what are you going to do now?" he asked.

"Now?"

He spread his arms. "Now."

The bedside telephone rang. "I don't know what you mean," Chuck said.

The phone rang. "What I mean," said the man, "is what will you do next? What will the next thing be?"

"I don't..." The phone rang. "Probably whatever it was going to be."

The man nodded. At first he was out of sync with the ringing of the phone. Then he wasn't. Then he was. "And what's that."

“Jesus, man, I don't....What do you keep asking me that for.”

The man cocked his head slightly. The telephone rang. “Has this been a transformative experience?”

“Transformative?”

He nodded. “For you.”

“I don't really...”

The phone rang. Chuck said, “Look, you're closer to the phone than I am.”

The man tossed his head toward the next bed. “It's for him.”

Chuck looked at the other bed. “The, that guy?”

The man nodded. “Answer it.”

“How do you know it's for him?”

The man leaned in. “He can't answer it.” He pointed without looking. “Look at him.” Pointed at the stump. “Go ahead.”

Chuck looked at the phone. “I don't even know him.” It was old. An old model. The phone vibrated in its hook as it rang. The ring started at one volume and ended at another.

“He won't mind.” The man had the receiver in his hand. He held it out to Chuck. He said, “Go ahead.”

Chuck thought about it.

The man said, “It's fine. Go ahead.”

The telephone wasn't ringing. The man held it out. Chuck thought about it.

“Go ahead,” the man said. “Pick them.”

“Pick what?”

He waved the receiver. There were flowers growing from the mouthpiece. Long and thick-stemmed. Brilliant like refracted light.

"It's fine." The man shook the receiver. "I'm telling you."

"I don't know," Chuck said.

"You're worrying too much. Here." He plucked one at the base and handed it over. Chuck accepted it. Inhaled. It smelled sweet. Faint.

The man was smiling at him. Chuck said, "You must be a magician."

He expected him to laugh. But he said, "No." He said, "I'm not."

It was morning because the light was growing. The blinds were up. It was painful. There were visitors. Four of them. A mother and three daughters. The mother was the shortest and she swept into the room first and her girls got taller as they came. They surrounded the young man's bed and ducked their heads like tiny birds to peck kisses at his face. The curtain was drawn all the way back. The young man reached up with his good hand for each of them. He smiled at them. His mother looked as though she wanted to cradle him. She kept putting her hands down on the stump and then removing them and taking hold of the bedside railing instead. The women commented on his appearance and his luck and his surgeon and he smiled brashly at their words.

There was a jar on the bedside table. Chuck looked at it. Craned his neck to peek around it. The jar was a jar. It was filled with a thin yellow liquid and a vague white blob. The blob had sharp edges. It came to a tiny sharp point. The mounted television was on and each member of the young man's family turned to it, every few seconds, as if by reflex, though they also cupped his face in their hands and kissed his forehead and peppered him with questions about what had happened, how it

had happened, how he had felt, how he felt now. Chuck wondered what kind of gift the young man's family had brought him. Whether it was some sort of delicacy. The program on the television had to do with forests. Forests or forest fires. Every so often a scene of the deep woods was interrupted by a shot of a person, sitting near a bookshelf, saying something. The jar was on the table between their two beds. A man said something about nature, something about cleansing. Every few moments the mother turned in Chuck's direction the same way that she and her daughters turned toward the television. Then he knew what it was. He raised his hand to snatch the jar away. The hand hovered above the bed, and stared at him, and fell back to his side. The look on the mother's face didn't change when she turned, and just as quietly she turned back to her son to share with him something about the procedure, the prognosis, the insurance claim. Chuck stared at the jar. A thin white blob turning slowly in the light. He watched for its eyes. The young man broke away from the television program to address his family as frequently as his family looked from him to it. The sound that the program gave off was insistent but very low. Most of the noise in the room came from the animated chatter of the young man's family. Through the doorway, the hospital was a steady pulse of unconcerned activity to which Chuck found himself increasingly drawn. Without realizing he was doing it he would glance from the doorway to the family, from the doorway to the television program. There was an order to the sounds of the hospital. A rhythm to them. Chuck thought he could almost feel it. When the young man's mother said something to her son about how he should have given up his smoking habit, he laughed and grinned bashfully and hung his head partway. His mother pressed him and the second-tallest sister said something about it too and the shortest sister turned toward them to add what sounded like a supporting statement mostly related. The young man only grinned and agreed. The rhythm came from being a part of the hospital, letting

it overwhelm and consume him. His mother said if he had quit smoking for his father's birthday like he'd promised he would either be lying in a hospital bed with just a concussion and an injured knee or he wouldn't be in one at all. There wasn't a conscious meter to the rhythm. It moved according to its own needs. Its breath changed in order to meet the pace of those needs. The young man only grinned. And Chuck understood. It was the kind of grin worn by people who were used to doing what they wanted and charming their way out of the worst of the trouble they got into whenever it did arise. Something like compassion and envy formed in his chest. It grew there. The jar was tall and thin and had a thick white lid. Chuck wanted to hold it. He reached over. He was such a shit. Used to creating messes of which he was unaware. He had probably ruined fancy desserts as a child by eating them with his bare hands as they cooled in the late afternoon. He had probably already forgotten about more pregnancy scares than he would ever remember. And yet his age made it impossible for Chuck to feel anger or indignation. Toward him. He was such a young man. Young and so dumb. It didn't matter that he had infinite time in front of him. To become what was regarded a "better" person. Or whether he ever would become one. Chuck saw how whole he was. How fundamental. How unlikely it was that anything in him would ever change. His family knew that. It had grown used to him. It was why no one criticized him for the close attention he paid the television set. And why even in their initial cries upon sight of his stump, swaddled to twice the thickness of a normal forearm, there not a trace of real anguish among them. They didn't see a stump. They didn't see where his attention went. He was himself. So there was nothing to be concerned about. This was their standard exchange of information. Only the setting had changed. As he reached for the jar the movement of his arm caught the mother's eye and she turned to him. He stopped. They looked at each other. Chuck felt the void of guilt but not the sensation of it. He

heard a beep. He knew there would not be another. The moment stretched. The surgeon. With his blue scrubs. He could explain this. He could explain the jar. Chuck waited for him. He tried to present a smile. The smile would explain that surgeon was coming. There was no distress over the surgeon's absence. He continued his absence. The void shifted.

Then the moment passed, and the mother's face returned to normal, and she smiled at Chuck and said something that sounded like "Hello," and one of her daughters, the tall one who had said the least, turned to him and looked away.

Chuck cradled the jar. He didn't imagine flowers, or a face among the petals, or a radiant stem. He stared into the tiny hard eyes of the blob. He saw that what he had thought was a fat bloated body was in truth a thin floppy frame looped over onto itself dozens and dozens of times. A body many times longer than his own. He counted the loops as they floated gently together, gently apart. A pair of burly orderlies came in and nodded to the young man's family and did their orderly things. The family's attention strayed. The young girls looked around the room. The tallest ran a finger along the frame of a painting of a beach at high tide. Chuck's brow furrowed. A tiny tongue protruded from the white blob. The blob was smiling at him. No one else knew. He reached around and stuffed the jar behind his pillow. The jar slipped around the bed frame and clanged against the floor. It smashed against the floor. Everyone looked up. They looked at Chuck and around him. He thought he should pretend to be asleep. He closed his eyes and lay back. That wouldn't work; they had already seen him. He opened his eyes. One of the orderlies walked out of the room. Briskly. Everything was happening briskly. The second orderly did precise things with his hands and the needles and tubes and swabs they held. The mother spoke to him in tight, practical sentences, asking for information about sustenance and physical therapy and rehabilitation. The tallest daughter stared

at the painting. As if she were trying to identify something about it. Something in it.

Chuck saw his opportunity. He lay his elbow into the second of his pillows. It billowed backward, between the bars of the bed frame. Chuck lay into it a second time. The pillow was wedged in place. He pushed back against it and twisted his body into the push. The pillow fell behind the bed. Chuck sighed. The pillow would conceal the blob. It would soak up the liquid and conceal the blob. And it was behind the bed, and under it. No one had to know. It wasn't anyone's concern. He could go on lying in the bed, absorbing the world and being absorbed by it. Nothing else had to happen.

The orderly returned and fell back into position. In his wake came a janitor. Another burly man. He had coarse stubble and a round face and a thick chest. He wore scrubs. And covered shoes. He kept his eyes down. On his work. Chuck tried to get his attention. He tried to say "Sir." All he could manage was a consonantless groan. The janitor reached under the bed. He held up a corner of the pillow between two gloved fingers. The pillowcase was blue. The lower corner a darker shade of blue. Beneath that came the sound of urine streaming into a bowl. Of rain spattering against a tile floor through a hole in the high roof. The janitor looked at Chuck. He didn't say anything. Chuck tried to think of something to say. He tried to smile. He imagined he looked like the victim of a stroke. He tried to look like one.

The janitor reached down and grabbed something else and tossed it into his mop bucket. Chuck never heard it land. He imagined the blob. It looked up at the room from the bucket. A small, ageless creature. Everything else from a different point in time. Full of something it had no ideas about. And which had no idea of itself. Its existence. He tried to turn his blob head, but the notion disappeared in a cowering slither.



The young man had drifted off. His family kissed him and squeezed his sleeping stump and filed out as they came in. Now Chuck could hear the television, under the hum of voices and movement outside. He could sense its movement. He didn't want to collaborate. He concentrated on the television. It was full of excitement. And more. Always something more. The forest fires continued. After those came whales. After whales, the ruins of a mountain civilization.

Some of the flowers were dying. It occurred to Chuck that they were too tall for their vase. They towered over it, their long stems bowing slightly in the middle. He looked around the room for sharp objects. The young man's bed was empty. He opened the drawer in the table. Only an empty bottle that rolled to the front.

He frowned and took the flowers out of the vase and laid them on the table and stared at them a moment. Then he picked the closest one and snapped the end from it like a green bean. And the next one. The third was soggy and fibrous and took twisting and pulling to break. And the next one. And the one after that. Alongside the clean breaks was a row of gelatinous masses. He lifted one of the remaining flowers to the tip of his mouth and bit the end from it. It came away cleanly. The taste was bitter. An unconsciousness bitterness seeping inside of him. He grimaced. He hacked like a game bird swallowing a marble. He fanned at his mouth. He reached for the vase and drank from it. Then again. He gasped. Hawked.

The young man entered, in a wheelchair. He stared at Chuck but the nurse pushed him to his bed. "Forgot my bag," he said, with a sudden smile.

"Oh," Chuck said. He added, "Yeah." He put the vase back, arranged the flowers in it. There were two with long stems. They looked unsure of the others.

The young man set the bag on his lap. He drummed his fingers on it. Chuck watched them because nothing else moved. The young man said, “Yup. Got em both working again.”

“Oh,” Chuck said. Then he realized. “Oh! Hey. That's great. That's, that's great.”

“Thanks,” said the young man. His hair was very precisely ordered. “They said it'll be a couple of months before I'm up to full sensation. But, you know.” He made a masturbatory gesture with his new hand. It was a gigantic hand. Much bigger than his birth hand. The nurse rolled her eyes.

“Does it hurt?” Chuck asked.

They headed for the door. “See you,” said the young man, pumping over his shoulder a giant fist.

“Oh—hey,” Chuck said. The nurse stopped. She fixed her eyes on him but turned the chair. Chuck held out the vase. “You forgot these. Also.”

A smile. “No thanks, man.”

Chuck looked from the vase to him. “What do you...mean?”

The nurse pushed them out. “Not my thing.”

“But these—aren't these yours?”

He was gone. Chuck stared out the doorway. A doctor passed by the room. Another. A janitor. He sat down on the bed, stretched his legs. The vase grew heavy in his hand. He had been trying to let go of things as best he could. Little things. The kind he knew he shouldn't carry with him. Sights and imperceptions. His shopping cart bumped into. Being walked in front of by people. A couple. Their only acknowledgement of the shift in his stride a glance over one shoulder after they had moved past. Acknowledgement only by his absence. It was more than simple things. The feeling

of being overlooked. Sometimes the mailbox. Trapped in his car by any delay, any halt. The merest construction detour or poor decision by the drivers in front of him. Anything that kept him from moving toward what he intended at the pace he knew to be appropriate. When in his fatigue he noticed other people he imagined what it must look like. A sweaty, tired man pounding on an uncomplaining wheel. Squeezing it. Throttling it as one might the neck of an unfortunate chicken. Exactly as pathetic and soggy as he was. The ability to see himself this way did nothing to keep him from acting like it. He was no calmer for the knowledge that the anger was irrational, that he was foolish for letting it guide him. There were no other means of release. For it, or from it. He started to walk to places. Without knowing he was doing it, he examined other recurring moments in his life, noting other sadnesses and hesitations as they appeared. He had a way of staying caught over time in something he only then began to understand had been there all along. It reminded him almost of the detachment he felt in his hospital bed while the hospital went about the business of itself. What he was was a tiny component of a very large thing. His role in that thing was to stay still and exist.

A nurse came in, pushing a wheelchair. Her blonde hair bobbed as she walked. "You're not dressed," she said.

Chuck looked down. He was wearing his hospital gown. He double-checked. He said, "I don't understand."

"Your clothes, silly-pants." She patted the seat. "We're getting you out of here. I'll pull the curtain so you can change." She opened the closet. "Nice flowers," she said. "Are they yours?"

"I don't know." Chuck looked at them. One of the red ones was ghastly and drooping but it hadn't fallen yet. "I guess so."

The nurse folded his items and put them into a hospital bag. “What kind are they.”

“I don't know.” Then: “Do you want them?”

She laughed. “No thanks. I've got my hands full for the rest of the day. Of stool samples. No end to that. They just keep coming. More and more.”

“More and more,” Chuck said. “Well, do you know if—have I had any visitors, over the last couple days?”

“You, personally?”

“Has anyone visited my room.”

She burped. She was chewing bubblegum. It smelled terrible. “Sure. Your roommate had quite a few. This is the place to be.”

“Did any of them come more than once?”

“We don't really keep records...” She shook her hands and stuck her tongue out and made a noise that said she didn't people know what else to say. “You know?”

“No,” he said. “You don't want them?”

“The flowers.”

He wiped his upper lip.

She smiled, a little bit. “Why?”

He didn't know. “They would go—you would look nice, with them. Because—I don't know. Why does anyone ever give anyone flowers. Because...because you have to clean up poop, how about that. Examine it. They're your poop flowers.”

“I don't have any place to put them.”

“You could put them on the poop machine.”

“It's not that kind of machine.”

“You could leave them at the nurse's station.”

“That's a good idea.” She patted the clothes stacked on the bedside chair. “Why don't you do that? I'll let you change.”

It was a different nurse who returned. He sat in the wheelchair with the bag upright on one leg and his hand curled around the vase on the other and didn't notice the station until they were passing it. They moved without concern. Chuck reached for the desk but saw that he was too low. Saw the vase slipping off the edge, falling to the ground, smashing. People picking up bits of glass between their fingers. Instead he kept it close to his chest. When the elevator chimed he looked back down the hallway toward his room. It was wide. Much more spacious than he had imagined. Full of people. But not enough of them. When the doors closed and the feeling began to pass he held it closer still.

He had suspected a problem with the refrigerator almost immediately. There had been a sale. He'd gotten a shrimp platter. The ice was melting off the shrimp and the shrimp were sitting in shrimp-water when he scooped a handful away for a morning snack. They tasted like it. More like shrimp-water and less like shrimp. Later on, after a nap, he poured a glass of milk. He had had an erotic dream. Sexless, but intense. In the dazed shuffle to the kitchen he'd forgotten the drama of it. It had something to do with false teeth and long stares. He poured the milk and drank it and it was much nearer to room temperature than milk probably should have been. But it tasted fine. That was the key. Not like spoiled milk. Not milk laden with bacteria. It couldn't be. It was much more likely that the refrigerator would continue to function until a more convenient time for it to not.

He paced the block. The next block. Looking for a worthy candidate. The dark doorway to a house whose occupants hadn't returned from work. An open mailbox. Secret—it had to be a secret. The hood of a car. An empty flag mount. All the cars were moving. He walked up the hill to turn at the intersection. A car approached, from behind: headlights on the low branches; then the power of the engine; then its physical presence. It rolled past the stop sign before taking off. He kept the bundle at his side in a tight fist. Like a weapon after use. He had wrapped the stems in aluminum foil but he could feel past it to the paste they were becoming. The little sinews and tendons of the stems, straining to maintain the muscle through which they'd been created. There was a row of townhomes most of which were empty and as he turned down the garden path of the first one a motion light came to life. He turned back up the path as a car pulled in to the adjacent drive. He switched hands. The drive wrapped around and the car followed it.

There was eggnog and deviled eggs and most of a ham. He thought about throwing it away but he wasn't sure the food was warm enough to justify the waste. He thought of donating it all. There was a soup kitchen within a short drive and a shelter close to it. The nog was unopened and the deviled eggs sat unblemished on a tray ringed with egg-shaped indentations made for that very purpose. But then there was the chance that the food had gone bad. He sniffed it. He didn't want to spread a bad thing and make it worse. So he got out a plate. He sliced against the bone of the precut ham and came away with meat enough for royalty. He piled a half-dozen eggs around it and got a pint glass from the cabinet and filled it to the top with creamy, lukewarm eggnog. After he set the food on the table he got a second glass and filled it. Then he sat and chewed. The ham had a gentle slime—one he didn't recognize, but thought could be attributes he had simply never noticed before. The extra warmth lent a sweetness to the eggnog; it complimented the ham wonderfully. His

thoughts turned to families. And other people. Doing just what he was doing in much the same way. At least some of them were probably eating food that had sat out longer than was supposed to be healthy, or hadn't sat long enough in other, overtaxed refrigerators. That had to be. It felt more rational than not. He was coming to embrace unusual ideas when they nonetheless felt true.

His neighborhood was made up of low-slung bungalows and boxy old brick homes and shiny new developments. Mature, well-developed trees. The sun had set. It was cold but it didn't feel cold. He wasn't an especially interesting guy. He had always thought of himself as a person who knew how to go about his business. He followed the gutter down a side street and came upon a half-open mailbox. He pulled back on the rusted clasp. The hinge squeaked terribly. He tried to jam the flowers in through the opening. The foil that gathered the stems made the bundle too wide. The hinge shrieked as the loose post rocked in its hole. The neighbor rolled his trash can to the curb. A car blazed up the street behind them and stopped at the three-way. Chuck took a step into the street and another car barreled down the hill toward him; then another. He stepped back with the flowers pressed against his leg and out of the neighbor's line of sight. He started to walk back the way he'd come and as soon as he turned another car came around the bend at the opposite end of the street. It was white. The driver hadn't flipped its headlights just yet. The car streaked toward him in a faultless glide. Chuck stood on the curb with the flowers behind his back in his folded hands. Looking like a boy who had just rung the bell on his first date. He bobbed on the balls of his feet and ground the tip of his tongue into the floor of his mouth. When he crossed back to the other side of the street he followed the driveway behind the townhomes. A man was taking his dog out. It was fluffy and white, with a long head. It looked like a goose. The dog's owner smiled at Chuck as he passed, and Chuck pressed his lips together. He cut across a rise and walked the through street on

the other side of the block. Lights were coming on. People standing in their yards. Talking. To neighbors. Their mailboxes at their doors. Someone crept behind him, waiting for a break in the cars parked along the street. He tucked the flowers back and stepped onto the curb. The car roared impractically as it passed. The draft knocked more petals from the bundle. There were petals everywhere. Spring was only a memory from years passed. He switched hands and wiped his palms on his thighs. He thought: You have no place here.

He chewed and chewed and drank. When the food was gone he took the second glass and refilled it and took it to the couch. He sipped from it and stared at the walls. After some time he felt faint hunger and rose to refill his plate and sat at the table to eat a second time. He finished and went to the refrigerator to plan the rest of his meal. The eggnog was gone but he had half a gallon of milk in a glass bottle. The eggs were disappearing, but there was plenty of ham. He had sliced cheese and mayonnaise and plenty of bread. He brought forward a container of chicken salad. Another full of yogurt. There was a tray of lasagna he had hardly touched. He had no fish. What he did have was enough. He would eat until he had to stop. And then he would wait, and eat some more. He was doing it right.

The smart thing to do would be to find a quiet spot to topple over. A quiet corner of a quiet yard around a home no one visited. Where he could sink into the ground and vanish, unknown. A pair of headlights crested the hill and raced toward the thoroughfares and opportunities of the city beyond. He felt the energy of the driver. He felt it in his chest and his arms. He wanted to hurl the bundle. He started to cross. A car came booming up the hill. He could make it if he ran but he wouldn't run. He jumped back onto the sidewalk and scraped the foil and the flowers against his leg. A group of people in the distance, coming his way. Dark shapes loping under their own spell. He



wore a track jacket and a thin shirt. This wasn't a good idea. It was stupid. There was no other word for it. A stupid idea. Beautiful objects. Made stupid by his association with them. Someone laughed and then the group did. What plan was this? He was slinking from door to door. In his own neighborhood. Like a rapist. That was what he looked like. The oldest and dryest in the history of bad ideas. He had thought: I would like to give someone flowers. I bet someone would like that. And the response came back: Yes: someone would. It's possible. And you would. You would like it very much. It would make you feel good, to do that. But how many more people were going to pass him; how much longer was it going to take for him to finish and be gone? The flowers were less and less flowers. They were eroding, as he beat them against his knee unconsciously while walking the disappearing blocks. He wanted to lash out against the open air. As would a knight. A knight stuck out of time and fighting something he didn't understand though he could see it as clearly as the trees and the clouds and the natural world around him. He had a handful of flowers and he had to give it to someone in secret. That was all he had space for. But when the world shifted around him it changed the space it left for him to move through, so that even a single bundle was too much, too big an operation. A whistle as a car passed. He gritted his teeth. He wanted to heave the flowers into a bush and let them rot there. He wondered how the petals would look smashed against the windshield of the next car. An outburst of petals. Completely harmless. Everyone fine. The explosion muted against the curtain of falling night. If there was a use to it, he couldn't see it. It had become a pinprick. And the pinprick sat inside the curtain and mocked him without needing him to look up. The sidewalk and the street along the hill were dotted with weak sodium lights. They made every living thing in their glare a dimension duller than did sunlight's ideal. It was up to the people who relied on them to fill themselves. What was he even doing? What had he intended to try? To

give a bouquet of flowers to a total stranger—what kind of unnecessary gesture was that? Half a bouquet. Now not that much. Cardboard flowers had more life. Fourth-graders had more imagination. Second-graders. Children with bright futures and agile minds and full hearts uncompressed by life. Not even a trace of incompleteness—a knee skinned, a toy denied. Nothing internal that would blossom into the disappointment to be. That was what the music in the rushing cars sounded like. And the people, driving the cars, that pulsed with it. They were constructing bulwarks against disappointment. Huge, arrogant constructions made of volume and speed and light and that they carried with them wherever they went, like a blanket that drags on the ground. No one had any ideas about him. Everything was itself and for itself. The trees, in their silence, remained indifferent. There was no conclusion to this. He couldn't execute the gesture and even if he did it a little bit it would go unnoticed or be misunderstood. A man comes outside in the morning and crushes the delicate stalks with his first step. Why would he look down? A woman steps out to survey the street, catches a glimpse out of the corner of her eye, and then stares at this misshapen thing with a face contorted in horror. No love. No loving surprise. Someone who thinks the flowers are from a secret admirer that she's suspected for weeks, who thanks him for the flowers only for him to be confused and put off by her. Or she by him. And what if she becomes ill at the thought of him, because what he thinks is sweet is to her terrible? Or if he is actually a terrible person, and she calls the police to have him put away for something he didn't do? And you've gotten someone arrested for nothing more than a fantasy? Which everyone has in their heads all the time anyway. So? What of it? What if? Do you even know what your thoughts are? You stupid, stupid person. Shame on you for having them. You should choke on the flowers and die. They should find you with stems sticking out of your mouth and a disgusted look on your face. Then you could be as done with this

earth as it is with you. There is no way that what you are thinking would ever happen. They would blow away. Or an animal would drag them off and eat the prettiest parts and leave the gnarled stems to decay inside the foil that will never rot, never decompose and become a new element in the churning, grinding world that you want so badly to be a visceral part of. To soak into its guts. To lose yourself and any notion that you were ever anything more than middling compost far beneath an ugly bush and a frightened creature's turds. What are you doing. What did you think you would do. There was no way that this was ever going to be anything but wrong. Look at the source of it. All you have is yourself and your history of piddling action. None of your efforts toward anything have ever mattered. You don't matter. You are less than worthy of attention. This idea would have meaning in someone else's head. Anyone else. Anyone else in the world would have bought the flowers and handed them to the first person to answer a knock at the door. And smiled and walked away. Ignoring all the questions. If there even were any. Making it clear through gesture and gaze that the act was perfectly kind and joyous. No attachments at all. But you: you fumble around and fiddle so painfully for just the right way to do such a simple thing that the thing is no longer simple. You turn pure things grotesque. You could mutilate children and achieve the same result. This is what you contribute to the world. With your endless fumbling and worrying. You render impotent and dumb everything that could have been beautiful. You make it just like yourself. No one considers the things that for you are a part of everyday existence. No one else would ever for a second entertain these absurd thoughts. They are a complete waste of time and energy and existence. If you were to leave the flowers on the sidewalk and jump in front of the next car yourself, the flowers would more than fill the void you left. Everything would become buoyant. You would be the bell ringing and the angel getting its wings. The bell is the joy of the world ridded of filth and the

angels every single other person getting a spring in their step and not knowing why. And not caring. You would care to know why. Instead of accepting the spring with grace and humility. Nothing about you is important. You need to understand that. These mashed-together, awful flowers. This soup of weeds that you've made, with nothing more than your stupid jangly body and your head full of dumb good intentions but no real understanding. These flowers have so much more worth than you ever could. You are made of poisoned things. And instead of bemoaning the poison influence you must have had on everyone you've ever come into contact with, the smart, responsible, sensible thing to do would be to wait, with true humility—and silence—for the fastest-moving car, and to roll under it as it passes. To just collapse into its beautiful, enchanting momentum. Hold the flowers; let them go; it doesn't matter. The flowers are already a ruin. They mirror your own sad nothing self. If you need proof of that nothingness: you are holding it in your hand. These drivers are energetic. They shoot down the hill like people taking charge of something. Not a single one of them would be affected by your selection of them, of their vehicle and careening youth, as the means by which you exit this world and crash headfirst into the black nothing that you can only pray awaits you. Let alone bothered. You are not worth the mental effort of even a minor, life-fracturing trauma. The skeleton of these peoples' lives will not be cracked, when you are gone. Write a note: "Please, continue with your plans for the evening." Put it in your pocket. Let that be your self. No one will read it. The note is on your face. What driver would not see it? What coroner would spend his best energy on you? People are highly visible. Their lives are written all over themselves. You know this because you have spent so long examining yourself. Which is all you will ever know. Too much yourself to be outside of it. Either more or less. There is no void, when you are gone. They will find clothes, with nothing in them. Don't be so dramatic as to think that you would ever jump in front of

a car. You are too much a coward to do anything about the problem of you. You should have known that the worm could do this job. You were warm and healthy for it. You could have eaten and eaten and kept it alive. The fattiest, most harmful foods. The least like nourishment. Food you actively ignore. Out of some misguided sense of duty to your body. Or the world. Whatever bizarre, inexplicable sense you make of those things. You could have eaten everything and clogged your necrotic heart and given the creature in your belly all it would have ever needed to grow and thrive and then to take you from where you don't want to be and put you where you hope there will be nothing to greet you. Least of all any semblance of you. Go home, and unplug your refrigerator. And sleep, and wait for the temperature to rise. When conditions are perfect, eat everything it contains. Eat the raw red meat, and the leftover noodles, and the mealy fruit, and the condiments. Eat, and wait for the eggs to grow again. Pray for them to re-appear, as if by magic. Let magic be the thing that takes you. The world so full of it. But none for you. Only this. It doesn't matter. None of this matters. You are nothing but the knowledge of your own worthlessness. Do what you know you should have when you had the chance. Until you can count on a bolt of lightning, it will be all you can trust. Let the eggs grow and become a part of yourself until they hatch an exception. One that needs you. It will have been the only one. Let it.

There was a woman watching him as he knelt beneath the mailbox. Squinting at him in the near-black. She thought to call out but then thought better of it. He spoke to himself and his whispers had the force of conviction. With violent pawing he parted the raw earth at the curb and after a defiant grunt he thrust both hands into the hollow he had made. She reached in through the doorway and flipped a switch and a soft yellow light washed across the shallow yard. Immediately he got up and walked away. He turned up a driveway and passed behind a house and kept going. Into a

copse of trees in the backyard. Through the brambles. She kept her eyes on him until she reached the curb. Planted at the foot of her driveway was a little bunch of flowers. Tickseed askew and daisy sagging. A third variety too mangled to identify. They looked like something obvious. To someone else. She pressed a foot down and then dragged the loose soil back into place. Stooped to pluck a ball of foil from the pavement. She squinted but there was nothing to see except the houses and the trees between them and the busy thoroughfare beyond that and after she tamped the dirt once more and went back inside the street was quiet dark again.

## The Beekeeper's Ambition

Camilla's brought us all together to meet her new boyfriend, the beekeeper. She bustles about the kitchen with a real, just grotesque smile on her face, shaking up drinks in a mixer the size of an oar. She assures us we're going to love him. Then she tells us all the different reasons why we'll love him. You know—he parachutes regularly. He's first in his class at barber school. His middle name is “Hunter.” And of course the honey. Gobs and gobs of fresh, choice honey that we'll have access to, no questions asked. I guess for when we're baking in an emergency.

So she's over the moon about him. But I don't know. Beekeeping? What's that about? It's a pretty strange habit, if you stop and think about it for a minute. You take thousands of these little creatures, innocent little guys, and you lock them up in a box, where they spend their lives working for you. Sounds more like a cult than a hobby. No, I've never been able to trust beekeepers. And it's not because my family is molasses people from way back. Picture a beekeeper, for a second. Guy rides up on a motorcycle; he puts on a fancy white beekeeping suit; he pours smoke all over the apiary to dope the bees up; he talks to them, like he's a guru. Gets them all excited, that way—they crawl all over him, cover his visor; they cling to him. Next, he steals their honey. The fruit of their labor. I don't know. That's not my idea of a relaxing Sunday afternoon.

Camilla hasn't shown the best judgment when meeting new people, either. Most of her friends live in basements. Her last boyfriend was a telemarketer. She knew one guy who needed the smell of cedar to become aroused. When she let that slip I started trying to get him to come to

unpainted furniture outlets with me. He was a piece of work. Another guy thought he was a hypnotist—she knows all kinds of questionable people. They glom onto her. It's cause she's such a nice person. She mixes a great drink. At the very least I'm getting some great drinks, sitting here waiting for the beekeeper.

I study our friends. No one looks particularly tense, though Candy's gone through most of her drink in the time it took Camilla to pour one round. Candy. There's another one. She thinks her eyes are too close together. It influences everything she does. She won't stand too near to you if you're talking with her, because she's afraid you're staring at her close-set eyes instead of listening to what she has to say. They're not all that close. They look better from a few feet away. Whose eyes don't? Oddball jelly contraptions, eyes. But she's delightful enough. She's married to Greg, and he loves her. He's in Belgium, working on a highway with his consulting firm. The two of them go through stamps like a pervert in the yearbook office.

Plus it's not as if there's a shortage of bees in the wild. I tell you, you can't throw a rock in this town without knocking a beehive out of a tree. Hell, in the summer months, nine out of ten piercing screams are bee-screams. You can tell the difference because of a certain hysterical quality to the pitch. We don't even look up when we hear them. Everyone's got bees. If I go out and stare at the trees in my yard, I'll find half a dozen hives, easily. I'm a beekeeper—Camilla should want to date me. Or she should want to date Tad Rogers, that handsome firefighter. That guy's got more trees in his yard than he's got muscles in his abdomen. He's a shirtless gardener, Tad is.

So we're all gathered in Camilla's kitchen, waiting for this beekeeper to arrive. Camilla's running around with her giant beating stick of a mixer, refreshing all our drinks. I don't know what on earth she mixed in the thing, but it tastes fantastic. We've all had two or three, and we're starting



to get sloppy, in that particular way. I put my arm around Albert, and we sing a song. Julia chimes in. Candy looks happy, from a distance. We're ready enough to meet this guy, and maybe even clap him on the back a time or two. Sure—I'll meet a beekeeper. I've got no specific quarrel with him. That was my grandfather's time. And it was a very different time. In those days, you were as likely to get jostled in line at the supermarket for being on the wrong side of an argument as you were to get a blade between the ribs. Nobody wants to go back to that.

At some point we decide to retire to the living room, where the lights aren't so bright. Camilla lugs the oar with her. The woman's got impressive forearms. We goad her into swilling a little bit from the oar itself. Albert helps her hoist it. He hoists a little too enthusiastically, and upends the darn thing. The drink goes all over the floor, and all over Camilla. It's a green drink, which I hadn't noticed. The oar lands on the floor, with a tremendous *clang*. Sounds exactly like a motorcycle pulling into the driveway. Camilla goes into her bedroom to put on a fresh shirt, and Albert throws a bunch of folded towels down over the spill and dances on them. So now we've got a little bit of a situation, here. Because if the beekeeper arrives, he's going to be greeted by all these unfamiliar faces. Julia's on her phone, and Candy's doing whatever she's doing to distract herself from all the reflective surfaces in the room. We're not at our most hospitable, is what I'm gathering. Alright. I can greet the beekeeper. I'll hold out my hand and introduce myself, and bring him inside and pour him a drink. He'll meet everybody else, but I'll stick close to him, and whisper little tidbits about each person into his ear. Julia absorbed a twin. It's easier to tell when she's not wearing a big purple sweater, but once in awhile she'll reach for something on a high shelf, and you can see the traces of it. Before too long, we'll get to be good buddies, the beekeeper and I. I'll tease him about being a beekeeper, and how he may have a strong jaw, but he's no Tad Rogers. I'll ask him if he

thinks he could pass the fireman's exam.

I go out to the car port, to wait for him. I'm just walking in circles out there. Just walking around, breathing through my nose, avoiding the flowerbeds. Squeezing an old tennis ball I found. Rehearsing my lines. Doing what you do when you're waiting to meet a new person. I get to thinking about the evening breeze, and of course that leads to workman's compensation. The mind'll just go, if you let it. I'm out there probably, I dunno—ten minutes, a half hour. Wandering. And at some point I come to realize there's no motorcycle in the driveway. The beekeeper's not here. Well—then what am I doing? I feel like a regular galoot. So of course I start looking for the door. But it's eluding me. I can't locate the door to this house. I don't know if there was a light on when I came outside, but there sure isn't one on now. There's just all this vinyl siding. I'm damned if I can find a knob. I'm using my good hand and everything. And I'm really giving this house a good feel. These new neighborhoods, you have a hard enough time telling the houses apart, let alone figuring out where the back door is. In my neighborhood, all the houses are brick. And brick—well, that's material you can set your watch to. We'll all be dead and planted, brick'll still be standing, ready to go at high tea. Camilla, she's got all this siding. You spend so much time washing off the mold, you never get around to sitting on your own porch, wondering how you even came to be.

Before too much longer I just start knocking on the house. That's all it takes. Everything's righted itself. Camilla's refilled the oar with some kind of lime concoction. We're drinking that, now, and visiting some more. Albert tells us about this supermarket tabloid he's working for, and we have a drink. Julia puts her arm around Candy, tries to get her to sing an old sea chanty, and we pretend not to notice, and we have a drink. The night goes like that. Except after about seven or eight more of these drinks, it becomes apparent that the beekeeper isn't coming. I don't know whether he had

an important meeting with his honeycomb supplier, or if his chute didn't open, or what all happened to him, but it looks like we'll have to be happy in our ignorance. Camilla's still got her weird smile, except it looks like a smile someone hit with a hammer. The poor woman built this wax figurine into an idol for us. We try our best to make her feel better—we feed her lies, like, we're sure he's a great guy, and we're still excited to meet him, and he probably got held up at work. But we all know bees are diurnal. And, honestly, I think we're all tired of being looked down upon. You know, we might not have all the art museums in the world, but you get us going and we can cover just about any topic. That's what I think at least. I don't know what other reason he could have for standing us all up. Maybe there's a big beekeeping convention in town. Maybe he's revolutionizing the industry. I hope that's what he's doing, because right now, the bees are asleep, and he isn't. I mean, even action movie stars, whenever they're chasing a bad guy on a motorcycle, they reach into their pockets, they pull out a gun. You see enough of these action movies, you start to think, Gee, I could do that. That's easy. I could do that while lighting a honey cigarette. So why can't he reach down and pull out his cellular telephone and drive his motorcycle at the same time? Maybe he fell asleep in a pile of bees, and they were startled and stung him to death. You can't forget you're working with wild animals. And to be perfectly frank about it Camilla was asking for trouble going around cavorting with a beekeeper in the first place. I'm not going to make her feel worse than she already does, but you need to be able to see some things coming. This beekeeper, he had bad news written on him from the start. It couldn't have been clearer if it'd been slathered all over his bare chest. My handsome neighbor Tad Rogers, he's got a personality like a brick house. And it's a good thing, too. I hope the day never comes when you can't trust a fireman.

The next thing that happens is I wake up on the floor under the living room window with a

splitting headache. I've got the pattern of the carpet plastered to my face, I got, got drool all over myself—it's one of those mornings. My teeth hurt. I don't even know how that's possible. Boy, they were sore. You know what they felt like, is like I'd been grinding them against the living room floor for most of the night. Of course Albert took the couch. He's a couch hog if ever one was. Always the first one on the couch. Or the bed, if one's available. He says he's got a bad back from an old basketball injury, which is a hoot. It's an open secret he threw it out riding roller coasters in high school. He's defensive about it, too; he goes into a little half crouch whenever he thinks someone's alluding to it. You use the word “corkscrew” around him and down he goes. He's a disturbingly heavy sleeper, for someone with his conscience. One time we were looking for things to do, so we threw a bunch of grapes at him, one by one, to try and wake him up. It was Julia's idea. She hasn't had a good night's sleep in eight years on account of him. By the end of the bunch she was really hurling those things, as hard as she could from across the room. Nary a mustache scratch to show for it. Man could sleep through fire. Though he's not as outlandish as he used to be. Hasn't been to an amusement park in years. The judge put a stop to that.

I'm standing at the toilet, trying to remember everything that happened last night. I'm trying to remember where Camilla got that oar, is what I'm trying to do. There's a blessing and a curse. Well, the window over the toilet looks out onto the front yard. And as I'm standing there, blinking my eyes, peeing, I see this weird blur, out in the grass. It's this great big white blur. It's kind of vibrating. Kind of oscillating. It's almost human-shaped. It looks a little like a person staggering under the weight of a bedsheet. What it mostly looks like is a zombie trying to fit in with the real humans. And using a bedsheet to hide his hideously disfigured zombie face. This thing takes a couple of steps, and then pauses. A couple of steps, and it pauses. Then it vanishes. The sheet drops

to the ground. Then it swoops back up, into the same shape. It does this a couple more times. Takes a step, takes a step, drops, comes back. I'm peeing all over the toilet seat, cause I'm staring out the window so hard. Finally I hear clapping. I press my face up against the window. And it's Camilla, sitting on the front steps, clapping for this guy standing there with a conductor's baton in his hand. I can see the smile she's got on from all the way back here. And the guy, of all the things to do, he takes a bow.

I wash up quick. I leave the toilet seat; there's no time. If you sit on urine, and you're not in your own bathroom, it's your own fault for not checking first. I've said plenty about my father, but that's one lesson that's getting passed on to the next generation. I go out into the hallway and she's clinging to this stranger's arm like he saved her from drowning. She's got stars in her eyes. She's changed into her hot pants. White ones. The kind high schoolers have life-defining moments because of. She introduces him to me. It's the guy. This is the beekeeper. He's wearing a cape. He gives me a really kind smile, holds out his hand to shake. He's practically got on a tuxedo, and here I am in my boxer shorts. He never once looks down. We should all be looking down. I've got all this crazy stuff happening. All I want to do is stare at his cape, and those wonderful hot pants, and pretend like I can hide my leg. Normally I only go pantsless at home, or on my birthday. The beekeeper doesn't see any of that. He looks into my eyes with that warm, inviting face of his, tells me how nice it is to finally meet me, and how he was sorry to hear about the lilacs. He's got a cousin with the same allergy, so he knows how rough it can be. Well, that's kind of him. Camilla goes around waking everybody up. She's over there bending down to rouse people, and here I am stuck making conversation with the sweet beekeeper. I tell you, it was a confusing moment. On top of all that, Camilla's as chipper as a songbird. That's a trick of hers—she loves to mix cocktails for you

while she drinks water all night. You could shout, sometimes, she's so fresh the next morning. You just want to take that oar of hers, and hide it from her. Then maybe somebody else could play bartender once in awhile.

I want to put some pants on, but Camilla insists we watch the performance right away. We shuffle out onto the porch. The beekeeper leads his bees through their repertoire. This great big mass of bees dives under the lifeless bedsheet. They mimic, I don't know—a person walking, it looks like; there might be a French poodle in there; there's a cable repair man; all different kinds of stuff. None of them look very good. They look just good enough to maybe convince you from a distance. If you were ever blitzed out of your gourd enough to think that a big white sheet was any of those things. I'm pretty sure Camilla and I are the only people in the audience who're more than halfway conscious. Julia is openly snoring. But the beekeeper, he's got an audience of one. Though you'd never know it to watch him. He's up there with his steely gaze, his precise baton movements. Like a real professional. And Camilla—we could've set her mother on fire right in front of her, and she wouldn't have known a thing about it. When the beekeeper finishes the show again, she just explodes into applause. He says he wishes he could show us more, but the bees need to rest, after so much activity. So we're all standing there, looking at each other. I sneak a couple of peeks at those hot pants. But I can't enjoy them. What are we supposed to do now? Do you clap, when bees do tricks? We kind of clap. I mean, we do the best we can. A flying bee exhibition isn't really what you want to show people first thing in the morning.

Now, it's obvious to me, what's going on here. This beekeeper's a true artist. Devoted to his craft. He wasn't out galavanting around while we were waiting up for him. He was at home, working on his act. It's possible he hasn't been to sleep yet. I've seen devotion everywhere from teenaged

musicians to regional tennis stars, and I know what it looks like in practice. The way the bees respond to this man's commands, so crisp and elegant, I'd say he's no more than a couple of show-stoppers away from lining up a big national tour. And those bankers, and high-rolling investor-types, once they see these bees pedal a bicycle through a flaming hoop they're going to jump at the chance to send some money his way. You throw in a jug band in on top of that and you're headed for the big marquees. The beekeeper's days in this town are numbered.

At that point, one of two things always happens. There's the chance he succeeds, and we only hear from him again when he gets the key to the city. But of course that's not a happy ending. If this thing takes off, and he becomes the kind of star people clamor for, Camilla'll go through tabloid hell before he finally breaks it off with her for some athlete's hairdresser he met doing gigs on a cruise ship. That's how that story goes. We've all read about it line at the grocer's.

And the other is he falls on his ass and hobbles back into town sideways. But say his act isn't anything more than a summer's diversion, and he's got twenty years' worth of bills to pay for it—it's still not going to work between them, sad to say. He's going to have all his creditors banging on his barbershop door, confirming that he failed his God-given talent. Camilla'll forget how brokenhearted he made her, and she'll try to win him back. And maybe he'll let her. She'll even say he never really left. But he's got nothing to do, kicking around here. This town's just gardens and whiskey. Unless those are your dreams, you've got to take yourself elsewhere. He's never going to be happy with a little downtown barber shop. What's a barber have to look forward to at the end of the day? He goes outside with a cloth and some oil and polishes his swirly barber pole. Maybe he talks with the man who runs the general store about the different kinds of clouds. When he goes home it's to his hometown wife, who covers him with love and fatty dinners and reminds him of the life

he had to give up, and the one he tripped backward into—I've seen it a hundred times.

One way or the other, fate's going to take a hand. All the skill in the world only gets you as far as you can imagine. I can't say anything to Camilla. She knows enough about this kind of loss to have overlooked it in him. Right now, she's intoxicated. She's the only one clapping. Even the beekeeper looks unsure. She's standing there clapping at him, like a giant, loving goofball. But if you get her on her porch with a few drinks in her all she'll talk about is getting the old distillery up and running again. And you don't need an unbroken heart to shuttle the grain cart around on the warehouse floor. Or fully functional legs, for that matter. I think that somewhere inside of her, some part of her acknowledges that the beekeeper isn't going to be the one to remember her birthdays. It'll be what keeps her together when she has to wave goodbye to him at the bus station. That's always the hardest part. Afterward it's just a question of how many oars we'll have to drain to make it all right again. She'll get through. Plus the beekeeper's future's not going to be as bad as it'll eventually seem. Bees are too temperamental for a long-term act. He has to know that. That's why he's got real-world skills. If he doesn't cut hair, he'll open a parachuting academy. People are always wanting to jump out of planes.



## Belief

There were things that he shared about himself that she accepted without question (rough upbringing; pleasure addict) because they were common enough to be true of almost anyone. And there were other things, much more specific (crippling caffeine dependency; eleven pet snakes), that she believed because of how seriously he'd explained them. Some of what he told her (youthful theft of toilet paper from a nursing home) was almost certainly untrue, but she didn't think was meant to be believed (statewide custard-eating champion), so she hadn't felt badly about laughing (drug-induced intercourse with a baseball cap), or asking for more details so she'd have reason to laugh again. Other things were just as unbelievable as the things she'd laughed at (fear of tulips stemming from childhood abuse), but he told her about them with the same seriousness he'd used to talk about the things she believed were meant to be taken seriously (did time for slashing a mechanic's tires; broke his leg trying to escape), so she was having a hard time figuring out whether the unbelievable serious things were unbelievable but true, or whether he was just a very dedicated joke-teller. On the list of unbelievable serious things (finds the face of Christ in stews and chilis) were things that she didn't believe anyone would say to try and be funny (objects to crossing guards on principle), or to try and win someone's sympathy (writes a weekly letter to his dead grandmother); the list was mostly things that could scare a person off (money launderer), and she thought that maybe he shared them with her (fought a raccoon in a cage on public access television) only after using the earlier things, the unbelievable things not meant to be believed (lost a foot race to a deaf

midget; keeps paper money in his beard), to disarm her. The more she thought, the more she realized that there hadn't been anything artificial about him, except probably his descriptions of himself ("like the last guy picked for the bowling team") and his physical prowess ("biceps like kitchen sponges;" "gut like a drowned dog")—he had been sitting right there in front of her the whole time, after all. Something told her he looked and acted like a person to whom all of the things he'd said had happened to himself (chewing gum allergy; advanced degree in mathematics; foreman in a lumber yard) had really happened. But trusting her impression of him made it even harder to understand why he had shared with her some things (despises the Arabic language), true or not (shipped a stillborn hamster to an ex-lover in a refrigerator box); it wasn't the sort of information (once lived in a storage unit) one tended to share with anybody (no underwear on Thursdays), even a lifelong friend or a spouse (pees in sinks), and clearly not a person one had met just a handful of times, over nothing more serious than coffee. They were intriguing and tantalizing and touched some of her most secret and protected places and were every last one of them things she wished fervently that she could un-know. Except that un-knowing even one of them (knits winter wear) was the same thing as disbelieving all of it—even the things (eats grapefruit and toast for breakfast; wants children) at the very core of her understanding of who he is, things (flosses) she had no reason to mistrust. Next she wondered which of the things she'd told him about herself (sleeps in a backyard tent) were essential for a complete understanding of her (avid rollerblader; plays the French horn); which the ones she'd lived with for so long (brushes her teeth at work) she might have forgotten how unusual they must appear to other people (keeps half her head shaved to the scalp); whether there were things she'd admitted only casually (picks from a neighbor's raspberry bushes), or with flippancy (Elvis lives) that were perhaps not as strange or unspeakable as she'd been believing them

to be (touches the oils at museums; avoids Indiana; smokes).

## The Contortionist

When you notice the black-clad man, his lateral crawl lithe as a cat's, approaching steadily from the other side of the crowded gallery, with teeth brighter than his smile, what do you feel?

Does your curiosity mask your fear?

Does his turtleneck sweater inspire a Cheshire cat's grin?

Do you react at all?

Do you allow the slightest hint of skepticism when he tells you that you are his “inspiration”?

That he has seen you “in [his] dreams,” and spends his waking hours “trying to capture on canvas” what he now knows he couldn't possibly have done justice?

Do you detect salesmanship in his use of the phrase “I know this sounds crazy”?

Is his joy sufficient cover for such an obvious pick up?

Do the energy and passion he tells you he “poured out of [him]self” and into your recreation mirror his description of the painting itself?

Does his bid for your trust fill the room?

Or are you a pair of eyes looking out from inside a head?

Do you believe in coincidence?

When he takes your hand in both of his, and turns you toward a different room, where, amid a thicket of passive expressions, long-stemmed wine glasses, discarded plates, and scarves, he claims

you hang in a frame, do you walk with him?

Or are you led?

Do you note the nearest exits?

The clearest paths?

How rough are the artist's hands around your calloused own?

How silent have this new room's patrons become?

Behind how many of their stern, robust faces rest serious, art-considering and art-purchasing selves, who attend openings not for wine and clever chatter, but to buy—and later, while in repose, to gaze upon the fruits of their patronage, with further wine, further expressions?

How long do you dwell upon details before facing what's right in front of you?

Is that cascade of chestnut hair yours?

Are those caustic eyes?

What sense do you make of the sudden appearance and steep descent of your cleavage?

Does this face, broad and bold, challenge its viewers the way yours does?

Are the eyes caustic and careful both?

Is this how you appear to the people back at whom you look, from behind a bar, a cigarette, a telephone call?

How much of this figure is you?

Is it only something that, through the gaps in a series of blinks, looks enough like you to be a convincing representation of you?

Is the artist's unshakeable belief in the power of his conviction what keeps you from walking away?

From finding his presence unsavory?

This situation unacceptable?

This night?

How long do you stare at his work before offering a comment on it?

Before facing him?

Do you weigh your words carefully?

How often do you ever weigh your words carefully?

Why does it take you as long as it does to ask if he's been put up to this?

If this is some kind of a joke?

Is the artist's smile sincere?

How closely do you listen to him?

When he says he “began having visions,” do you hear “Did it hurt when you fell from Heaven”?

When he says “You haunted me for weeks,” do you wonder whether this could all be explained away by an acquaintance you simply didn't know you shared?

When he tells you he never thought he would “actually meet” his “vision,” that no such person could “possibly exist,” are you instead wondering about the odds that he saw you passing one afternoon in a park, or on a streetcar, and, filled with unspoken fantasies, applied to canvas, by painstaking reapplication of memory (or from photographs: no matter how grainy, how blurry, how surreptitiously taken), what he hoped was a flattering enough version of his infatuation for him to be able to one day present it to you—and in so doing complete the final step of the longest plan to get a girl in bed you'd ever in your idlest musings thought possible?

Are you, in fact, as transfixing as you like to think you are?

When is a coincidence too big to be believed?

Does his explanation register on a brain dizzied by the improbability of its concoctions?

One struggling to balance whether its own simplest explanation is less likely than the one where the artist is telling the truth?

If you turn away, bewildered by the swirl of his presence and your exposed arrogance: how long will it take for this encounter's resonance to fade?

If you continue your evening as though nothing interrupted it: will it be because you are able to ignore the wispy figure who'll flicker in and out of your peripheral vision until you leave, drive home, undress, check behind the closet doors after you turn your head too quickly in front of a mirror?

Or because when you wake in the night, filled with a restless vulnerability, you won't want to remember what put it there?

If he offers you the painting—"the portrait"—as a gift, will you accept it?

Will knowing what he'll say next make you any better prepared to answer?

Do you believe in fate?

To what extent?

Why do you pause at the doorbell, and choose, instead, to knock?

Does the rap of your knuckles on the roughly-hewn lumber convey a raised eyebrow?

What is an artist's studio supposed to look like?

What an artist?

Do you snicker at the absence of stains on his still-black clothing?

What is more likely: that he has been in the studio all day, or that he is playing a part?

Is the linger of his hands on your shoulders as they take your overcoat the next gesture in this performance?

When he offers a glass of wine while telling you he “never drinks while working,” do you feel you've figured him out?

Are your competing smiles those of people familiar with an unspoken message?

Can you respect him for the extent of his subterfuge?

Do you register his words as he trails behind while you orient yourself with his work?

Do more of the canvasses than you expected depict young women in full health?

Or do fewer?

How many of his still lives—of melons, pillows, toys, costumes—are so ripe as to be positively breasty?

Is an automobile with a long and low-slung engine compartment always a phallic symbol?

Are his tendencies toward muted tones, short brush strokes, sloppy foregrounds, understated accents, and confusing angles interesting, or signs of an uninspired soul?

Do his depictions of stern faces (when there are faces), powerless objects (which are nonetheless integral), meticulously centered subjects (their features obscured), meals (ornate and almost entirely without people to eat them), and cows (bizarrely sympathetic) fill you with confused longing?

Does his look like the work of an artist?

If he is a bad artist: is that an unforgivable sin?



Do you sense in this dim and ordered space the reverence of a cathedral?

Is a frameless mattress tucked into an unlit corner a quiet invitation?

Does the presence of sheets on this mattress amuse you?

What did you think you would find here?

How many of his words to you have you heard?

How much are you thinking about what you would have presented, had you been in his situation?

What do you see of yourself in his work?

What in these canvases leads you to believe he wanted to paint you?

Why don't you ask him?

When you sit on the stool, itself in the center of a raised platform, in front of floor-to-ceiling windows, curtainless, with a magnificent view of the river, a passing barge, the bridge with its strings of even lights persistent as a bulwark against the setting sun, and the rocks that lead to the unkind shore, and watch him, his motion when it carries around the edges of the canvas he adorns, why can't you think?

Why can you feel without considering what you're feeling?

How aware do you become of your recklessly sexual posture?

Does the spread of your stockinged legs support you more than the stool?

How far has it retreated, the cling of the skirt you wear to catch men in a stare?

What did you expect from him when you asked if he wanted "to see an even lower neckline" than the one he'd already imagined?

Do you remember?

Have you forgotten how to judge silences?

Is this one thick with tension: like a battle?

Or heavy with unforeseen possibility: like a pudding?

What in his confidence behind the canvas is foreign to your understanding of him?

Why does he dress like a night thief, do you suppose?

Do you smile when you realize that you know more thieves than you do working artists?

Does he acknowledge the question when you ask if he's ever stolen a grandfather clock?

At what point does it occur to you that you may have misunderstood everything about what this evening was to be?

What is it about the feelings you choose to ignore that instead remind you of guilt?

How much of those feelings can be reasonably interpreted as guilt?

Has he already captured the sharpest angles of your defensiveness?

Is it too late for you to bring your legs in?

Can you button your sweater?

Can you face him fully?

Why would you want to?

Because you feel shame?

If you do: should you cover your shame with an overbearing sincerity?

With an earnestness you don't really feel, but feel you ought to?

How many times have you faked, amplified, accented, implied, or raised the specter of tears, in order to turn a tableau to your advantage?

Has he raised the stakes beyond your ability to meet them?

What do you think?

That the artist engineered not just your first meeting—and the means by which, at that meeting, he would get a chance to stare at you from behind the veil of a canvas—but this second visit, and all your second-guessing, as well?

Wouldn't he have to be a monster, to be able to do all that?

Really and truly from a nightmare planet?

Is that possibility more likely than the one where this is just happening?

Are those the only options?

How much do you believe in fate?

How long have the artist's sleeves been rolled to his elbows?

What is it about his forearms that is graceful?

When was the last time you thought of forearms that way?

Does their stark appearance against an otherwise drably cloaked form shock you into a recognition of flesh?

How do you display this shock?

What is it from childhood that his delicate three-fingered grip on the paintbrush reminds you of?

What are your intentions here?

How many barges have gone up the river behind you?

Where are they going?

What kind of sense does a barge make?

Why don't you ask if you can adjust yourself?

How long has it been since he stopped moving?  
How long after he stops moving does he frown?  
How long after frowning does he clear his throat?  
How long after you hear him do you wait to look up?  
How long after looking are you summoned?  
Is the wave of his hand against the air impatient, or eager?  
How much space is there, between impatience and kindness?  
Was this portrait completed impossibly quickly?  
Does it feel rushed, to you?  
Does it look frantic?  
How might he explain the look on your face?  
Would he say that nothing about your posture was of interest to him?  
Your thrusting shoulders?  
Your open sweater and spread legs?  
How quickly does the thought form, that he must bring girls up here all the time and capture  
their self-doubt?  
How quickly do you step on it?  
Is that what he's put to canvas?  
How many of your thoughts can you find in these clouded eyes?  
This thatched brow?  
What of your mind is here reflected?  
When you, in later years, again see the portrait after a lifetime of looking past it, will you

remember the thoughts behind this face?

Or will the portrait be the residue of these moments?

Will you shudder at a private thing on such public display?

Or will you smile at the security and stability of it, at the brazen warmth that began in this place?

Is the first kiss yours, or his?

Might you want to remember that?

How long do you both hold the kiss before reaching for each other?

How tentative is his grasp?

How deliberate your own?

When do you expect urgency to take over?

How deep is your surprise when it does not?

How did you get from one place to the other?

How did you both remain so clothed?

What about the curve of his face and the coil of his core display anything other than focus?

When does he look like he could be doing this with anyone else?

Do you worry that your own intensity can't match his?

How many times have you worried since?

How often have the same thoughts of then, that one time, hummed beneath you, heard but not seen, like an undocumented species?

How many of your thoughts of him were born then, did not exist during it?

Of what are you acutely aware first: your bare legs, the persistent tick of a hidden clock, or

his tears?

Why do his tears surprise you?

How do you demonstrate that surprise?

How long has it been since you've spoken words aloud?

How much longer will it be?

Where do your hands go?

How do they caress?

With warmth, and blood inside them?

With the steady purpose of paddles?

Do they comfort?

Does he speak, that night?

Has he ever spoken of it?

What have his actions said?

Do you believe in magic?

Why?

What about chance?

How can you know what his next question will be before he asks it?

How can a person so welcoming and delightful be so deliberate and serious in this of all moments?

How, in this pause, can any of the facts about yourself not matter?

How many of them are facts?

Which of these are the truest facts?

Which of the things that you know about yourself are you willing to change?

Which can you permit to change without your awareness, or permission?

Which is the true wonder: Knowing with the certainty of your own life that you are about to be proposed to at a sidewalk café in Paris, on a blustery autumn day shot through with splendid light, in the distended shadow of the Eiffel Tower, with indefinite time in front of you to explore the city, the air, each other?

Or having found yourself to be the kind of person who melts at the very thought of such a scenario: no matter how fairy tale it is, how contrived?

Is “proposed” a strong enough word?

What other words are there?

How quiet is the café’s crowd?

Who among it has not understood the earnestness of the man speaking calmly in a foreign language?

Read his hesitation?

How much more has he said with his hands?

When his arms dip and slide to emphasize a point, do you think of swans gliding?

When in your life have you ever watched swans.

When he pauses and his whole face furrows over some necessary and elusive point, do you see what time will do to him: how generous the creases will become, the strange sense a still-unsightly mustache will make?

Do you shudder at such predictable, inevitable reactions?

Has your right arm rested on the circular edge of the table for far too long?

Is the discomfort of this position as evident to those watching you openly from the corners of their eager eyes as it appears to you it can't help but be?

What is happening?

Why is it happening?

Is the difference between magic and luck anything more than perception?

Than a willingness to stare?

Do you chide your thoughts for wandering at this moment?

Do you grant them their speculations on a future the form of which you hadn't dared guess until now?

What will change?

How will what will change change?

Do you live a fabled existence?

Will you still?

If these clouds break open, is that a bad sign?

Is your recent willingness to hold hands on long walks indicative of an interior softening?

To take long walks indicative of an increasing desire for calm?

To gaze longingly a manifestation of long-stifled emotional growth?

To spend long stretches of time in mutual contemplation evidence of some emerging ability to ignore your own worst habits?

How willing are you to be someone you haven't foreseen?

What is the difference between growth and change?



Do you believe in magic?

How much?

Why does it have to be magic that's gotten you to this point?

Why is a fairy tale the only explanation that satisfies you?

How much of your life could you have ever predicted?

How much of it matters, to you, now?

In the moment-to-moment, fiber-to-fiber essence of your existence?

Is it this setting that troubles you?

Do you feel unworthy of such wonder?

Why is what might be for other people not also for you?

And which others?

And what is this?

Is this setting important?

Is it more beautiful than any other afternoon you've shared?

Any more charged with meaning than any other fragment of your time, with this person,  
together?

Less real than any other of your moments?

How much less?

How much of what has ever happened to you have you accepted because it seemed like what  
you expected at the time?

How well have you ever known the sort of person to whom things like what's happened to  
you are supposed to happen?

How comfortable were you, disdaining possibilities from afar?

When has this ever happened to anyone else?

These chances?

This moment?

Were the steps that led you here in a pathway of light?

If you followed it without knowing it was lit: are you a fool?

If you followed an incandescent smile: what made you do that?

What are you, right now, but one person in concert with another?

When will you be anything else?

Do you, who pledges to record in your bones the essence of each new season before one becomes the next, only to every time lose yourself so completely in the becoming that all you can feel is the turn, know what it is you're doing?

Will you know what "Pinch me" means, when you say it?

Can you give life to the dead expression?

Will the words remain words?

What do you believe?

That shovels moved this earth?

That the coffin is full?

How can these things be?

Can any among the assembled mourners know the shape of your grief?

Its facets?

Is that part of yourself closed to you, as well?

Is the you you see reflected in the faces of your children and their children beside them one that you still know?

Have their happinesses been real?

How would those faces change if you knew how to trace yourself beyond their inception?

How dense is the knot where choices grow and multiply?

Are your questions different from anyone else's?

Are they, at long last, merely and only a means to distraction?

If you, from your easy chair, in the sitting room, a glass of wine nearby, loved ones flanking each part of you, to tend to every need, were, with a shudder cloaked in a sigh, to rest your sinewy defenses, and, in a gentle flap of your arms, unfold your self entire, give voice to all your longest-held, closest-kept fears: what would happen?

If you were to say:

That your whole conscious life has been the punchline to a dirty joke.

That all your life's drama—

—all its happiness—

—all of it—

—came out of an impurity.

That whether or not you, his beloved, had appeared to your husband in dreams, his enthusiasm, his soul, were real, and from the night you met forward they were yours.

But that yours were not.

Not his—because you had your doubts.

At first general: Is this real, and how far will he take it.

Then inlaid, like gold, into a stringless instrument: If this is real, how will I know it?

When?

Where are my moorings strongest?

Where my bindings?

And so—not yours either.

What then?

Would they understand you?

Are you, finally, capable of being understood?

Or would they say “You're being too hard on yourself”?

And “It's hard to let go”?

And “You don't know what you're saying”?

Might they be right?

Would the aim of their pity be true?

Where have you always known your life was based on a lie?

In the heart you've always followed?

The marrow, where seasons reside?

In your brain, which has never stopped?

Which part of you has led you furthest away from yourself?

Would it feel good, to call this thing a lie?

To make external what has only ever been kept in?

Would you feel relief?

Even if you couldn't make yourself clear?  
Must every thought be given voice?  
How many rooms would yours fill?  
How do you measure time with space?  
And what do you think you would find there, at the end of a chain of rooms filled with a  
lifetime of needless doubt and balmless evaluation?  
Would you find yourself?  
All your old narrowness, and swiftness and certainty, and the tight comfort of your skin and  
insides?  
Would you recognize that self?  
What would you do with her?  
Wear her, like a shroud?  
Inhabit her like an old pelt and hide this other self away?  
How do you think you would come back?  
How lost would you get?  
How hard would you try?  
When did you stop believing that impurities could be accepted?  
Or embraced?  
Or forgotten?  
How sure are you, that what you're wondering now is what you've always wondered?  
That this is the same always?  
Are you willing to have been wrong your whole life?

Is forgiveness worth a life's admission?

Is it yours to give?

What is it, that takes all of a person, offering no permanence in exchange?

That changes you but not every time along your contours?

That could be now what it was then?

But that might be unrecognizable to the you that you've become?

Does your belief have room for this?

Can you find it?

Breathe into it?

Do you choose to live as a sorter of possibilities?

Spending your life where it began, in self-interrogation?

Do you, in looking back, discard the clearest answers, and search instead for further questions?

Or do you look back at all?

## We Are Not Medical Experts

He said he thought the worst part of the evening had been when she noticed he'd cut off his thumb. She said for her the worst part was the actual cutting off of the thumb itself. He said that that was sweet but she hadn't even been in the room when it happened, and in either case he didn't really remember it. She told him he probably wasn't the most reliable source on what had happened, given that he needed her to maneuver him immediately, starting with holding his bleeding stump over the sink. He said he hadn't done it to inconvenience her. The way she remembered it was she had come in from the living room to ask about the kinds of pasta they had in the cupboard and though he was bent over the cutting board with his back to her she heard him suck in his breath and then saw his left hand jerk away from the awkward thrust of the right. And furthermore it didn't matter whether he remembered or not, what was important was that it had happened, and it was a part of her mind, now. He said he took his ability to cut off his left thumb while making dinner as a sign that he was a lot more absentminded than either of them had thought. That her first thought had probably been he'd done it on purpose. Since cutting his thumb off on purpose was more plausible than doing it accidentally. She asked him if he was going to miss having two original, organic thumbs. He responded that the scariest part of the whole night was the look on the doctor's face when he removed the hand towel. She said the scariest part for her was when the hospital people thought they had lost the cooler with his severed finger in it. The whole drive to the hospital had been scary, too, in hindsight, and she never would have stopped at the gas station to get more

ice for the cooler if he hadn't suggested it. He reminded her that they had managed to keep the whole missing cooler thing a secret from him. She said it was also kind of horrifying, how little she'd known about the true efficiency of their knives. She knew they needed knives to assist with the cooking but it was shocking how you could overlook a small little thing and have it turn out to be not so little after all. He said he didn't want to brag but he'd been cutting with a lot of force and she told him he really wasn't in a position to brag. He said he remembered hearing at some point that it was of crucial importance to keep a severed limb as cold and secure as possible. She asked if he was sorry that the thumb turned out to be unsalvageable and he told her that if he was actually upset about it he'd go ahead and get rid of the other thumb, too, to restore balance to his hands. That the first one hadn't been intentional, but, by God, the second one would be. She didn't say anything about that. He asked her what she thought the most surreal part of the night had been. She asked if he meant other than her husband telling her to look straight into his eyes and not down at the hand he was clutching at a weird angle while a sense of comic foreboding worked its way down into her. He kept seeing his thumb lying among the diced yellow bell pepper on the cutting board like it was the next component of their dinner. As if it somehow belonged there. She thought about the question for a moment and said one thing she would have a hard time forgetting any time soon was the way he had smiled at her while telling her not to look down. It looked like the smile of someone trying to convince a small child who had just fallen from a chair and hit her head on the ground that there was no blood, that the pain wasn't as bad as the child knew it to be. She acknowledged the great number of strange thoughts and recollections she kept having just while they were lying there talking to one another and she doubted she would be able to forget any of them for at least a while. His assurance that the action hadn't been intentional was one of those strange thoughts, she noted.



He said what had happened was he realized a tremendously sharp sensation was distracting him from what he'd been thinking about and he looked down to find he'd cut most of the way through the base of the thumb holding the pepper in place. He'd tried to move it and that had made the bleeding worse and sent a sensation of ice up toward his brain. So at that point in the moment it somehow made more sense to him to cut it the rest of the way off, since by then the thumb mostly wasn't his. Anymore. She thought about that and said she was the same way about hangnails. He said he thought if they washed it thoroughly with soap and bleach they could probably save the cutting board, though they would of course want to shave the wood down past where the blood had soaked into it. But given all the work that would take they might want to retire the cutting board, even though it had been a cherished wedding present, and kind of still was. She said she was sorry the thumb was unusable. He said if they didn't want to use it they could mount it somewhere in the house and treat it like performance art. She asked if he wanted to look at the little brochure on prosthetic digits and limbs the doctors had given them. The models of thumbs in the brochure looked to her like variations on the state of Florida. She said the similarity mostly came from the pad of imitation flesh that those models had at the base of the thumb, for people who had lost a portion of the webbing between the thumb and index finger, and that that pad looked like the state's panhandle. To him it looked like the Loch Ness Monster sticking its long neck out of the water, if it looked like anything other than a pale prosthetic thumb. She said he was being ridiculous. He said he thought he was allowed to be a little bit ridiculous. When she didn't say anything he told her that he couldn't explain it to himself and the absence of an explanation was what kept at him. She said there would be plenty of time to find one. He asked if they could read the brochure together in the dark and she said they could give it a try. She turned off the light and lay holding the brochure to her

chest and beneath it eighty percent of his hand. She mentioned how it was nice of the hospital staff to let them take his unsalvageable thumb home in the cooler with them, and apart from a general idea about closure what did he want it for. He said the thumb wouldn't spoil until the ice in the cooler melted and the ice wouldn't start to melt for a couple of days and they could worry about it then. She pointed out that if they replenished the ice until the weather turned they could leave the cooler out on the porch at least until the spring thaw. He said between the cooler and the freezer in their very own kitchen they probably had the technology to hold the thumb indefinitely. Maybe if they felt ambitious about it they could get some other severed thumbs off the black market and make a necklace out of them. She said she was pretty sure the thumb was the most expensive finger but she hadn't done too much research yet. They went on like that until falling asleep: first one, then the other.

## Boy

He has decided not to talk. And why not? Not because words clutter the air. He lives in a city where tranquility is the empty streets and sidewalks of an early morning. Not because his voice is tired from shouting to be heard. Most of his existence is unheard, unnoticed. Is “Because” enough of a reason? Not since he was a boy has it been one. He decides that it will be one now. And with the decision comes a sudden clarity. Why “Because”? Just because. Because because. The word sounds better by itself. It is barren, void of qualified meaning. Almost absurd. Which it is. “Because.” It puts him in a place he wants to be.

He passes milkmen and paperboys like a misjudged throw from a child's hand. The florist stares at the back of his head as he runs his fingers through the flowers in their barrels. At the post office, he pantomimes with inflated gestures the putting of a stamp on an envelope until the teller sells him what he needs. In the square, a young man with a clipboard asks him a question and they stare pleasantly at one another. The young man's smile becomes strained. Then uneasy. He holds up a finger and removes his cellular telephone from an inside pocket and puts it to his ear. He looks expectant and nods sternly every few seconds. When he looks back he sees that the young man has found others and he is filled with something so powerful that he wanders. He does not laugh. His arm tires and he switches hands. Nods with great vigor, intense determination. His cheek makes a noise against the collar of his coat.

At a corner a woman plays the violin. He hears it before he can see her. It is serene—but like

the peace that comes with acceptance. She looks the way the music sounds. Bends the strings of her instrument with a hope too intense to be practiced. There is only one idea in her. He reaches into the coat and withdraws his wallet and with loose fingers drops a sheaf of bills into her case before she has finished playing. When she is done she takes off her glasses and looks at him. He is startled and she smiles. They stay that way. When she asks him something he turns and resumes his walk. He does not see whether she looks after him or into the case. He kisses the screen of the telephone before putting it away.

He comes to a wide corner on an open street where a coiled man leans against a brick building. The man asks him a question. He turns and waves. Waiting for the light. The man repeats the question. To the back of his head. The question is jarring, and unusual. The man pushes off from the wall to ask it again. He looks over and raises a hesitant wave. The man steps in front of him, peering forward though they are only inches apart. Asks a different question. What to be seen in the empty eyes, focused on the crosswalk over the man's shoulder? In his thoughts are vows and explanations. The man reaches out and flicks his ear. His eyes water. The sting births a strangeness in his heart. He sucks in air. The man asks the question and his eyes repeat it. Confusion in his voice, and anger. He looks down. Away when the man ducks to meet him. To question him. He is aware of the warmth of his lips and the word like a heart in his head. The man reaches up with an open hand to slap him. He sees what is happening but cannot move. Senses the strength the man holds back. The man lashes out with a fist. With both of them. He is wearing a heavy winter coat that buttons to the chin and muffles some of the blows. A hook to the gut. A knee to the face when he doubles over. Repeating the question. Another fist. A short kick to the ribs when he goes down. He does not cry out. The man sits on his chest and holds his face gently and reduces the question to

one word. Implores him to just answer. The simple question. The truth obvious to one of them. He tries to cover his face but the man's knees pin his arms to the ground.

When he looks up he is alone. He blinks and breathes. Stands and brushes himself off and runs his hands down his face. There is little blood. His inner elbows are sore where the man bore down on them and they throb when his arms sway with his step. Behind him each drip from a rusty pipe splats against the sidewalk. When he comes to a convenience store he retrieves a ten-pound bag of ice from the freezer in the very back. He sets the bag upon the counter. The cashier looks at him and looks away. He exits holding the bag across his face with both hands like a priest and a child at its baptism. He walks and shifts the pressure from swollen jaw to sore cheek. There is a long and shallow cut along his forehead. He holds the bag aloft there.

There is a group waiting to cross the street. Without turning his head he sees the policeman see him as clearly as others ignore them. Hesitation. The network of thoughts. The light changes and he pushes off the curb. Several blocks later he is tense against the hand on his shoulder that did not reach, the voice that did not call to him. Why tense? Because it is behind him? Why a hand? Because it is for the policemen to stop crime? What crime. What would he even say?

He approaches his building and waits for the elevator. Then turns away to take the stairs. He plods. Thinks about why. Because there is no reason not to. Because no reason can still be something. His footsteps sound like the first syllable dragging the next. The condensation that clings to the lowest corner of the bag falls to the stairs in spatters and droplets. He can't remember if he felt like clicking his heels when the musician spoke to him or if he did do that.

From his bed he looks out the window at the bird perched on the power line. It is the size of a modest egg. It hops forward, hops again. Then waits. He notes the gray uniformity of its chest, the

deep blue of its wings. Were it to touch an exposed section of the line it would vanish, in a burst of energy, and take with it all evidence that it had ever existed. This does not happen. It remains perched, him watching as he lies on his side, the talons gripping the wire with casual force.

“Should You Never Hear From Me Again”:

An Anthology of Self-Reflection

Most of the visitors to the Lanfair Valley Memorial Center ask about facts and figures.

They want to know about the billion dollar price tag.

The four billion dollar price tag.

The twenty years of construction delays.

The generation of bureaucratic scuffling.

The concrete and rebar and lead slabs and glass in quantity enough to recreate the skyline of Chicago.

The airtight chamber the size of a football field a thousand feet below the main building.

The ten thousand irradiated bodies buried there.

Just shy of two decades after the fact, you can already watch the truth receding into the muck of history.

People have heard more rumors, half-truths, falsehoods, fabrications, misleading statements, denials, and outright lies about this place than there are facts about it to share. Even though those facts are public, have always been public, are as easy to find as pie shells in your grocer's freezer.

For example, that the percentage of the Memorial's thirty million dollar cost paid in public money was zero.

That the construction was nearly complete a decade before the Memorial's dedication, its

final touches held up first by unfounded fear over radiation levels, and then public protest.

The concrete pit is at the site of the former Lanfair Valley Nuclear Power Station, forty miles away by air, and is filled with rubble from the reactor itself.

People are interested to discover that we have one million visitors annually.

They are almost universally surprised to hear that the level of ambient radiation here is roughly equivalent to what you expose yourself to by standing next to a microwave while it runs.

They don't believe that only once a month do we have to call the local police because of an altercation.

That our rangers do not carry firearms.

That visitors are free to walk about the grounds as they like.

There are no sensors buried in the earth.

No cameras hidden in desert rocks.

They are often surprised to hear that the Center receives no Federal funding, and, other than a tax break on its eleven hundred acres, no assistance from the state.

“But,” they say, “isn't this a national park?”

“What about all those fights in Congress?”

“What about all the protesting?”

“People arm-in-arm in front of the earth-movers?”

Many of them say, “I grew up watching those protests.”

Some tell us, “It reminded me of Vietnam.”

Often, they are so bewildered by our responses that they forget to ask for the explanations their questions suggest they want.



The axiom that the way people say things says more about them than they know they reveal turns out to be true.

The Lanfair Valley Memorial Center receives one million visitors a year, and, in large measure, they are polite people.

Energetic and inquisitive; happy and alert.

Which can be hard to reconcile with their questions. Most of those are disturbing.

Paranoid.

Bleak.

At the intersection of all these qualities is a desire to know whether the promise of the world is still valid.

It's not an easy question to put into words.

Even harder to ask.

And, fortunately for us, it isn't our job to tell people about promises.

So instead we tell them about the weight and dimensions of the seventeen-ton boulders flanking the front doors.

The bulldozers that scooped their hollows into place.

They ask about size and volume and scope when they want to be awed, because to be awed is to know that great things are possible.

The strength of a child, rooted in the knowledge that the dinosaurs are dead, but he is not.

They ask about the absolutes of life to test that strength.

The campaigns of misdirection and misinformation waged against the idea of a memorial before it began construction, and maintained against the physical space because of vague notions

about national honor and disrespect toward that honor once it was built—if these campaigns have reminded us of anything, it's that the importance of persistence can never be overstated.

Repeat something loud enough, or hard enough, but most of all often enough, and that thing will become fact.

Since all a fact really is is a statement enough people have agreed to accept that anyone can safely assume everyone accepts it.

Tell people that even the notion of a zombie memorial is obscene, and they'll find it repulsive.

Tell them a penny of public funding for it is a knife in the back of every family who lost a member to the unfortunately transformed, and they'll take up arms.

Tell them radiation is the cause of the undead plague, and they'll look at you funny for implying it could have been anything else.

There are always more assumptions about a controversy than there are demonstrable truths. That goes double where the living dead are concerned.

And it's easier to believe than to check. Which also goes double for the undead: it takes less energy and requires less emotional risk than studying the reasons for your belief in the reasons for zombies to simply know you're right without having to know it.

To a great extent, our national zombie crisis is perfect for exposing the fractures in our body politic, and in doing so lengthening them.

It's the problem that defines our age, but we aren't sure of its cause.

It has deadly consequences, but we can't agree on how to treat it.

It's physically repugnant, so we must force ourselves to look at it.

And it's complicated, which means avoiding a serious conversation is as easy as turning our heads.

This is what happened:

Eighteen years ago, the Lanfair Valley Nuclear Power Station suffered a loss-of-coolant accident when the condensate pump located inside the Station's third reactor malfunctioned during an inspection.

The malfunction led to a critical rise in temperature; the explosion of the water inlet at the base of the cooling tower; the breach of the tower itself; and, in the words of the senior member of the first on-site response team, the venting into the atmosphere of “enough radioactive matter to make Three Mile Island look like *Guys and Dolls*.”

This was at 6:39 PM, Pacific Standard Time.

The prevailing wind over Lanfair Valley came out of the northwest at twelve miles per hour.

Which means the cloud drifted into the westernmost claw of the Mojave National Preserve, over the silent Castle Mountains, into open desert, and its easternmost edge arrived in Schubert, California, population 860, just after seven o' clock.

Began to settle into doorways and crevasses; nestle inside long sleeves and exposed skin; merge with the knives and forks and dinners that Schubert's residents were sitting down to eat.

Passed through Needles, its confluence of state highways, its ranches, its five thousand residents, no more than thirty minutes later.

By then, the first of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission's Federal Disaster Units were en route from Las Vegas, but, having misunderstood the severity of the emergency, would be

unprepared to act upon arriving at a quarter to eight, and would have to send out what amounted to an APB for all Units in southern California.

The nearest of which, based on its best response time in the FDU's annual drills, was a further two hours away, in Lancaster, the northernmost city in Los Angeles County.

By the the time the Lancaster team got word, the cloud was more or less following Interstate 40 through central Arizona.

So each of the drivers of the nineteen hundred cars that the United States Department of Transportation says pass, on average, through that particular hundred-mile stretch every Thursday night between eight PM and midnight got her own dose, too.

Along with the nineteen hundred cars' passengers.

And the nineteen hundred cars.

At around nine PM, the wind picked up speed from the north, putting the cloud—shaped like a dragon's skull, and fattening, twenty miles wide by the nonpartisan CUSDS' most conservative estimate—on track to arrive in the outskirts of metropolitan Phoenix not long after the clock turned over a new day.

Between nine and ten, the governors of California, Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico, and Colorado held individual press conferences, the defining characteristics of which were a lack of specific information, redundant questions from the hastily assembled press, and the increasingly frantic attempts of each governor to maintain the sense of calm that they hoped would reflect outward from their podiums.

The number of cars on Arizona State Routes 101 and 202, which form the northern and northeastern sections of the metro Phoenix beltway, increased fivefold, as residents who'd just

absorbed the news of what could happen to them tried to flee the city and instead found themselves immobile.

The President of the United States held his own press conference, at which he read a terse statement before wisely deferring to the head of the NRC, the senior senator from California, and the Secretary of the Interior.

The Governor of Texas horned in on the medley with a briefing of his own, which was preempted by the President after thirteen seconds.

The glut of media vans and curious onlookers heading from Interstate 15 down Nipton Road to Ivanpah Road, away from sure safety, into the Preserve, slowed the passage of the police- and black sedan-escorted and off-road-incapable Lancaster and Chula Vista Disaster Units to a crawl not much faster than the one suffered through by the citizens of Phoenix, who sat in rings around their city, in vehicles that assured freedom never more essential, wide-eyed and undernourished by the trickle of data coming from the offices trusted to function properly when needed most, three hundred miles away by road.

The Arizona State Police and Department of Transportation, caught just as unaware as everyone they were sworn to protect, activated their Level Four Emergency Contraflow Lane Strategy, but far too late to have an effect on the amount of traffic stranded on 101 and 102, or the rising volume on Interstates 10 and 17, the primary arteries feeding the beltway, rendering their Strategy, according to a DOT spokesperson, “impotent in the best case.”

By midnight, the combined forces of the four on-site response teams—the training and focus of eighty-eight men and women, aided by the knowledge that three more teams were on their way via helicopter—were, to use NRC parlance, in “full concert.”

“Full concert” refers to the improvised effort of disparate units, thrown together in a disaster, organized by general rank and specialty.

The result of the Lanfair Valley concert was the cessation, within four hours, of ninety percent of the radioactive flow.

The result of such a sharp reduction was the continued life, by the CUSDS' estimate, of the hundred thousand Phoenicians who would have been expected to die within three months, had the flow not been shut off.

Of the cloud's dissipation en route to Tucson.

The focus and energy of what became nearly two hundred people, some of whom received doses of radiation so high that while they worked they were able to watch their bodies rot away beneath them.

It is important to remember sacrifice and triumph, in light of the obscurity that came next.

In the days after the meltdown, living beings began demonstrating “zombie-like symptoms” in towns across the irradiated swath.

At the state prison in Kingman, inmates and guards committed mass cannibalism.

Flocks of sheep went mad in Prescott.

An Episcopalian minister foamed at the mouth and shouted obscenities before collapsing during a sermon at the St. James Church of God in Cadiz.

At the same time, a farmer lost the power of speech, tore his son limb from limb, and decapitated himself in a wheat thresher in Janesville, Wisconsin, on property adjacent to the site of a recent spill of sixty thousand gallons of tainted chlorine.

A coven of registered Wiccans complained to the sheriff of what appeared to be elaborate

pranks involving the dead rising from fresh graves and interrupting an internment ceremony for a newly departed friend in La Grande, Oregon.

In rural Gaston County North Carolina, a man who was raised in a house built directly atop a late-classified Superfund site drove his car into a ditch and began clawing at his wife, who escaped because her husband couldn't work his seat belt. She suffered serious lacerations to her left arm, along with, when her husband was put down by police after attempting to bite a deputy, a sense of shock she called "profound."

Comb through newspapers and coroner's reports from the weeks and months following the Lanfair Valley meltdown, and you'll find no shortage of "zombie-like" occurrences from all over the southwest.

And an overwhelming number of stories that take place nowhere near it.

Each one with different speculation as to its cause.

The affected aren't even technically zombies, in keeping with the standard usage of the word, since whatever transforms them doesn't kill them first, or in the process.

A zombie, traditionally, is a soulless corpse revived by witchcraft.

Popularly, a zombie is a brain-dead corpse that craves the flesh of the living; and, having eaten it, turns the living into further zombies.

Dr. Kenneth Chandrasekhar, chief hematopathologist at the Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York, testified before Congress that "the result of so-called zombification has more in common with rabies than radiation poisoning or any work of the imagination."

He said he "couldn't state conclusively" that what he was studying was "not a new disease, or a mutated form of a known one."

Over one hundred and twenty experts, in fields as diverse as medicine, chemistry, theology, radiology, radiobiology, engineering, and paranormal investigation, have said the same, either before assorted Congressional task forces or in dozens of journals dedicated to their specialties.

These victims are not corpses, and haven't been revived.

Biologically, they are still human.

The government won't kill them.

The military condones and is to an undisclosed extent complicit in the lucrative black market for zombie research parts.

We aren't sure how they came to be.

What gives them their sickly pallor.

Why they need to be provoked in order to attack us.

Why, when they do attack, they often use their teeth—but have no specific interest in consumption.

Why it is that the transformation we undergo after surviving an attack—when we survive—doesn't respond to any vaccine we've created, but can be stopped by radical amputation of the affected body parts.

We don't know communicative they truly are, since, just as it is with normal humans, their willingness and ability to tolerate other beings is related to variables like rest, hunger, and environment.

Or how intelligent they are, since, given any threat, they attack by charging straight ahead.

Or what their legal status as U.S. citizens is, since we only call them “zombies” because they only fit parts of the definition of a word that came into being long before they did.



What little legal research there is has only increased the number of possible causes of such strange behavior, scattered them like wheat mistaken for chaff.

Nor can we state, definitively, that they are without souls.

“The matter,” to quote the surgeon general, “is as gray as they are.”

And some people don't even call them that.

Some people don't believe in them.

Whatever they are.

Whether or not we know we're doing it, what our actions and words say about our relationship to them is:

The only thing we can be absolutely sure about is that we can't be sure.

It's for reasons of confusion on this scale, and because of a deep belief in the power of catharsis, that the Memorial Board approved and expedited the Remembrance Booth, the newest component of the Center, which has now been open for one year.

Dubbed “The Therapy Box” and “The Confessional” by the media, the booth is an unremarkable cinderblock chamber stuck awkwardly and dominantly in the left rear corner of the main hall, flanked by a photographic essay on the effects of radiation on local plant life.

It measures seventeen by seven by eight feet—the exact dimensions recommended for a childless couple by the Federal fallout shelter guidelines of the mid-twentieth century.

It is painted blue-gray inside and out.

It contains nothing but a rectangular table; a padded folding chair, oiled daily, with plastic caps on its feet; a yellow overhead light with a simple brown shade; and, embedded in the ceiling, a

half-dozen Kidman MEMS microphones, controlled through the soundboard in the recording station elsewhere in the building.

The dullness of the Booth is by design.

There is nothing inside or out to distract the mind.

To misguide intent.

The microphones are turned on five minutes before the Center opens each day, turned off five minutes after its close.

Other than an infrequent check on the audio feed to ensure that the current speaker is not sitting silently, in an act of defiance against something they refuse to share—which happens roughly once per day—or sleeping—which sometimes happens after lunch—the recording station is not maintained during visiting hours.

The visitor need do nothing more than enter the Booth, sit at the table, and speak.

Though a sign posted at the head of the line informs visitors of all of this information, and a staff member is on hand to answer any questions, perhaps the thing that visitors have the hardest time understanding is the near-total freedom the Booth represents.

We impose no time limit.

There is no censorship.

The sole requirement is that they share the effect of the disaster on their lives.

A visitor enters.

Sits in the chair.

Shares anything.

Leaves through a second door on the other side of the room.

Enters a dim antechamber, which grants a moment for repose.

Exits the chamber, at which point the red light outside the front door to the booth turns green.

And the next visitor comes in.

There is a guestbook just outside the door. Signing is optional.

Most visitors, waiting their turn, behave about the same way people tend to while in line for a roller coaster.

There is fidgeting and nervous glancing.

Idle chatter.

On all but the gloomiest days, laughter.

Neither as much as reverent silence as one might expect, nor as many stoic stares.

Many visitors bring notes or notebooks in with them.

Prewritten speeches. Books of quotations.

Photographs.

One young man from the University of Nevada-Las Vegas brought a physical copy of his entire doctoral dissertation on the speculative microbiology of the creatures, and read it, in its entirety, because, in his analysis, either the government would confiscate his research and imprison him before he could matriculate, or he would not live to see it published.

We have metal detectors to keep knives and firearms out of the building.

So far, we have no way of keeping visitors from bringing capsules, or plastic bags, or belts.

Most testimonies are fewer than fifteen minutes long, and nearly all of them are less than thirty.

The longest run for several hours and are often apocalyptic visions of no mean literary merit.

The shortest are a sentence, or a single word—usually an obscenity, though there are exceptions.

Like “Grace.”

And “Denial.”

And “Happiness.”

The final feature of the Memorial involved the transport, from Elberton, Georgia, of sixty-three tons of granite, in double-sided, seven-by-seven-by-two foot blocks, and the its placement here.

The fifty blocks snake their way along a low bluff, north of the Center, facing the Power Station's ruins.

There is room for a thousand names on each side of each block.

The names are of those who “died, were injured, or were otherwise significantly affected by the meltdown and its immediate effects.”

We chisel one name into the stone every day.

That pace is meant to encourage contemplation, forgiveness, temperance, acceptance.

Unfortunately, the pace of confirmation of death, injury, or significant affect leads to a great deal of frustration, outrage, and ill will.

At present speed, the granite will be complete in two hundred and seventy-three years.

More time than has passed since the end of the Civil War.

The torching of the White House by the British.

The inception of the United States, in both presence and spirit.

“Never” is a long time, but less daunting when thought of in human terms.

Because there is no direct link between the radiation leaked as a result of the Lanfair Valley disaster and the process popularly known as zombification, we hope, eventually, to help our country into a state of assessment, wherein fiction can be separated from fact.

Time is a luxury we all still have.

Over the past twelve months, we’ve recorded nearly twelve thousand testimonials, or thirty three per day.

Our best estimates tell us that the ratio of visitors standing in line to those who get to testify is around twenty-to-one.

What we choose to extrapolate from this data, given the size of the sample we've taken, is that our country is searching for an explanation of itself.

An understanding who we are, and where we're going.

“Therapy Box,” though not meant seriously, is therefore an accurate nickname.

And although each recording is archived and made free to the public via electronic database, the Memorial Board of Directors has elected to publish a selection of testimonials for two reasons.

The first is merely practical: We would like to try to demonstrate, in the face of great public skepticism, that our intentions are good.

We seek chiefly to chronicle. Knowing that, it is our responsibility to acknowledge that a chronicle's effectiveness is due in large measure to presentation.

Which is to say, it must be presented.

Questions of editorial intent, of authorship, were foremost in our minds. Every effort has

been made to transcribe accurately. Nothing in the pages that follow has been edited out of its original delivery, whether for length, content, or any other reason.

Proceeds from the sale of this volume, whatever they may be, will go to an assortment of charities and scholarships related to all victims of the meltdown, cleanup, and fallout.

The second reason is less so.

We would like to place our faith in a tangible medium of ideas, as a means of investing goodwill in ourselves, and our ability to cope.

It isn't as difficult to envision a world in collapse as it was perhaps a generation ago.

Electricity gone; luxuries abandoned.

The assumption of ease denied.

Should that collapse come about, almost all of our work will be inaccessible to us.

And by “our,” we refer to humankind.

A physical book, glued and bound, cloth-covered, printed on thousand-year paper, suggests at least a starting point, from which we might be fortunate enough to begin again.

The concepts of beginning and end are very much on all our minds. Consider these pages both a declaration of what we are, and a shelter against what, if anything, we might be.

Claudia Wickes, Ph.D

Director, Lanfair Valley Memorial Center

Ivanpah, CA

Anonymous

Galesburg, IL

There are a lot of factors at play, here. It's a mistake to assume that history has a straight trajectory, and that it can be easily influenced by one thing or another. You know. You can't just say, "Oh, well, Hitler was evil, and, thus, World War Two." It's more than simple dots and connections. A lot of people had to go along with him. Because there was focused resistance. And one person, one man, can't overcome an entire resistance movement by himself. A lot of people had to agree to them for Hitler's tactics to work, for his ideas to become law. So many parts of life shape history that it's irresponsible to say any one thing led to everything. I mean, if we extrapolate further, could Hitler have become that powerful without festering resentment over the Treaty of Versailles? Possibly. Probably not. But possibly. But probably not. Everything accretes, in myriad, unpredictable ways. Hitler is only one example. Let's not even get started on the solar system.

Having said that, I think one of the primary reasons the first of the creatures was so successful in attacking us, and turning their victims into brain-hungry, flesh-mad beasts was because none of the victims could bring themselves to believe that they were actually being attacked by real zombies. In other words, it was impossible for them to believe that the thing that was happening to them was really happening. As opposed to, you know, you just expect that maybe if you go sit up front at the circus, a tiger might maul you, or if you go to India you could catch the plague and die. We all have an idea about where tigers live, and where in the world you might still be able to catch

the plague. We don't think those things will happen to us, because they're not likely. They don't happen to us even semi-regularly. We know they *could* happen. If you win front row tickets to the circus, you might pause, and recalibrate yourself against the likelihood of the tiger having a bad day. It's a wild animal. But we still don't expect it. We say, "Oh, I'll be careful; that's not the kind of thing that will happen to me. I've," you know, "I've never broken a bone." Well. You've never been skiing, either.

But this is different, now. The world for us is radically different, and it changed when a zombie attack became a serious possibility. There's no reason to use another word. They don't have magical powers. They can't conjure themselves at the site of an invocation, or whatever it is that people say they can do. Ritual is another thing we've gotten a new perspective on. Do you remember, when you were very young, you had that belief that you could swat at a bee and kill it, but you never, ever wanted to even touch a yellowjacket, because if you did kill one, accidentally or not, it sent off this still-unexplained yellowjacket chemical alarm that within sixty seconds brought ninety-nine more yellowjackets to attack the killer? Who knows where that came from? The numbers are always very precise, in childhood. Sixty seconds exactly. Ninety-nine yellowjackets *exactly*. But when your friend tells you that, and another friend backs it up, and you didn't even want to touch it in the first place, then, by God, you've got the power of magic working against you. This is functionally the same thing. Ours is a collective trauma. And it isn't a particularly pleasant word to be confronted with, unless you're playing Scrabble. So I try to say it as often as possible for the rest of us, to take a little of the burden off. Zombie. Zombie zombie zombie zombie zombie zombie zombie. Zombie; zombie. There. Somewhere in a neighborhood under martial law, someone's headache just went away.



But what just hits me over the head until I see bluebirds is ultimately, although we have no one we can go and ask—and we won't until the mythical antidote is produced—it's a safe bet that the first person to walk down the sidewalk one peaceful afternoon and find himself being chewed, on all of a sudden, by a dead-eyed human-looking thing, did not think “Oh, my God, I'm being attacked by a zombie.” The number of thoughts that were more likely in that first instance is vast. “Ouch?” comes to mind. Or “Who are you and what do you think you're doing to my arm?” How about “Can I help you, sir; are you lost?” Maybe just “I have no idea what's happening and can't process this.” Or not even actual, fully-formed thoughts: just fear. Raw, unfiltered fear, running from the dead eyes to the now dripping, human mouth-sized gash in this person's arm, which now has loose flesh hanging from it like wrapping paper forgotten in the joy of the gift. And then a huge surge of adrenaline, which blocks out some of the pain, but gets the mind racing, and amplifies experience, distorting memory in the process. I'm willing to wager good money that “Is this a sick practical joke” crossed that person's mind, and “An actual zombie is attacking me” did not.

You see what a problem this turns in to. Separating the fiction of an impossible thing from the reality of the thing becoming. Who ever expects to have to deal with a nightmare come to life? On a scale so wide, it obliterates any lingering notion that we can return to a world without it? It isn't a case of simple naïveté. The assumption that the first victims were naïve bystanders is a product of the highly militarized and paranoid aftermath in which we now live. I'm not one of the thankfully very few pleading for zombie relations, or anything like that. They're not a nation. Zombies don't have diplomats. But to assume that we should have expected the worst is to assume that this was something we could have, realistically, expected at all. There's a reason that the first national newscast to carry the story of real zombies' real existence began with the words “Yes, it's

true.” There are still a great many people walking around in this existence who can't quite bring themselves to believe it. We've fractured reality, in a very tangible way.

If you're lucky enough to talk to people born before the Second World War—people born long enough before it to remember the atom bomb, and what it meant—they'll tell you that when they found out what had happened, they knew something had been taken from them that they hadn't even known they'd had. There's often a sadness in their voices. It's nearly imperceptible. It's likely that you have to have spoken to a great many of them before you can register it at all. And it might be deepened by their having lived now through two such changes. It's somewhat ironic that atomic energy was responsible for both of them. But what are you going to do? Dwell on that? Wallowing in irony is just another brainless activity. It's the same kind of change. There are plenty of reasons to consider giving up. That isn't one of the vital ones. It isn't that we aren't safe anywhere anymore. We're safe in most places. Our own homes, for one thing. Whether you love them or despise them, a reasonable person has to admit that the good old armed forces have kept us for the most part safe and functional for a lot of years now. The real terror is the knowledge that the age of capital-I Information has become one of sinisterly-lowercase-i implication. And we do it to ourselves, which can make it very difficult to face the day. We don't trust any authority—but neither will we place trust in ourselves. We can't do it. We're just too unsure of everything to do it. Anything that we think is possible could be happening now, and we wouldn't know it, because we are also terrific skeptics. Christ could have returned, a long time ago. There's so much that's dubious in daily life that our minds, the same ones that conceptualized zombies but never suspected that they could become real until they were on the sidewalk gnawing our arms off at the shoulder, are forced to fill in what we don't want to when we won't let anyone do it for us. And, knowing what we've done in

that instance without trying to do anything at all, we're terrified of what might happen when we have to continue living unstable lives. I think any sane observer has to agree that this is a real problem. You have to have someone to turn to. Something to believe in. Ultimately it doesn't matter what the thing is, as long as you believe in it. If you can put yourself into something, and use it to help yourself get through the day, then you're doing okay compared to people who go around jumping at shadows. Even drugs would probably be a better system of faith than having no system at all. Going without is much, much harder than dealing with any addiction. Any physical foe. Though both consume you the same way.

Elaine C. Hertz

Sylmar, CA

I got two little girls. Seven and ten. There's a school on our street but it's only K through 5 and it doesn't have advanced classes. My littlest needs a gifted program. Her sister's smart, too, but it's no comparing them. I won't have them in separate schools. There's too much separation in their lives already. I drop them off on my way to work. I got to go south to go north. Adds probably fifty minutes to my drive. It's got a real good placement record. Kids get scholarships to prep schools, go to college all over. Costs an arm and a leg. Both arms, some months. They've got art classes, music lessons. And no fences. It was on a three-sided range and they decided instead of fences they'd just blow the other sides out. There's one bridge to it.

We have to go through some scratchy lookin neighborhoods. Pretty snooty ones too. The kind where you got six guys with rifles to do the work for you. Huge walls around your house. I think that's a shame. It's no way to live. Just cause there's creatures in the woods or maybe even across the street, that doesn't mean you don't go out and live your life. I think it'd do those people good to have to defend themselves and their families one time. They don't know what it's like to have a pack of four hungry monsters wander out from behind a house at a red light. No other cars around. Maybe they don't move fast but there's still four of em. Everybody should know what that feels like. You hear people talk about human rights and dignity and you just know they got no idea. It's not a matter of right or wrong cause there's nothin wrong about it. They want you. They want

your meat. They eat it to get at your soul cause they haven't got one anymore. They don't know doin that keeps em from gettin one back. I don't care if my children are on the front seat with me. I will blow that thing's head off with my shotgun and roll the window up and drop my children off at school with a kiss on the forehead and that's just all there is to it. I do it regularly. I got a holster in the wagon. Some mornings I pray for it. It's a hell of a lot better than coffee, I'll tell you that.

One time I let one get real close. Like you used to with people selling oranges on the highway. I told my girls "Now you pay attention so you know what to do if this ever happens to you." I took a peanut butter sandwich I had for my lunch and smeared the peanut butter all along the head of the barrel. Then I cracked the window just a little bit and teased the barrel out and waved it back and forth. You do anything too fast and they get excited, they start to scream. This real raggedy thing, it comes over, and it's followin the barrel like a dog watchin a treat. I tease it out a little more and it reaches forward. It catches the scent. Leans its head forward, and sticks its tongue out. That was when the girls shrieked, when it stuck that nasty old kitchen sponge tongue out. I have to admit I don't blame em. It looked pretty God-awful bad. Part of the problem with em is havin to look at em. It didn't move when they screamed. Just kept lickin that peanut butter. Then when it leaned forward with its mouth open to take a bite on the barrel is when I pulled the trigger. That head just disappeared. If you ever saw a strongman smash a watermelon, that's what it looked like. And the girls didn't scream at that. That's when they stopped. I try not to be prideful but it was hard for the rest of that day. All they talked about all the way to school was how that disgusting maggoty tongue looked. Not a word about the head they saw explode six feet from their own pretty little faces. That's when I knew I was raisin em right.

I don't think that means I got a mean streak. I hear that from other mothers. If I could get

the car washed off before we got to school I would. But I guarantee if they had to drive the roads we take every morning they'd do the exact same thing. And they're not bad people. I think they've got their heads in their asses a lot of em, but they're not bad. Just sheltered. Truly, truly sheltered. All I ever say is don't pretend like you aint got a gun in the nightstand and two by the front door. If I could go back twenty years I'd buy every bit of Remington stock I could.

I'm not somebody who goes lookin for trouble. I go to work and we go to school and to the supermarket and home. That's mostly all. There isn't much. We'll play in the yard. The girls've got some friends in the neighborhood and I'll take em over to their houses to play. I'm not about to take the risk of goin all the way out to the movies when I can get em all in my livin room for the same exact price. We got a swing set in the back yard; we don't need to go to some park where I don't know who put the fence up. I don't know what the fence is made of or how deep the anchors go. I don't know who trims the branches back or how often it gets done. You can float around in a dream all day, like an asshole, or you can accept the world for what it is and realize nobody's gonna take care of it for you. You've got to protect what's yours. It's not to do with bein alone either. I always said this before any man ran out on me. I'll say it up until the minute they put me in my plot. I teach that to my girls in little ways. They make their own lunches. If they don't, they don't have anything to eat. If you can make yourself up out of what's inside of you, you'll be better off. Better than a lot of those damn classmates. Some of these kids aint got the sense God gave a melon. That's what they come from.

My uncle comes over Sundays to see what I need help with. I got a couple good brothers-in-law, too. There's somebody with us almost every night. It's nice to have regular company. They still apologize. Nobody knows where my husbands're at. It doesn't bother me. If that's who they turned

out to be then shame on me for not seein it in them. I read about people they find up in the hills near here or out in the desert. All kinds of mutilations. Odd rituals and who knows what. One man out there, I think it was the beginning of last week, they found him in a bunker he dug out himself, with one arm blown off and him stuck to the floor from all the blood. Sheriff said there was so much blood at first they almost didn't bother to investigate. After they searched awhile they found a needle and thread in all that soup. Then they looked the body over and now the theory is he tried to stitch his shoulder shut but he went into shock before he could finish. This man just bled the hell out on the floor of his pillbox. They got ideas about how he lost the arm but that's as far as they'll take it. So for all I know both my girls' daddies are already dead. There're plenty of gangs roaming around, on top of everything else. I think they're mostly just packrats. Some people never figure out how to live. They never were taught. Then they pass that onto their kids. We're about to have a whole generation now of people that decided to up and split off from the rest of the human race. I don't think we could get em back if we wanted to. Somebody told em it wouldn't be hard. Or they never got told the truth about it.

As for my job, it's night and day as far as I'm concerned. Most inmates you can talk to, find out how they are. What they think about. Whether or not they pray. I don't think that's a requisite, but it calms a lot of em down. The people that you can't control you probably never could anyway. And you just keep them locked up all but one hour a day. A person needs a little sunlight. Anything more's just a privilege. Lot of things are privileges. You get those taken away when you don't deserve em. Those people you're just a little more cautious with. That's all. It's all you can be. You've got to be cautious on this job. Vigilant. Those men have done horrible things, all of them. Murder. Rape. To kids. You think you already heard the worst thing you could have. Meanwhile new ones

are comin in all the time. There's no limit to what people will do. But they've still got souls. These men have done terrible things that I won't get specific about but none of em have done anything like what you get capable of when you lose that. They'll talk to you and explain why. If they won't explain it they talk about why not. Some of em got remorse. You can see it. It's real. You look em in the eyes and you can see the bottom. You're not gonna like what you see. But you can get there and see it. Whereas the other.

It can be hard. When my first husband left I had a rough spot. I thought some things I'll not repeat. When I got pregnant again I started to think about my children. The children I wanted, and their own kids after. It got easier when I did that. I didn't worry anymore about what I had comin to me. What I was owed. Didn't even think about it. All I was thinkin was years down the line. I knew if I had the chance I'd raise em so they'd see what the world had in store for people who didn't know how to prepare. Tell the truth, I'm glad when we get to school sometimes and the car's dirty. That's another thing I'll never share. A little blood and guts never hurt anybody. My girls know what it takes to survive. They see mamma do it two, three times a week. I know who I am. I'm fine with it. I know they know what I'm doing. I'd sooner take em to a picnic in the exercise yard then let em ride that bus to school. There's just nothin else to say about it.

Col. James G. Tibbets, US Army (Ret.)

Flagstaff, AZ

I'm visiting my grandchildren and we all came out for the afternoon. I thought I'd maybe



stand in line and see if my number came up, so to speak. To be frank, I think I hoped it would not.

I was a ballistics officer in the Mideast for two tours. I was waiting to hear where we'd be deployed next when everything fell apart, and they reassigned us Stateside. My battalion and I had some of the most extensive urban and mountain combat experience of anyone in the active service. Some of the men and women under my command were not happy about reassignment, and they let me know it. They thought it was a disgrace to have to fire on fellow citizens. I never looked at it that way. To me, when you become one of them, you're no longer a part of humanity. It's as simple as that. Creatures are no more human than gerbils. I told my soldiers, "This country has a problem it's expecting you to deal with." But you could see some of them were becoming disillusioned. People think morale is bad now. They should have seen the first wave of early discharges. I challenged everyone I saw uncertainty in. "If you have a problem with this task," I told them, "then you need to make way for someone who can do it." I didn't think they would take me up on it. Not one of them. That was unexpected. I was trying a motivational tactic. The number of soldiers who resigned—good people. Soldiers I'd thought were strong. They weren't up to it. It's as simple as that. They gave up careers, pensions. And honor. They took an oath and they couldn't uphold it. I didn't tell anyone I was disappointed. But I let them know. You can never be sure what kind of person you're dealing with until times get tough.

In the end, I'm glad they left. That made the unit stronger, as a result; it made me stronger. I turned into a better leader. I found strength I had previously only suspected. I learned a lot about human nature, doing cleanups in the States. Street-sweeping. We were the first ones on the ground in Detroit. We neutralized Youngstown almost single-handedly when the 114<sup>th</sup> was held over in Toledo. Three weeks of non-stop tranquilizing and transporting. They stood and cheered when we

left. We cleaned both Augustas. Filled seven national parks. Made a lot of cities habitable again. I saw a lot of friendship, a lot of sacrifice. All of it stays with me. I learned a lot about creatures, not all of it unpleasant. They don't vomit blood nearly as much as you might have heard. They do retain some human traits. They like to cuddle. When we came across a particularly large creature, we'd say, "That's a big spoon, right there." We'd load him into the truck, "Somebody'll be cold without their big spoon tonight." They'll rest that way, in nests. Curled around each other. We've seen nests of thousands. They're not unlike ants. You might across small groups—three, four, five, huddled in an alley at night. They look up at you. Right before you pull the trigger. Their senses get dulled very quickly. They'll rampage and forage for days at a time and then collapse. Their eyes look almost like normal eyes. If you've ever seen an especially determined linebacker up close, you know just before the snap his eyes are a mix of the human and the primitive. In this case it's the exact opposite. The eyes are just pits of madness. Subhumans. But as they look up, you'll swear you can see the human part trying to climb back out. There's a desperation to them.

That's the exception, though; not the rule. Ninety-nine percent of the time they're blood-crazy. You can't trust them any more than you can talk to them. But they get tired. They can only be relentless for so long. They've got to eat, too. And when they rest, they like to rest together. So they're not that different from us, in that way. They come from us. They were us, at one point.

Well—I never let any scientists embed with my outfit. What we had to do, that's no place for the merely inquisitive. I doubt we'll see an antidote in my lifetime. It'll have to be another solution. There weren't many days I preferred my little sedative darts to live ammunition. We could have taken care of the whole disgraceful problem twenty years ago.

I've got a little distance from that part of my life. I don't think I've mellowed. Maybe. Well—

why the hell not? I've earned the right to step back. And if I had to do it over? I'd do it just the same. My leg doesn't bother me. When I think of how things would have turned out if they hadn't operated when they did, all I feel is gratitude. That's the absolute, God-honest truth. I've got grandchildren. What other way is there to feel? I'm blessed. I'm absolutely blessed. I've met people who don't know what to say to that.

J.G. Ryan

Garden City, MI

Let's see. Well, I'm a hunter. I've been a headhunter about twelve years now. It's not a taboo thing in metro Detroit. A lot of people think it's a very high-risk job, and I suppose that might be true in other cities, but Detroit is so well-regulated, and so rigid between good areas and bad ones, that there's really not too much danger, as long as you keep your head on straight. All the problems we used to have with unemployment, and street gangs, all that got cleaned up when people started to go into business for themselves. Most of the old gang members are cops or military now. My dad says our neighborhood hasn't been this safe since before he was a kid. If you know what you're doing, it's no more dangerous than welding. A lot of the job, honestly, is just waiting for something to happen. A lot of people have trouble sitting still for minutes or hours like that. My buddy Crazy Don got impatient and left his car to try and flush a few creatures on his own and he lost a hand. I've heard people say they've gotten more intelligent over time; I don't know if that's true, but you don't tend to see them in small groups as much as you used to. Don keeps his hand tethered to a bolt in the wall in his kitchen. It creeps up the walls looking for a way out. By now it's pretty dormant; most of the tissue has rotted off. Can't really move. At Christmas he puts foam antlers on it. That's Don kind of in a nutshell.

When I take a crew out, there's at least four of us. Four in a convertible is a good group. You can move much more quickly without windows to roll up and down. I've got a '64 Chrysler 300K we

use. Three-speed automatic; bottle green; trunk big enough for a Little League team, helmets and all. My buddies tell me it's too nice to use for hunting, but it's such a brutal car. You know, nowadays, the cars that aren't garbage trucks are just bottle rockets on wheels. To do this job well, you need strength and maneuverability. You need finesse. And I didn't pay a thing for it; it fell into my lap. We were doing some work in Corktown over by the Lodge, and this car's idling in the street. My brother points it out to me: "Look at this asshole." If you've got to sit in the street to wait for somebody, you damn sure don't do it with the engine running. Especially if it's an old beast like the Chrysler. The whole time we were there, running around, cutting heads off, this dude sat in the street, with the car running. Alright; so, we finish there, we go home, next day we're back, same part of town, and the car's still out there, still running. Well, now we know something's up with this dude. We go over, and he's got a hose running from the exhaust pipe in through the window. So he's dead. So that's how I got my 300. I let it air out for a couple of days and it was good to go.

But, yeah, four-on-eight isn't a big deal. Even four-on-twelve isn't anything to get uptight about. You keep your guard up, aim high, and know when to pull the trigger. You don't just pull up next to a pack and start blasting away. That's the single dumbest approach. There's a craftsmanship to it, man, a real artistry. Most people don't see it that way. But we have clients. We're filling orders for people. If a private lab wants ten skulls for brain study, you don't have the luxury of shooting north of the throat. We're talking intact skulls. No cracks; no pieces missing. You don't have the luxury of a gun with a spray. Head shots are the surest way to go, but now you've got to rely on body shots. Some firms want living specimens. That's its own set of problems. You make sure your tranquilizers are still viable; you do a few test runs, see if your restraints take the skin off if you clamp them too tightly. What's your escape route? What are your alternates? Who's your alternate

crew? Where're you holding the bodies? You have to put a lot of thought into this if you want to make a living at it. We get compared to organized crime; to be honest, I think it's closer to what professional athletes do, to keep in shape. Staying on task all the time. Preparation; preparation; preparation. You have to know when to be ruthless and when to retreat. There's definitely a right way to go about it. You've got to be good at dealing with people. Controlling your crew and working with clients. People want body parts for all kinds of weird, disgusting reasons, and you've got to just nod and say "No problem; I'll have that for you in three days." Crazy Don and my buddy Henning have a whole side business selling arms to the Japanese. Just arms. I have no idea what they fuck they do with them, but those guys make a fortune selling fresh, dismembered arms. Henning's got kids at Northwestern. If you go out looking to shoot up the world, you're not gonna last. This a business, like any other. No one's going to come in after you.

All you need to do is get their attention, and they come over to the car. Some guys carry a cooler full of steak. To me, that's a waste of good steak. You can just whistle. A bird call works. What you want is a sharp noise that isn't too loud. A gunshot is a very bad idea. At this point, they know to respond to gunfire with extreme prejudice. You only want to pull the trigger when you're actually firing on them. A recording of a human scream? Likewise a bad idea. Screams are catnip for zombies. They'll swarm. A sharp, directed noise can get the attention of one or two at a time. If you're collecting heads, you knock it over with a quick gutshot at close range, jump out of the car, keep the gun fully extended so it'll swipe at that instead of you, get the barrel up against the neck, and let go of one more shot. One blast with a double pretty much takes the head off. None of my work pants are clean from the knees down anymore, but if you do it right, that's the only casualty you have to worry about. It's a lot easier to stain a pair of pants or a leather jacket than it is to shed

your own skin. I've seen guys wearing garbage bags to protect their clothes. A lot of crews out on the East Coast wear head-to-toe body armor, which I think takes it too far in the other direction. If you need to run, you can't be weighted down. All it takes is two or three of em to pin you, and once you're down, that armor's not gonna last forever.

If there are any resistant sinews or attached muscle, that's what your secondary is for. He cuts it away, takes the head by the hair, throws it in the trunk. It's important to grab by the ends of the hair—if they have any life left in them, they'll bite at any skin anywhere near the mouth. Sometimes you'll see kids booting an old head around in a cul-de-sac. I can't tell you how many parents I've gone up to the front door and told "Your kid better be wearing fucking chain mail to take a stupid chance like that." The heads can live for a week by themselves. It's a depressed state, but they'll still bite you. That's about all they can do. They're dying, but that doesn't mean they don't have instincts. And their instincts are a lot keener than ours. These kids coming up today, they don't know how good they have it. There are hardly any neighborhoods marked with impaled heads anymore. It used to be you couldn't go five blocks without seeing a spiked fence with heads impaled all along it. Those times are gone. There's a whole chic zombie thing going on. Apparently in Brooklyn they have them imported. I hope to God I'm wrong about that. We're getting complacent. We think we're better than them and it's making us lazy. They think "meat." That's all they've got on their minds. It makes them better hunters, in some respects. When you lose your focus, you're not the better hunter anymore. The superior hunter can block out everything except his prey. I'm setting up tuition funds on this. You know? Math. When we get really rolling the bodies stack up all around the car and form a barrier. Then it's like picking apples. You can go around and grab heads wherever you see them. That's a powerful feeling. There's a hundred dead zombies lying around and you put

them all there. You get to sit behind the wheel while everyone else breaks the circle open so you can drive the car out.

As a matter of fact we're working on accuracy, now, with our hunting. We've had to leave big harvests behind because there wasn't any more room in the trunk. That's money rotting away, when you do that. It's hard to find a buyer for old product. Zombies don't make babies. I don't want to be a whaler. We could fish ourselves out of a job if we're not careful. Don and some of his people want me help out with a real estate deal. They need someone to clean out a few neighborhoods they've bought up. A lot of landlords now are just people squatting in abandoned homes. They'll watch a place for awhile and make sure no one lives there anymore and just move in. There are blocks and blocks of houses these guys have turned into their own kingdoms. I don't want to cross paths with any of them. Parts of Detroit are pristine, now. There are a lot of nice places to raise a family. Then there's this other side of things that's just begging to be taken care of. It sounds like this would be a part of that. But I don't want to be the guy doling out vigilante justice and selling stripped copper on the side. It's got to be the city that does it. Not too many people are crazy about Detroit having such an underbelly for this type of thing. I know a lot of the city government would love to get people like me in jail on completely unrelated charges. Like Capone. Exactly like Capone. It's bad enough Don's trying to get me to go in on this Most Dangerous Game compound out in Zion. He wants to buy the fucking nuclear power station, the decommissioned one. He took me over there once to consult for him; it was the creepiest thing. It looked exactly like what you'd expect a nuclear holocaust to look like. Everything was gray. Huge overgrown weeds. This was just an abandoned power station, but it does things to your mind. All this fog. Ruins everywhere. And then the undead wandering around. Meanwhile handless Don's giggling like it's a video game. I said



to him, “Why the fuck would somebody pay you a thousand dollars a day to go hunting when he could just wander off into a bad neighborhood?” But he was right. People pay it. People are on a list. They can't get in there fast enough. It gave me second thoughts. But that's a whole other enterprise—and it's way too visible. My profession is much less overt and much harder to find. I'm pretty well insulated, legally speaking. When Don gets caught he'll be a federal criminal. God bless him, he loves those Illinois pecans.

I've been in stupid situations before. By “stupid” I'm talking about situations I brought about. Part of it was bad luck, but, you can't attribute every bad thing that happens to you to luck not being on your side. That's another weakness you've got to get past. What happened the time I'm thinking of was, I was with a crew of three, myself included. That was probably my first mistake. You really want to have a minimum of four, in case you have to pair up. And the same thing could have happened just as easily with four. Maybe I would have lost three men instead of two. But, regardless, you want everything covered. Now, four is a minimum. That's the rule. It was me, my midget buddy Fuller, who's maybe five-five if he's got a hard-on, and my buddy Rob Bob, who's just a goofy son of a bitch. We called around a little bit to get a fourth, but no one was answering, and it was Fuller's car and he had to go to work later, he wanted to go. So we went with three. Things were going fine. I wouldn't quite call what happened an ambush; I don't think you can call it that, but it was a very effective charge. They really only know how to do that, and they do it as quickly as possible. So if you get surrounded, it's because there were already creatures all around you, not because they were waiting to trap you. And we just took too damn long to finish the job. This creature we got stuck on, he had the biggest bull neck I've ever seen on a humanoid. It was like—it was huge. I dunno. It's hard to look back and explain it to someone who's never been there. We had

him down, and I shot him in the neck. He's still swinging away at us, and Fuller's teasing him with his shotgun, to keep his hands occupied. So, I shoot him on the other side of the neck. He flails and knocks Fuller's shotgun away. It goes flying down the street, and he starts getting up. Meanwhile, Rob Bob's dealing with his own creature, and his shot *misses*, if you can believe that. He takes a nice chunk out of the street. Fuller's gun lands up near him, and instead of taking another shot, he goes to get it. Well, of course the creature gets up and starts to come after him. Rob Bob sees this, and he turns and fires, but it's a wild shot. He shatters a window across the street. So now there's one on Rob Bob, a horde starting to pour in from the backyards, and the giant's lurching after Fuller, who's ducking under his arms and trying to cut his head off. It's hanging at this perverse angle, like he's trying to eat his own shoulder. I can't shoot or I'll hit Fuller, and then there's a horrible scream and Rob Bob's getting bitten in the face. You hear the scream before you register what happened. It's a crunch. It's—the cheekbone and the jaw, is what it is. It sounds like eating a handful of cereal out the bag; it'll disorient you. They're not vampires. It bites you *in* the face. It makes a noise.

What I should have done, right then, was get in the car and go. I should have ordered it as soon as Fuller lost his gun. It was stupid to try and keep that situation under control. Instead, I run and get the AR out of the backseat and start firing into the horde. That was a mistake. That just calls more of them. It *happens*. More and more of them. You don't even know what to do. Just keep firing. The only thing you can wonder is where the fuck they're all coming from? We were standing there firing guns for a full minute, calling all kinds of attention to ourselves, and we didn't have anything to deal with. As soon as we get a few of em coming our way, and they start to scream when we shoot a few more, we can't stop them for anything. I don't get it. When the AR's empty I run for the car and shout to get in. By the time you have to shout, you're not in a good place. We think

we're always prepared. We try to be prepared. You're on edge all the time. You're always ready. The thing you have to do is keep yourself out of situations where you need to be fully active. Because it escalates quickly. We're three young, well-armed guys, we kept cool, and we got overrun. Plain and simple. You have to know when things might escalate like that.

Rob Bob is gone. He's covered. Fuller's being picked up and slammed into the ground. I run back to the car, I go to turn the keys—and they aren't there. And I don't have time to even let my heart sink. I don't have time to wonder where they are. I can't go looking for em. I just run. I've never had such a clear head before. Not once did I think about how stupid we got, or the four living creatures we had in the trunk, or even the '71 Caprice that I had to leave sitting in the middle of the street that, honestly, I was very fond of. Not once. I got to think about it plenty afterward. I ran for hours. Without stopping. Two, three hours, easy. Leather jacket, AR-10, knife in my boot. You've got to stay in pretty good shape to do this well, but you don't expect to have to put it to the test quite like that. And I felt pretty lucky. I escaped a zombie massacre with all my limbs intact. No bites. When I started to get close I got a flare gun off a dead hobo. I used that to distract a some of em that kept after me. I rested up a tree for a little while and then when I was through I got picked up by a bus full of nuns. That was a trip. They made a lot of death jokes. They must have a death wish to pick me up, and they were going to have to strip search me for bite marks if they didn't die of shock in the middle of it. I wished I had cash to give them. I tried to give em the rifle, but they wouldn't take it. So we hugged.

I think it was pride that got me in trouble. That, and it never felt like we had lost control of the situation until we had way fucking lost it. It's prideful not to feel like you could lose control of things at any moment. I was confident, but, because I overlooked the possibility, I was arrogant. We

got stupid. If you run into a problem on a hunt, a problem like that, you either back away immediately or attack it with *vital* force. And if you back away, you back away fast. Don't stand there trying to deal with the thing like it's no big deal. It's always a big deal, and man, I'm telling you, the minute you forget that, that's the minute you find yourself swimming in shit. You can't be dumb. You've got to know what hubris is. It's completely unacceptable. When things get tight, you pack it up. Not if, but when. It's gonna happen.

I miss those guys. They were pretty good. They were good guys individually. Rob Bob would brew this terrible, terrible beer and then drink it all so no one else would know how bad it was. You've never seen a worse drunk. He's vomited on every wall in his house. They were reliable. Fuller, he was in my wedding. First cop I ever bribed. I knew em both for twenty years. Oh, well. I can't look out for everybody all the time. I hate to put it that way, because it feels heartless, but that's the way life works. We all know that. I wouldn't expect anyone to hang around and try to rescue me. I pay out a little bit to their families. There's more work coming in all the time. Economic interests aside, I don't have a lot of faith that they'll find a cure anytime soon. We don't even know what made these things in the first place; how are we going to reverse the process? And even if we do find the miracle cure, the problem's not going to go away tomorrow. It'll take years just to make enough to inject into everyone, let alone to administer it. I'm confident I'll be doing this the rest of my life. It's a matter of stretching it out. I think I'm making the switch to rifles. The guys I'm working with now, we're training with scopes. They're very big in California. Those valleys. It takes longer to make the pickup, but you can drop one from farther away. There's less risk up front, and you have more time to prepare when you need to cut something off. Plus when problems come up, you've got more of a head start.

I'm feeling a little experimental. I'm learning from my mistakes. I think the first key to that is admitting when you've made one. I'm actually out here to bid on a new car. There's a '66 Olds 442 at the Leno garage auction. He knew how to keep up a garage, I'll say that much for him. This thing's got a W-30 three hundred and sixty horsepower engine, rotisserie restoration, track pack. Triple black. You could put your dick in it. It's got everything: class, muscle, finesse, practicality. I almost don't even care about getting the measurements for the trunk. I tell everyone I meet I'm a meat wholesaler. I know there are some collectors who would refuse to sell to me if they knew what I was going to do with their cars. But, seriously, this is a business decision. There's nothing wrong with a little style when it makes sense to have some. And everything about this car makes sense. I'm gonna install a hummingbird filter in the muffler to use as a signal when we take it out. It's a cool job for some people, because of the underground factor. But I've got to take the long view on this.

So, I think that's about all I had to say. Thanks for listening, whoever's out there—I assume someone is listening to this—and, you know, if you're ever in Detroit, and you've got some free time on your hands, feel free to look me up. I'm won't take civilians along on a run, but I'm always happy to talk shop.

Anonymous

Modesto, CA

My neighbor still has a sprinkler system. And that....I just don't think that's right.

Prester John

Palm Beach, FL

I recently took a trip to Canada. Never been; first time. Been to Western Europe on a speaking tour; saw Japan on a honeymoon. I once spent a winter in Kalispell, Montana, visiting friends. But I didn't get across the border. Never made it up to Canada before this year. Frankly, I never saw the point. And, I have to say, I was breathless. Completely blown away. First of all, it's a beautiful country. Magnificent to look at. We went coast to coast: Alaska to Ontario; Nunavut to PEI. The whole way. Never got tired of looking out the windows. It's so much *bigger*, than most of this country—so much *fresher*. There's a vibrancy to Canada that we haven't had in a long time. Second, it's full of no-nonsense people. They go about their business, Canadians. Very polite. That part is true. Yes. The rumors are true; Canadians are polite. They're quick to smile, eager to give directions. But they're also very quietly determined. They go about their business. Canadians are very much of the belief that you should go your way, and I should go mine. They'll help you if you get lost, because it's the decent thing to do. Canadians are decent. And they're not the ones getting lost. They know what they are doing. There's a spirit of self-reliance to the Canadian people that we have largely lost in this country. You hear a lot of talk down here about self-reliance, and bootstraps, and all the rest of it—Canadians walk the walk. A very driven, very results-oriented people. And—and this may be the most important thing—is Canadians know how to deal with a crisis. They heard

about the troubles their American friends were having, south of the border; what did Canada say? Not “How can we help?” Not “Let's help you *study* the problem.” Canada took one look at what was starting to happen in this country, and they said “We're building a fence.” They said “No, thanks. Not for us. We'd rather not have that particular problem.” Our border with Canada used to be the freest and most open in the world. No more. It's closed. You can't get a business card through there without proper documentation. Not a whistle. That gate is shut. If you don't have the right papers, you aint getting through. Not for a day trip; not for your dying aunt. No ticket, no passage.

I think there are a number of lessons to be learned from this. But the starkest one is that I don't know if we can rightfully call our country the greatest nation on earth any more. We have problems, and we push them aside. We don't look at them. We're not willing to make the tough choices. “Put up a wall,” we said. Some of us said it. “Put up a wall around the infected areas; seal all of those people in, to keep the rest of us safe.” For five minutes, we had this debate. Then everyone else—the vocal, sad majority—started listing all the different reasons we couldn't possibly put a wall up. Too expensive. Takes too long—wouldn't finish in time. We'd have to monitor the wall. Patrol it. Walls don't work, ultimately. Look at Berlin; look at Korea; look at Quebec. Walls don't work. They don't fix things. They're not the answer. Worst of all—worst excuse of all: walls restrict human rights. They aren't fair. They keep people locked in unfairly. So, because we couldn't agree on why a wall was a terrible idea, we never built one. And now the infection, the disease, the radioactivity, whatever your belief is, it's everywhere. It's unavoidable. Between twenty and eighty million affected, say the most reliable estimates. Cases in all forty-eight states. Cases all over Mexico. Creeping into Central America. Brazil now with something similar. This isn't just a single-country problem; it's become a *world* problem. All because we didn't want to lay a few bricks. Because we couldn't make



the hard choice when we still had the option. We were worried about a little bit of money, and a little bit of *rights*. I ask people this question, all the time: in light of the overwhelming, worldwide, human-wide problem this has become, have you ever heard of such an absurd, such a silly notion, as *rights*?

And I'll tell you one thing I'll never for the life of me understand, is why does it matter where these things come from? Why does it matter? What difference does it make? What difference does it make whether it was a nuclear meltdown, or a chemical fire, or an alien lifeform released into our world as the result of a nuclear meltdown, or if it's God's divine hand, finally wiping us away and cleansing his earth? They are *here*. Coming up on twenty years, they've been here, and we are doing nothing about it. We are letting people rot—*letting*, we're encouraging it! Come on down to Uncle Sam's! We'll fix you up good! They are here, and that fact makes where they come from—how they got here—irrelevant. Irrelevant! Totally irrelevant. Waste of time to even think about. Much less talk about. But it's all anybody wants to talk about. “Where did they come from?” When people still do talk. “Where did these creatures come from? How did they get here? What made them?” I'll tell you what. Why don't we eliminate them, first. Then, I will personally donate ten million dollars to a fund devoted entirely and solely to paying the world's top researchers to go out into the world, out in the desert, and pick over the corpses and find out how these things came to be in the first place. That's a promise.

I, I just don't understand it. When did we become so fixated on meaningless problems in this country? On therapy answers? Because that's what this is—it's a therapy answer. It's a question we ask to try and make ourselves feel better. We've all been to therapy. Think it works? Doesn't matter. Because at some point you've asked, “Why did Daddy hit me?” “Why did Mommy throw the boiling

water on me when I ate cookies before dinner?" "Why do I feel so angry all the time?" Go ahead and substitute the word "angry" with the emotion of your choice. No need to exclude anybody. We can never exclude anyone any more. Haven't been able to for years. Now, whether or not you believe therapy actually works is also irrelevant. Why? Because it's a self-love exercise, designed to make you feel about yourself the way your parents never did. Your friends. Whoever you want. That's why they ask you about *origins*. Why this way; where did *this* come from. Where did that come from. This country's been in therapy well over a hundred years. Many generations, asking the same questions their parents did. We still don't know why Daddy held our hands to the hot stove when we spilled milk on his business papers. We have an *idea*. We have an idea why Mommy spanked us with a dirty spade after we dug up her garden. But we can't understand that, can we? Not until we understand their parents, and their parents' parents—and then we'd have to go back and consider everyone's parents, to the beginning of time. It's a useless question. We will never have all the necessary information. Maybe after getting up to Heaven. "Grandpa Dan, Great-Grandma Jean, why were you such cold bastards to your children?" I don't know if you can say that in Heaven, but I'm not the only one who'll be trying to. We are our country's children. Our country breeds us and influences us the same way our parents do. These creatures—you don't believe it, go live in the forest. You don't believe it, go live in a hut. These are the questions we *can't* ask of our government. Even though the powers that be know where the chemical tanks are *located*, geographically, and even though they know where the *money* came from, they can't tell us *why* they created the creatures in the first place. They can't tell us why they continue to create them. That sequence was set in motion long ago. Whether it was the Third Continental Congress, or the Eagle River Accords, or, what's most likely to me, just good, old-fashioned curiosity, these things are *here now*. They dominate our

lives. They've changed everything. When was the last time, before this thing took over—and I know it's tough, having to think back that far, but see if you can. When was the last time, before these things took over, that you walked down your driveway with the intent of doing a little gardening, maybe a little trimming and edging, and discovered your next door neighbor's skull being gnawed on by a formerly human creature? In his own yard. Make no mistake about that. He wasn't in your yard. He didn't get dragged over. All you have to do, to physically *do*, is back up past the petunias and go back inside. You see, peering over the slight rise in the landscape, that the creature has already feasted on poor Bob's entrails, a lot of his midsection. So it's got a full belly; it's a little slow. Even if it sees you it's not going to give a very good chase. *You're* not in immediate danger, discovering this. But all you wanted to do was a little yard work. Why should you have to duck back inside like a cowardly lion? This is where we're at, as a culture. We're all guaranteed guns and we're all afraid to use them. I tell you, it makes me sick most mornings—physically ill. It really does. I wake up in the morning, and I remember where I am, and I run for the toilet. And not just because of Bob. It has nothing to do with poor Bob. This is about what we're turning into. What we're *letting* ourselves become.

And listen—I'm not even saying it was chemical vats that spawned these things. I don't know what continues to. I don't pretend to. You believe in the vat theory, fine. There's plenty of vats to originate from. Plenty of information to support that theory. You believe it was nuclear fallout, fine! Take your pick. Anyone still counting the reactor meltdowns and malfunctions from the last generation alone? Any *one* of them would substantiate the earliest sightings—Wolf Creek; Rancho Seco; Oconee; Dresden; Seabrook Station; Prairie Island—do I have to go on? Take your pick! Subtitle that list "Places we forgot to invest in infrastructure." Oops. See, kids—it's boring, but it does

make a difference. Be careful who you vote for. If you believe it was some sort of alien technology—well, there's less evidence for that, but there's always been less evidence for that, hasn't there? That idea has become so ingrained in the rapidly unraveling fabric of our society that I don't think you can just discredit it. "Oh, we have a museum devoted to the possibility of alien life; doesn't that mean the government has nothing to hide?" Unbelievable. It's unbelievable, how trusting some people still are. It just breaks my mind into tiny little pieces. Think about this. If you believe that the government had a hand in raising the dead, keeping the undead a part of our world, do you also believe the government would be *proud* of that participation? How many times do your dogs need to go missing before you get angry? Get in line with the rest of us and realize that anger is the dominant emotion among your fellow countrymen. There's a museum at Roswell *so* you'll say "Phew, I sure am glad we aren't covering anything up."

Do they still make people that ignorant? Did we learn nothing from the Bush Dynasty? You hide your information out in the open, folks. I can't tell you if we're breeding these things in chemical vats and releasing them as a form of scare control. I don't know if all the nuclear accidents were related, or if the first one started the process and all the others were supposed to be cover-ups. I don't know if this is God, reaching down to smite us. I wish I did. I really do wish I knew. But I don't. And until I get to Heaven, I don't think I'll have any idea what the truth is. What I do know, though, will stun you. We have finally reached a place, in our society, where there's so much *mis*-information, and the daily situation has gotten *so* bad, so horrifying, that the truth doesn't even matter, anymore. Want to know where the creatures come from? I don't. Why not? Because I would rather line my front yard with land mines, and wait on my porch with a shotgun for any of them that get through that. I'd rather be rid of this threat than find out what started it. Oh, the government has

a serum. Oh, they're testing it out in laboratories. Congratulations: you've been duped. I'm talking about life and death, here. Not *justification*. Not *gratification*. If you need to know—you *don't* need to know the "truth," the supposed truth, more than you need to live. If you'd rather find out the truth, ask yourself—whose side *are* you on? What's your purpose, in this life? To prolong it? Are you *un-*willing to pick up a gun and go to work? Are you just afraid? There's no shame in fear, at first. Some of you are infants, taking your first step into a big, scary world. Your first beatings. Some people still have this idea that the world is a big, open, freeing, happy place, and that their place in it is assured. And they're not all rich. Well—I'm rich, and I've got news for you: I don't believe for a second that any of that is true. That kind of thinking is obsolete. Unreal. Completely incompatible. It was finished almost a generation ago. The world is a hot, stinking, dangerous place filled with a lot of unhappy creatures that will eat you to death on sight. They are slow and deliberate, not unlike a deadly virus. But they can be killed, and killed in ways that *justify* our humanity, that reinforce and *celebrate* it, rather than diminish it. I'm not one of those people who believe that to slaughter them is to become them. How many times a day do I have to see that bumper sticker? Do people really *believe* that? Is this more misinformation? Who, in this world, knowing what we know, is still endorsing cannibalism? We've got food issues, but not ones that bad. I don't see the problem. If you really believe that by slaughtering these brainless creatures, we somehow turn our souls over to them, please, do us all a favor and just put the Winchester in your own mouth and have a good friend pull the trigger. You want information? You want a stark choice? Remember how the saying goes—it's kill, or be killed. There are still good people in this country. People who know how to deal with serious problems. You can have the privilege of fighting alongside them, or you can camp out in the hills and go it alone, but you can't ignore the problems. You damn sure can't ignore them with

absurd, idiotic questions like "But what about where they *come* from?" Not with cries of "We want the truth!" Do you know how ridiculous you sound? Do you have any idea? I think if you did, you'd stop. I hope you'd have the common sense to do that. The lines are drawn as clearly as they've ever been. Why can't you see that? What more do you need? Ask yourself—what more could you possibly need?

There are still good people working to protect this country. I believe that. I have to. There may only be a handful of them, living in tents up in the mountains, waiting for the rest of us to die off before they venture back down. But they're there. It's not cowardly to run away when everyone else has lost their minds. That's the sensible thing to do. You say to them: "You've all lost your minds. Adios. I'll be back when the smoke clears." If they even come back. If they even come back. Isn't that a scary prospect? Isn't that the scariest thing to think? That these brave people will leave us alone...forever? What are we supposed to do if all the brave people are gone? We couldn't even build a wall—how can we be trusted to shoot millions of people in the head? That's what it's going to come to. People don't like to talk about it. They'll talk about anything else. It's why our greatest national debate, right now, is over "Creature Rights." That's what we've come to. What is the legal status of these partly human, kind of human, mostly inhuman creatures; how can we make sure their rights aren't being infringed upon. It's a sad, sad state of affairs. Animal rights—that concept is strange enough. Don't beat your animals. Unless they do something wrong. Unless they attack someone. That much should be obvious. Are these things animals? You see anybody keeping one as a pet? Are they humans? Are you kidding me. Do they act like humans? Does the average human's eyeballs rot in their sockets after a couple of weeks? Do humans try to eat one another for meat, generally? Not on your life are they human. Not on your life are they anything more than a pest, to

be eliminated. "Creature Rights" is the most offensive phrase in our history since "pro-choice." It's disgusting. Canada didn't quibble about rights. They didn't worry about impeding anything. They took one look and put up a fence of titanium alloy in epoxy-resin honeycomb and patrolled it with the finest, most absurd-looking Mounties they had. A chain-link fence. So they could see trouble coming before it got there. They took the tough choice, and made it easy—and you know what else? The Canadians made a lot of people rich by building that fence. Used a lot of manpower. Created a lot of jobs. Touched off a firestorm of improvement across the country. Did wonders for their whole infrastructure. This whole debate is just one more way for us to avoid looking at the real problem. Which is, let's face it, extermination. People exhibiting anything along the long, long range of symptoms. From the obvious to the very early signs. Between twenty and eighty million. What we need in this country is a leader strong enough to stand up and say "Let's stop kidding ourselves. These formerly human things have all got to go. They need to be wiped out." And we need citizens strong enough to agree. People willing to blow kisses to Aunt Myrtle and Uncle Fudd and say "Folks, but I'm not dying just because I'm related to you. Humanity isn't dying out just because you gave me some toys when I was a child." And then blow what's left of their brains all over the sidewalk. We need citizens strong enough to pick up a shovel, to take the controls of an earth-moving machine, and start digging holes. We need to evacuate towns downwind of the burning stench, and we need the people in those towns to stand up and salute the flag and say "Yes, sir, I will relocate, and I'll do it gladly." We've already abandoned cities and national parks to them. We round them up and dump them out of semi-trucks like cattle. What's eighty million dead? What is it, really, balanced against the tide of history? How much more *selfish* are we going to be, keeping these eighty million people alive? We could wipe this problem out in a weekend. One weekend, one concerted

effort, one country *saved*. The world grateful. The world saying “Here's a country that knows how to take care of itself. This is a nation to be *respected*. A nation to be *feared*.” We need to declare the next Fourth of July weekend a time of national sacrifice and purging, and get to work. People need to be reminded what those words mean. They don't mean anything, anymore. This is the biggest problem we have ever faced and we could eliminate it in three days. I tell you, the Russians are laughing at us. The Germans are *laughing*. These are countries that know what war dead look like. They've got it in their DNA. Eighty million, that's a drop in a very big bucket. A generation from now, we won't even miss them. Even the Canadians are shaking their heads. No one else understands us. We've got a cancer in ourselves. We need to cut it out. No one's going to do it for us. No one else will make our decisions. I hope we're strong enough to do it. I pray we are. I've already started the Canadian citizenship process. It takes years for everything to go through. There's a huge waiting list. Not that I'm surprised. I second-guessed the decision. For a minute. Canadians believe in liberty, they believe in the pursuit of happiness—and they believe in *life*. Life most of all. I never would have guessed that my country would give up on life before everything else. It was a sad day, when I had to come to terms with that. I believe there's still time for us to change our minds. I'm going to try, fervently, to get people to do just that. It's my number one goal, while the paperwork is being processed, while the persistent Canadians are doing their background checks and compiling their questions for me. I'm going to see if I can't get this country turned back toward what it used to be best at. We may have had our best days, but that means we can draw from them. We need inspiration for future greatness. There's never a brighter day than the one you make out of the greatest glories of your past. That's my message. That's what I want to get people believing in. In the event that I can't—my bags are packed. It was a hard choice to make, but it was the right one. And when the choice is right,



it's no choice at all.

Kate McNeil

Greenville, SC

It's *weird*. What's going on. I mean I know that doesn't completely cover it but it's just...*weird*. Who ever thought we'd be living side by side with zombies? Oh, sorry—"creatures." I guess they don't want to be called the Z-word anymore. I'd just as soon call them shithead motherfuckers, but, I know we've all got to try and be polite. Respect all systems of belief. Besides, if some people eat monkey brains and we're descended from apes then I guess this all makes sense, in a way...right? Maybe?

I shouldn't joke about it, though. I did lose, last year, a very dear friend of mine to a creature attack. She was coming home late from a pool party, very drunk, and just...thought she'd take a shortcut. And she never made it. It's—but, I mean, and I get so mad at myself for not saying to her, before she left, "Well, what do you expect when you go around wearing that? No towel?" A creature's a creature, darling; it's gonna do what it's gonna do. It's only natural. God, she was so free-spirited. Always saw the sunny side. But you can't expect it to repress itself for your benefit. It doesn't know what that word means. These are the times we live in—put down the beer bong, and pick up a crowbar for the walk home. I get mad at myself. Honestly, though, I think she only had herself to blame. And for all I know, that's not what happened at all. We can only assume it was zombies, but we don't have a body. For all we know she was just raped and murdered. You can

never tell, anymore. The world's a confusing place.

We did put up a little memorial, you know, where we last saw her. A nice little cross, some flowers, a little candle. And I do get that we're honoring her, her memory, and her spirit, and, whatever; but...during the ceremony I leaned over to my mother and, just out of the corner of my mouth, I whispered, "Isn't this a little silly? I know she's dead and all, but, technically, she's still with us." Doesn't it sound strange? She's still out there somewhere. It's just that we don't know with which giant pack of bloodthirsty undead creatures she's currently migrating. She's not herself as we knew her, obviously, but I'm sure if we look hard enough on the other side of the freeway we'll find a zombie with undead blonde hair, wearing half a blue bikini, who, if we can get close enough to check, reeks of mouthwash and body shots. Underneath the stench of decaying, green-gray flesh. I wonder how long it takes before the implants fall out? Though of course it would be easier to identify her if it's the bottom half that's fallen off. Of the bikini. Charlotte loved Chinese tattoos.

I mean, honestly. She's changed, but so? Haven't we all? We all have that moment after which, for us, the world is a different place. I know I'm not the same person I was before my third summer at band camp. But there isn't a glowing little candle to me behind the boathouse over the spot where it still smells like ammonia and tears. That's not getting any flowers any time soon.

Or, any longer, I should say. Not getting them any longer. It's sweet when they take your flowers and give them to another girl and then take her back to the exact same spot. It is. It's just how life works. How the cycle continues. By any means necessary.

Really, though, I wish someone would answer me this. Is the world so different? Is it? It's still full of neighborhoods you don't want to go into. Traffic still sucks. You still have to protect your garden with a shotgun. Mailmen are still obsolete; I don't see the big changes everyone's

preoccupied with. There are fewer garage sales, but, that's not a big deal. That friend, that one friend everyone has with a pickup truck—now he gets to sleep in on Saturdays. I think, honestly, if anything, we're *less* materialistic as a culture, now. Which is a good thing. Right? We don't need all that *stuff*. We're free from it. Now we can do what we were meant to do. Just stay in, every night, and have tons of terrified sex, huffing through gas masks that don't protect us from crippling paranoia. And afterward, cling to each other, praying for either a defect-free child or a barren womb so we won't have to brave the trip to the hospital to deliver it. Again—not so different. Talk to your Nana some time. She'll tell you that's how it used to be.

Or anyway I think so. But I really like sex. I try to stay optimistic. What bums me out more than anything is there are no good Halloween parties anymore.

Anonymous

Unknown

You want to know what it's like, living with zombies? I'll tell you. If you've ever read a fantasy book to a child, you know that there's always a forbidden forest, or a haunted castle—some place where the hero's not supposed to go. The thing that lives in the forest, it doesn't get out and kill everyone. It just lives in the forest. That's where it lives. And everyone leaves it alone. Until a goddamn meddling hero gets it in his head to go in after it and fight it. Because of a vague ancient prophecy, or his own idiot notion about tyranny and justice. Whenever he comes around, a bunch of people are going to get killed. The hero never gets killed. But he's the only one. Everyone else is expendable. Everything happens so the hero can fulfill his destiny.

Well. All those cordoned-off neighborhoods and new trenches and barricades? Those are the border around the forbidden forest. They keep us inside our castles. Where we belong. The creatures outside the castles don't want to gnaw our brains out. They just want to be. As long as we leave them be, they won't bother us. In fact, if we leave them alone long enough, they won't be able to keep infecting us, and then they'll die out. And if we could get more people to understand that—if we could get all these selfish imbeciles to stop charging in after them—we'd all sleep a lot better at night.

But, we can't get them to stop. The heroes who charge in, that's what they do. They don't

listen to reason. They have to keep doing it. And the thing in the forest, it can only do what it does. So, until someone does something unexpected, or something unexpected just happens, this is us. There is no change. We're caught in a cycle of our own making. And we're confused. But that's because confusion comes more easily than shame.

That's what it's like. That's all.

Anonymous

Keyser, WV

One thing you hear people say a great deal nowadays is that we are livin in a senseless world. This world aint got no sense to it. Even less than it used to. And you used to hear it, too. But there was more of a kind of a hopelessness to it then. People knew they couldn't do nothin cept rail against it. Curse it. Like cursin it was maybe lettin God know he wasn't pullin nothin over on you. And then maybe He wouldn't lump you in with all the rest. Whereas nowadays, folks can't buy shotgun shells fast enough. I seen plenty of folks from home to here with cellars just packed floor to ceilin with boxes. Used to be you'd stock up on your pickled vegetables. Jugs of water. Wine even. Supplies. In case the worst happened. I'd say we witnessed about the worst thing you could conceive of happened and I want to know where them pickles went. I used to be a bit of a wanderer but I aint roamin any countryside with all them shells saved up. It's not some damn lifeless walkin creature I'm afraid of. It's these restless people who got nothin better to do all day than sit up on the roof peerin out over the hills through military-grade binoculars, talkin to their kids on the ground with field radios they stole. People like that are literally just askin for trouble. I'm not answerin any of their questions.

It's that kinda attitude I wonder about. Cause it doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me. It is a damn horrendous thing we're livin with, but it's not as if things are so dangerous you can't bomb

on down through the hills for a quick run to the store. You maybe keep your a firearm a little more handy than you used to. It's a horrible thing but it aint the end of things. The way we live's changed but the livin part hasn't. And so it starts me to wonderin what exactly it is about a senseless life that all these skeptics and nonbelievers think it is they can see. When you use a word like senseless you're assumin you know what makes sense in the first place. I can tell you from long experience most folks do not have the foggiest goddamned notion of what good sense is and I include myself in that category. We behave mostly based on what people've done before. That don't make it sensible. People put up what I guess they think is a good fight. Railin against the government. These creatures. Their weak-kneed neighbors and anything else you can name. I couldn't tell you why. Probably no one could. You can keep all the truculent counsel you want. It won't bring you closer to a solution for the problems you see. Folks've been yellin and screamin forever and a day about things we still aint fixed. Now we got all new problems in on top of the old ones.

I suspect I sound a somewhat confused. I sure feel it. My property abuts Allegheny Forest; has for as long as that Forest's been designated. It wasn't all that long ago a place like that, a national forest, was for recreation. Hikin and campin out and all types of mischief. That's why we set it aside in the first place. I used to take my evenin leisure in that demesne. Hard to believe. Spend some time in a place and you might come to value it. Few years after this all started I walked out to the rim of Limestone Gap and continued along it a ways. Thinkin whatever I was thinkin. I did this regular as walkin the dog. This was after supper, and it wasn't quite autumn yet so the light was still good. Weather was nice enough that I didn't notice it. Leaves just startin to do somethin different with the sun. I was wearin a light orange jacket on account of deer season. Had it out with the rangers on more than one occasion over that. Neither my ancestors nor yours had to worry about hunters in a



public place. But then there were fewer of em. We overfish too, but you've never seen a damn orange scuba diver. I lost that fight. So probably it's that I was thinkin about, or somethin near to it.

I'm walkin along there with my hands in my pockets and a branch, not five feet from my head, explodes. Only one reason for that to happen and I hit the ground fore I even knew there's bark in my mouth to spit out. I lay there awhile wonderin not anything at all and I come to hear the leaves rustlin. This damn passel of good ole boys runs on up. "Didja get im?" "Damn right I got him; he's dead aint he?" There wasn't a bullet hole on me but they didn't so much as bend over to check. They must be mistakin me for a buck. Which would make them too foolish to so much as look at a rifle. If I start to get up they'll fire off another ten rounds before I can make my knees. So I just say—and mind you, I can't be any more prone, and I got a face full of dirt to prove it—I say "Beggin y'all's pardon, but I think you got the wrong guy." They weren't too pleased to hear a human voice. They come over and help me up but they cussed up a black storm doin it. I know most of these boys. I taught most of em, the ones that made it to eleventh grade. They see who it is they shot at and they get to lookin all sheepish, same as they did twenty years ago when they were breakin windows and drinkin out of the hose in your side yard instead of askin for a glass of water like any person smarter than a dog. Now they're grown men with God's own firepower and not a single clear idea how to use it. There's about nine of em, all decked out in Cabela's finest. Jackets with nine kinds of pockets in em. Pants with nine more. Every one of em's bulged out like a fat man at a holiday. You'd've thought they were on an excursion to some remote corner of the world. I ask em how much time they spent bird-doggin me that they finally spotted my antlers. I remember I asked em "What kinda sights you got on those rifles you can't tell a live man from a deer?" I didn't want to get too vociferous but I tell you I by God could have. Not one of em looked me in the eye.

To a man they looked like you caught em with their pants down where they oughtnt. They all fall in to apologizin and explainin that it's their duty to quote "take back" the area from the forces of evil that have infiltrated it. Things like that. You coulda knocked me over with a hot breath. Cause I was and to this day remain unaware of any evil in the area they's talkin about. They start goin on about God and duty and country and what all, and maybe their faces were a bit ashamed, but those eyes, boy, once they looked up, they burned with the fervid attention of the devoted. I got a real shudder. They're not just overcorrectin for their mistake. I was lookin at a regular conventicle of blood worship and nobody can tell them the first thing about it. They got the most righteous purpose of all. I ask em how big a territory I was forbidden from walkin through and they come right back on down. "Hell, sir, you's free to walk wherever you want." Well, what am I supposed to do to let everyone know it's me? Make up a song? And they got no answer for that.

I said to em how come you boys didn't just join up if you all are so concerned about everybody's well-bein. One boy stands tall and tells me "We can't trust the government to protect us anymore." That's about as self-righteous a belief as you can have on the matter. I thought about pointin out it was that attitude keepin the military as weak as they thought it was. At least in the army they could get some good target practice. Meanwhile, it's gettin dark. I've taken all the time I care to. I tell those boys to maybe next time think about yellin "Halt" first. And it's like with kids, they all start noddin in unison, sayin "Yessir, yessir, we surely will." All that false deference. But I tell you, on my way back up the Gorge, if I couldn't find them goin the other way in the comin darkness it wasn't for lack of fire in their eyes.

Allegheny Forest goes clear through Maryland. More or less to the ocean. If everyone livin along it decides that boys like them're doin God's work half as well as they think it, it's gonna be a

regular enclave fore long. It's headed that way already. A few months after that those local boys got folded into a proper outfit out of Fredricksburg. Bout sixty of em came out to inspect the troops one afternoon. You never seen so many godddamn beards in all your life. Looked like Manassas. They gave our applicants a good looking-to and said they'd let em join on a trial basis. Got em hollerin like fools. One of the conditions is they got to enforce a curfew. Nobody in the woods an hour fore sunset and every night nobody on the streets after six. Anybody doesn't like it, you get em to like it. Now, I wasn't the only one'd been inconvenienced by a musket ball, so I thought that proclamation'd be the thing to nip this nascent revolution in its speckled bud. They shot Lance Parker in the throat one morning comin across the creek and he can't talk anymore. And Lance runs an ice cream shop. I thought it'd be a done deal. We put it to a town vote. You never knew how many people could abstain from civic duty until that vote. This was about four years in. About five. They didn't have to go around intimidating folks. Turned out folks didn't need intimidatin. Enough of em were already worn down. When all you see on the news for five years is another outbreak and another botched containment operation, you start to wonder what it's all really comin to. What it's all about. That was the number one topic of conversation, for all that time. For everyone. It's still at the top but maybe not by such a wide margin. In any case. We gave up by a vote of six hundred and thirty seven for the curfew to one forty nine against. This is in a town with just under four thousand eligible voters. Six three seven; one four nine. I don't think I'll ever understand that.

I can't say I get out for regular walks as much as I might like. When I do I whistle up a storm. I just don't even hardly want to anymore. Ponder that awhile. It aint just a walk. It's everything. It chills me to think about, cause you can't do one thing without needin to account for the whole enterprise. Maybe we are safer. There's no way to compare. I can't say whether they're

right, and this thing has got too big for even the swollen military to put a lid over. But we submitted to martial law a dozen plus years ago, and people still don't much care to stand and talk with you on the sidewalk. Not likely to stop by and visit afternoons. Now that we've got in a world split between revenants and those out to get em, you can just feel the trust disintegrating all around you. Do we trust our armies or do we form our own. Do we trust the people in town with us. Or do we just keep em in our sights. You know it's there when you can take it for granted. Don't have to explain what it means. I doubt I could have if I'd've tried. I seen other things since I got shot at and things happened to me before that but nothin's ever shook my head up like that vote. We took a vote on where to cut our own system off. I'd say we did it right about mid-thigh.

Generally I take my coffee watchin the forest out my back window instead of bein out in it. Only one time have I ever seen any inhuman creatures amble on my. This was one December on a day with good sun. A couple scurvy lookin bastards. They'd bump up on a tree and get turned around. Go that way until they bumped into another. They didn't look all that different from your basic town drunk. Had clothes tattered to shreds. Faces looked pretty similar. All tore up from the weather. Branches. Probably attached by wolves. Vultures. They come into sight, bump on through awhile, and exit right on down into the far hills. Only two live ones I ever seen in person. I didn't hear any rifle blast after they turned that corner neither. I stood there waitin for it. Part of me wishes I was still waitin. If we don't have a problem up here in this so-called wild I don't believe it's on account of that band of misfits protectin us. People like that wouldn't know vigilance after all the lessons in the world. What they understand is fear. They'll go out and kill a bunch of em they find way out in the forest someplace where nobody lives and then come and string up along the road leading into town. You ask em why. They'll tell you. It's to warn the other ones to stay away. I don't

know whether the senseless creature's less reasonable than the one attributing sense to him. It's only cause havin to think about that makes me feel a little pessimistic.

I read one time about a higher up in the Catholic Church. He was speaking about one of the victims of the purges they used to be so fond of. Apparently they'd found one fellow in particular guilty of paranoid schemes and plotting to take down the whole Church. I never found out what plan he had for that little errand. But this higher-up, speakin to a council of his peers, he said, "If most men or any men are capable of such plots the sooner the earth explodes itself the better." It might be that's who's runnin the show now. Maybe it's the schemer. It's one of em. People who can't see five feet in front of their eyeballs. It aint evil exactly. For that you got to know how to use the brain you've got. We ever have real trouble up here beyond what's already taken root, it'll be on account of plain old stupidity. Consider this the claim of it. Meanwhile we got babies bein taken out of strollers and erstwhile good people clutchin their heads and runnin out into the forests and deserts to die of their own accord cause they feel like nobody's watchin over em where they life. These stories, they happen all the time. None of it's a secret. So I say again: why wouldn't you join up and man a post? Why bother where there aint no bother? To me that's the absolute pinnacle of senselessness.

I did say that one time. I was in town getting some scrap lumber for a bookshelf. Gentleman I've known since he was two days old came out the surplus store. I don't want to say his name. There's nothin to gain by it. He was armored up solid. You'd need a couple extra arms at least to make use of everything he's got. I didn't recognize half the stuff hangin off him. But he sure did look like whatever business you had for him he was gonna by God take care of it. He seen me and nodded and we made conversation for a minute. Then I couldn't help doin it. I asked him in all quiet

seriousness why he was stickin around defendin a place that didn't have the need. This man squares his shoulders and says, "If we leave, they'll move in."

If that aint a prepared statement, I want to know what is. I didn't say nothin about it. I shook his hand and we went our ways. But I'll say it now. I wonder what he thinks we did about the ills of the world before he showed up. I been shootin guns a lot longer'n he has. If you think I can't defend myself against my part of this invasion you're plannin for I encourage you to come on up in the middle of the night and find out. I know that's close to talkin without sense. But it's true. There's hardly a person in my part of the world won't tell you the same. They'll handle a carbine as good as the best in your troop. Cause they been doin it longer than you been alive.

Of course it aint just the weapons. You think the path's well-worn. Somewhere it diverged. You spend your life goin nowhere and don't know that that's where you're at, you can't expect the people in line behind you to be anyplace but stuck. So I know who it is they're all stayin behind for. Once or twice I've wondered if I shouldn't join em my own self. Me and my creaky bones.

It gets difficult. Bein on the other side of a thing like this. Gets lonely. I aint old but I seen more sunsets than I'm gonna. When you acknowledge that, you can't help thinkin maybe you're the one took the wrong path. You could've been on the wrong one all along. I got no real way of knowin. How could I? I ask an empty room and a recording machine. I suspect their answers're just as useful.

Conan Troutman

Unknown

All I wanna say's I got here in ten days from Blytheville Arkansas and I got a me a ole neon green '73 Pontiac GTO rusted half to shit with sixty-four heads in the trunk and I'm gonna blow the chest out every last zombie I see and fill that trunk with heads till that the damn thing's full, and I'm then I'm takin it to the nearest army base or black market or wherever damn place I can get a commission on them heads and havin a damn auction in the parking lot to the highest bidder for whatever research or trophies or whatever kinda freak show surprises you want to do with a thing like that. And then I'm takin that money and goin back out here to California and buyin a house and a diner and a bowlin alley and that's where I'm gonna be for as long as I've got and never firin a shotgun again as long as that is neither. That's all I got to say and anybody who hears this wants to come along you're welcome to but you better have your own place to put the heads in.

Dr. Joseph Grogram, Assistant Field Director, CDCM

San Francisco, CA

My name is not Joseph Grogram. And, while I was at one time employed by the arm of the United States government referred to as the CDCM, I neither work for them any longer, nor reside in San Francisco, nor anywhere else in the state of California. That subterfuge will prove minor for any clever person who attempts to dissemble it; but, then, it is not my sole line of defense. I am here today only to offer evidence of my existence, for those would-be detectives who seek me. They know who they are.

I was born in Philadelphia and lived in that city until I was twelve, when a series of late amendments to my grandfather's will led to a family schism that persists to this day. My immediate family and I set out for ourselves, heading north to Manhattan, where distant cousins sympathetic to our side of the story set my father up in their trade. Antiques. It was a lucrative business and they were only too happy to share what they had with a man whose gifts of persuasion had to that point in his life resulted in a chain of prominent automotive dealerships and rumors of three distant mistresses. He was proud. I've always thought of New York City as Philadelphia left to cook overnight. It is a great deal of fun for a man to spend his formative years there. I was both educated and went to school in the city. And then, like so many young members of so many generations before, I headed west.



My pedigree is impeccable; my diploma, first-rate; I was raised to keep my wits about me, and my mind is as eager with facts and figures as other whole beings are for vacation, or chocolate pie. My looks are good enough to warrant serious attention from the sorts of women it behooves one to pay attention to. In short, within three years of my arrival on the coast I had met each of the goals I set for myself before departing. Within seven years I had a family of proper size. My wife and I were of one mind on the subject. She is a bookkeeper for a billionaire. There is love between us. That it never came before practical matters never bothered me, and I have yet to see any reason it did her.

Why do I mention all this? In part to establish my bonafides, as a man who is an expert in a difficult field. That being secrecy. None of what I've said about myself is true in the ways that we expect truth to be. And, yet, none of my words are outright falsehoods. The measure of truth is one we very rarely take as individuals. Let alone as a group. Details are important—as important as adjectives in a poem. I find our modern reliance and dependency upon anonymity a laughable farce. It is something through which we presume some measure of control over our lives. Those lives which we feel to be so completely out of control. I have never held my tongue on the matter: The government has absolutely no interest in keeping track of any of us for nefarious purposes. I do not begrudge parents the use of these threats to keep children in line. “If you aren't good,” they tell us, “if you don't eat your greens, if you merely palm the sleeping pill and stay awake on the flight, I'll turn your information over to the government and let them conduct on you whatsoever tests they will.” I have never used, nor needed, such threats. Every generation has its boogey-man; I begrudge none theirs. True anonymity—true secrecy—comes in *retreat*.

It isn't hard for me to see how my circumstances will doubtless be turned against my story.

Yes; I was a government employee; no, I am not one any longer; yes, I chose my profession based on the partly misguided notion that those who are best equipped to do so should contribute to the betterment of their societies; no, that does not at present exclude me from the privileges of total expression and total credulity. My words are no less reliable because of my past associations. I give such elaborate background to illustrate that no one, least of all I, expected any of the events of the last ten years ever to transpire. Nor, to extrapolate further, did I, at least, ever suspect that I would ever have even the slightest reason to expect that any such absurd event or series of events *could* transpire. Who, but the most unintelligible lunatic, ever would have? I would have been perfectly happy, upon the birth of my final child a mere generation ago, to play through the final lines my part had to offer and pass away peacefully, in my sleep or at the dinner table with fork poised. This was something I knew then. I say it now not needing to employ the benefit of hindsight. I am *able* to say it with the benefit of hindsight: when I remember those days, in my more lucid and thoughtful moments, I think I knew, instinctively, that I would have been happy to forfeit any “American” idea of what a life should be, filled with its conquests and triumphs, in favor of a gradually waning influence over my children's lives, followed by a retirement and no influence over anything at all. I would have been content to merely fade from existence. All any man ever wants is a comfortable margin. The appearance of children heightens this desire in him; when such a space exists prior to their births, a confusing lethargy finds its way into his heart with their first desperate cries. He has, in a very real sense, done his duty. True, the children have yet to be raised, but he never harbored any great love for that task, and trusts that his progeny will be quick-witted enough to avoid the most obvious household accidents and deadly pitfalls—at least until the age of vehicular licensing, at which point they're more the world's children than his own, family pedigree or not, trust fund or

not. I re-created myself: my purpose in life, I knew in the moments just before each of my children arrived, had been fulfilled. There was nothing left to do but smile.

Instead, my subsequent elevation from Sub-Field Assistant to Field Moderator to Surveyor and finally to Assistant Field Director at the CDCM led me to the forefront of those same boogey-man tales. I was the man in charge of what is thought of as the threat of last resort. Allow me to disabuse you of any such notions. The work of the Center is to classify, catalog, cross-reference, and ponder. It conducts no vile...experiments on living humans, or their tissue. It does not kidnap the homeless, the infirm, the terminally ill, and force them to sign away legal rights, after which they are as helpless against the needles and prods of our sub-basement laboratories as a child is to refuse candy from the man with a hook for a hand. All I did—all I ever did—was examine reports of outbreaks, compare their physical characteristics and the bodily samples recovered from each with similar samples from the same regional databases, and try to coordinate our analysis with the home office in Atlanta, as it lurched through darkness toward the general direction of what it hoped was possibly, potentially, something that might in time look like a cure.

If I sound pathetic, know that I felt it. The work was a vigorous waste. Our helplessness underscored the defining characteristic of my life: miscalculation. The lethargy that snuggled in with my essence in the wake of my children's births did not dissipate, but its warmth did. I was left inside a shell of myself, unable to feel anything other than blank frustration and unfocused helplessness. There is no way to prepare one's children to deal effectively with a zombie-laden world. Bicycle accidents and political disagreements, the poverty of the shiftless and the ignorance of the moneyed: the issues that once loomed so large now receded and vanished. I could see no way out for myself. The world as I knew it, the ordered and precise world of steadiness, was gone. In its place was a

half-spent minefield.

There was a second looming presence, in those days, and it was this that led me to resign my post and uproot everyone so cheerfully. I suppose I should feel more thankful to the shadow of government; if the state of California had not moved its capital one hundred miles further west, from Sacramento to my very cozy adopted hometown by the bay, I may very well have never left, never changed a thing. The thought of that old sloth fills me with a cold resolve. As I saw it, the move was the final exploitation of what has always been our nation's most ambitious state, and that, combined with the near-simultaneous opening of the United States government's Center for Disease Containment and Management, its Consumer Protection Bureau, its Asia / Pacific Surveillance Complex, and the New IRS—a glut of bureaucracy that has only in the last half-dozen years, with a great governmental burp, settled—was all the motivation I needed to remove my family and begin the real business of living our lives. I could not foresee a future in San Francisco, where the ever-larger, ever-more-distended hand of state control would crush me into oblivion. I, like most people, work best with no one looking over my shoulder, worst when it is in a desperate grip. I knew I would be unable to function in an environment like what it was inevitable that the city would become. I have always found it somewhat ironic that my westward intentions—steady work, steady income, steady relationship, children to teach and a front yard to teach them in—runs ideologically counter to and in the same geographical direction as the classical American conception of Westward Movement. We move west to rise up; to improve; to conquer. To take. The purest conception of such an idea died a hundred-odd years before my own birth, but it, like all mythologies, persists.

Amid neither uproar nor statement of protest nor fanfare, I resigned. We left the city the same day. We had no destination in mind. It was as if the bounds that I had imagined were

tightening around me had been cut loose and cast off as suddenly as the click of a shutter concealed inside a shaded lens, and as the flow of blood returned sensation to my limbs and my skull, I was better able than I had ever been to see the strange rationale for my behavior to that point. Yes, I had a family; more importantly, I had means. What business was it of mine, to try to run anything? Why did I want to be in charge of people? Why did I feel I had to be responsible for anything? My family was both mine and not mine. My wife is a smart woman, capable, strong-willed, that will sheathed in quiet kindness. My children are all intelligent and malleable, possessed of the keen sense of self-preservation that enabled my family to amass the wealth and power that made possible my original departure to the West. They all bear the honorable line that will keep them a full head above their fellow man. I have nothing to worry about from any of them. As for my former co-workers and employees, a great many of them were retreating into paralysis. They had no idea how to survive a world that above all requires the thriftiness of the self. They, whether they knew it or not (and most of them did not—they very, very did not) had themselves to think of. I was no more theirs than they were mine.

Now: the turn. The most difficult part of any story; in this case, it is the hinge that will hold or crack in two based on your skepticism, your own personal prejudices. As for me it makes no difference either way. I am a specter, present in daylight only because I am what you think you see of me, in order to stick out my tongue at the world. Know this: the real meaning of secrecy in retreat is that it is only by withdrawing from the world, by learning to exist within but independently of it, that one can be *purely* anonymous. If it's freedom that you crave, pay for it properly and take it wholeheartedly. You must withdraw. This is the only way to obtain what you seek. It's for this reason that I'm grateful to those creatures—those drooling, bloodthirsty idiots. I dwelled in

drudgery for years, faced with the simplest, most insurmountable evidence of their existence, unconsciously convinced that I would never escape their presence in my life. It's only now, in a life far away from the safety of a city, with its masses of humanity and impressive defenses, amid terrain rugged enough to kill the sturdiest of men in any one of a hundred ways over the course of a weekend excursion, that I find the security and placidity I can only now see I need to be at one with the peace I knew in youth. In the city, one is humbled by the infinitesimality of one's presence alongside millions, and crushed by zombie facts and zombie figures even as the threat of attack hovers as near to zero as any likelihood ever does. Free of the city, and faced with the possibility of a hillside rampage, a consumption among orchards, the raw presence of *them*, I feel true comfort. I know the comfort of a compound, a fortress constructed by my own hands. There is no satisfaction to match that which comes from the knowledge you have brought into existence and made inevitable the domain of self.

This is real. There is no fooling the intellect. I have never been a believer in the idea that I might trick myself into doing anything I think I don't want to do. Over the course of my lifetime I have accrued more assets, earned more money than most people will ever hope to make. I know its value and the best use of that value. I could not be more secure from outside threat were my home made from cannons. And consider the geographic advantage. My home rests anchored to a mountain that overlooks, at a distance of four miles, the south side of my city. It was built in the style of Spanish missionaries. Carved out of the very rock it stands on. It is meant to look like stucco but it is not stucco. It's a heavy quartz derivative. Punching this stone cracks your knuckles and gives you bloody hands with which to leave bloody traces. The evidence of your futility becomes a mural for my amusement. It's a one story house; very spacious, it sprawls across the mountaintop and has

neither stairwells in which I can become bogged down nor elevators for finding myself trapped. The previous owner surrounded it with a high, wrought-iron fence, and placed guardian angels atop its turrets, every three dozen feet or so, and their benevolent faces have become a wonderful joke. To accompany it, I have added a second fence, sixteen feet tall, further down the mountain in a great swoop, topped it with barbed wire and pikes. The space between the bars of this second fence is exactly seven inches: wide enough to try sneaking through; narrow enough to get caught. Buried in the ground in the no-man's land between the first fence and the second is a series of pressurized motion detection devices similar in design to a conventional land mine. I was prepared to wait for a clandestine shipment of genuine explosives—despite a black market the size of which this country has not seen since the golden age of the Mafia, genuine Vietnamese and Russian land mines remain excruciatingly difficult to obtain—but when I learned about these, I found myself filled with glee. So much better, I reasoned, to lace the ground with devices designed not to kill outright, but to merely raise awareness. I will *know* that they are coming. They will not know that I know. I will find out when the trigger is tripped. Anything heavier than a child's footfall sets it off. The cameras in my control room are activated. I will watch as they stumble forth in the daylight, tripping uphill toward my house, toward the scents I have left out to lure them, and the traps I have laid in preparation of their arrival. The first thing I did upon taking legal ownership of my home and its acreage was pay a visit to the county tax commissioner and learn how much of the land adjacent to my property was for sale, and in which directions. There's another hint for you—my ownership might make me conspicuous, if it were all in the same name. I own all the land I can see, for as far as I can see. Whatever moves does so because I permit it. I track the movements of everything that interacts with me. As people have moved away, wildlife has returned to the area. Which is nice, I think. It means

intrusion is harder to detect. The patterns of animals are still strange to me. It makes no difference to me that my subjects are not all aware that they are subjects. Secrecy: secrecy in all things.

Anonymity means finding satisfaction in unshared knowledge. It is unnecessary, that the extent of my power be known. How much better, how much cleaner, to operate in what looks like darkness

You may consider this speech an act of insolence. Perhaps; perhaps there is evidence to support that claim. If you can point to me where in the record I claimed to be free of it, I will grant you a wish.

I have so many tricks and traps at the ready. Industrial fans to blow the smell of stinking meat as far as the wind will take it. Thousand-foot pits camouflaged by stone and shadow. I have tripwires tied to ink and gasoline and others ready to give spark and make flame. There is no limit to what the inspired mind can conceive. It's all in an attempt to be ready. I have been ready. I will continue to be. I don't spend all my time in the control room, waiting for something to happen. I spend my best time there. Moments of anticipation, in which the boundary between secrecy and action becomes translucent, and nearly disappears, are decadent enough to make me collapse. There's a sexual air about them. A comfortable margin is only truly comfortable on paper. It needs to be put into practice, its width examined, in order for the feelings it engenders to be justified. I have turned my life into a regular examination. I test the world's capability daily. I am waiting for it to test mine.



Jasper Grubbs

McPherson, KS

We have a nice home. Not too near a city. It already had a shelter. I expanded it not long ago. My wife and I talked it over. She didn't like it. I didn't either. Didn't see anything else to do about it. Things you'd rather not deal with at all have a way of bouncing toward you when you ignore them.

We have two children. A daughter. And a son. They're not so young. They helped me with the design. We all pitched in. They know how to read schematics. They can hew trees, and build fires. Both of them speak a foreign language. Different ones. Got those on their own. Don't know how useful they'll be. Could be very useful. I guess it depends on how bad things get.

I suppose I'd have to admit they're a little under-educated. About the world. I know I worry in ways my wife doesn't. I notice things in them that she brushes off. They're terribly shy. We've taught them everything we know. Anything else would be untrue. They know a lot of things. But people are something else.

They were terrified. The more they found out. The closer the reports came. Though I don't suppose they should have been anything but. We don't keep anything from them. Certain things you only understand with age. We dug out a pit in the yard. We used to keep a few pigs. Pigs are mostly silent. Intelligent. The pigs went. It would have been a danger to keep them any longer. We dug out under the pen, in the rear of the yard. Got the plans from the library and doubled them. Made a few

minor modifications. More electricity. It's an old fallout shelter. Miss Henderson, she's been our librarian since I was younger than my son. She took me right to the section. I hardly had to say a word. They've got an excellent selection of Cold War plans and strategies. For the individual homeowner. That's the name of the book, as a matter of fact. It's a series. We've got room for four cots and a chemical toilet. Two walls worth of shelves for canned goods. A card table. I'm happy to say it's not too cramped. There's enough pork down there for a real celebration.

We still eat in the house. At the table. Nights we'll sit in the living room and watch a movie. Or my wife will read us something. She's a wonderful storyteller. She used to put on puppet shows. At the school, when our children were younger. We had a community theater also. It was a joy to hear her rehearse for a play. She does all the parts.

We've got a clear view down both sides of the street. I check the floodlights every morning. Anything starts coming, we'll see it long before it reaches us. We know everyone who lives on our street. It's a single street. East-west. A lot of our friends have moved away. Our children's friends. I've never seen the logic in that. Like moving away from the flu.

They'll be sixteen and fifteen this year. The house is willed to them. We've got some money. I closed our savings account and put the money in a sack. There's a compartment under the shelter. Helen doesn't know. You have to wrap it in plastic or it gets moldy. That's in the shelter book too. You can find out just about anything you want to with a good library.

I couldn't tell you why I did that. I know why. I don't think I could explain it. You get older, you start to think less about what's not important. You start to understand what is and what isn't. I wonder what there'll be to spend it on.

I've seen them grow up. Been there for every minute of their lives. Very few things have

happened to them that I haven't witnessed. Lately I wonder if....I've taught them all I can. We both have. Whatever's going to happen to them, they'll find out when they have to.

Anonymous

Charleston, SC

If I make it to my thirty-fifth birthday I'm going to strap weights to my ankles and drive my car into the ocean. I wanted to put that into the world. Now I have. I'm thirty-one.

Patrick Albert Mullany, O.C.S.O.

Dubuque, IA

People come to us for answers. As though we have any to give. Often I feel they would do better for themselves by seeking truth in the fudge they purchase before departing. Mine isn't a loss of faith. On the contrary I think of it as a deepening. Why do you ask for the answer when you already know have it inside of yourself? When the answer is God you have had it all along.

I know it isn't fair. That we should remain here. As a last line of defense against total submission to a world others brought upon us. Who did so in no small measure by ridiculing that toward which we strove. Man is his own prophecies and his doom is now writ upon the earth. We live it—along with it—and carry on our narrow existence.

Death need be neither immediate, nor visible. We are likewise proof of that.

I've taken up smoking. Ostensibly to provide a better method of conveying preponderance. In my silent moments I acknowledge I am a constructor of ramparts. These against the rage of the inner soul while its presentation remains passive. That anyone would be so *arrogant*. That our ranks should not *smell* with those among you courageous and willing enough to admit your slow and stupid ways. That you do not, to a person, admit them. You should strain to erect new walls of densest stone for your enclosure among us as we should suffer to accommodate you. Christ's was the heavier burden and yet his had a destination. Where does this lead? To what does this lead? The world crumbles as surely as I am here to witness it. None of us know when the crumbling shall end

nor how will manifest what is now when it lies beneath the rubble of the new world to be.

And I, for all practical purposes, oversee a gift shop. At which point the monastery becomes superfluous. An afterthought. A...punchline.

A man visited us recently and came to me as I walked the grounds and said "Brother, tell me about the Book of Revelation."

I paused, and thought, and said, "What would you like to know?"

And he paused. And there came unto his eyes a hysteria. He spoke frantically. He said, "Well, isn't all of this foretold? The dead rising from the grave? Revelations? Isn't this one of the signs that the end has come? It's supposed to be happening, isn't it?"

I looked at this man. Past his clothing and his bags and upon his face. Where were shadowed expressions of guile and frustration most helpless and childish. Even for a clear non-believer. His sincere desire for a powerful answer was as visible as his inability to cleanse himself with it. For the right answer. Here was a man who, absent his own ideas or a network into which they might be allowed or expected to develop, had come to a place of what he knew to be impenetrable holiness for a confirmation. "Yes," he wanted me to say. "Yes, my child. Of course you are correct. All of this is foretold in the good book. The second coming is upon us; the Son of God will return to Earth to smite the unjust with a flaming sword and then collect the righteous in a grasp of endless love and return with them to Heaven; and He will sit at his Father's side and watch and chuckle mirthfully as all of His newly arrived angels roll in the dewy ablutionary meadow at the foot of His throne rejoicing at the miracle of their sudden eternal cleanliness. We are all sinners and we shall all be saved and taken to a place free of the misery and filth of human existence.

"And there will be fudge there.

“And it will be *divine*.”

There were words on this man's T-shirt. I did not look at them even at a glance though I wanted to very badly. It was clear that the words formed some type of slogan. Perhaps something this man lived by. I ignored it. I looked at him. I wondered, God forgive me, whether this frail being had bothered to read the text he referenced so easily. Had even attempted it. It is an extraordinary and confusing story made all the more so because of its lack of suitable comparison in the Book whence it comes. There is literally nothing else like it. It lends itself to vastly differing interpretations. It is for us to gaze into, to find ourselves, accompanied by strange feelings. I have given hour-long lectures on the subject. Impromptu lectures, and at mealtimes. I have held educated monks rapt. Not an easy thing to do. And I have ended where I began, with no flowering knowledge to show for my efforts. Barely the seeds of truth. This is more difficult. To offer forth oneself and remain the same. We would all do well to encourage the feeling. I must never presume the ability to look into this man though I knew in my vain cowardice it was what I tried to do. This is the reaction against which I must persist in my every other action. Just as he, not understanding what it means to sacrifice and still be wrong, needed the quick, savory, easily digestible conclusion.

I said to him: “Let me ask you something.”

He leaned in. Those wild, helpless eyes.

I asked him: “If the rule you lived by is what led you to this of what use was the rule?”

He blinked. Of course.

He stared at me for several seconds. To determine whether I had shared with him something genuinely profound and whether it would take only that much time to interpret it.

I did not shrug. I said: “The Book of Revelation is about a collapse in faith.”

And I went on my way.

My answer was not a dismissal. I did not mean for this man to unlock his heart and recognize the error of his ways inside. And then come back in the night during a raging storm to cry and howl and pound at the gates screaming Hallelujah, let me in, for I am pure with Spirit.

I told him the truth as I know it. A person can do no more. His brother can do so much less with it that the entire enterprise is made vapid. Contemptible. His ordinary sense and common good will and what he believed to be sincerity are not enough to warrant what he wants when what he wants is all he knows. The sloth of the quotidian.

Listen to me: I know this much. We do not live in a self-correcting world.

We are not a righteous, self-correcting species.

We are capable of doing any number of simultaneous things across a spectrum so wide it often appears limitless. And at the same time. This is no trick to us.

The redemptive power of the next thing has supplanted that of a God whose fault we perceive to have been telling us that we may always be wrong. That He will love us regardless. But that it is possible to always be wrong.

To be correct ourselves never, in either action or deed. Never.

To never know this.

Or, to know it, and kick against it, and for all the kicks in the world realize not greater meaning, not success.

That it is possible to *err*. To exist as a mistake.

That some other, unknown being may be always correct? Perhaps. More than likely not. In a world of limitless possibility, how can it not be that impossibilities are the most likely of all?



Somehow, we persist in such a denial.

Often I think of those for whom salvation is not enough. Is not a visible destination and thus not worth searching for. What will it look like, for them? To be there and not know it. What would that be like?

How could that be? To be anywhere in existence, and not know it.

Yet here we are.

Anonymous

Revere, MA

I saw something on television a few nights ago that, sort of, put right in my head a bunch of things I had been thinking for a little while. And when I say “thinking,” I don't mean intensely thinking through, like, “Oh my God; Grandma's in a Mexican jail and we have to put a bribe together to get her out.” Just generally thinking about. Like when you kind of want some Jell-O. Kind of. But you don't want to go to the trouble of making it. And waiting for it to set. So you have ice cream instead. But that's not what you wanted. And the next day you do the same thing, and the next day, and all week you're eating ice cream just because it's already there. Until one night at around two-thirty the carton's empty and you just make Jell-O so you can have it with breakfast.

And, before I say what I saw, let me preface it by saying that it wasn't something immediately offensive and terrible. There was actually footage of the cops firing on an infected day-care center full of zombie toddlers on the news earlier that same night, but that isn't what bothered me. They set the building on fire and one of the slightly more developed kids crawled out through a broken window and writhed in flames on the ground before the police shot her and her little flaming sundress up some more, to put her out of her child-sized misery. They interviewed one of the officers, and he said, “We've been seeing a lot of this lately.” He was chewing gum. *Gum*. If his badge wasn't in the shot you'd have thought he was at a block party.

It does seem like a lot of people have maybe lost their sense of perspective. The most vile,

horrible things happen all around us, all the time. And our response is, “Eh.” Just, “More corn chips.” But maybe that isn't even completely true. We've had breast implants and gym memberships for years. Coupons. Things like that, that don't matter at all. That only exist to keep us on our little islands of ourselves.

Anyway—what happened is I was up way too late, and I was watching television to try and get to sleep. I know that that's supposed to stimulate you. But it's only the pictures and the movement that do that. I keep my eyes closed almost always when I watch TV. And it's amazing at how little you need the picture to follow what's happening. Doesn't matter if it's the news, sports, something with a lot of breasts in it—whatever. Most of TV is words, describing the images you see. It's just a picture of something, with words that tell you exactly what you're looking at. It was very late. Very early in the morning. The time when you don't have the highest quality programming on the air. Nor do you get the best, most well thought-through commercials. And what I heard—and eventually I saw it, I had to open my eyes—was a commercial for Royston Gold-Plated Old West Pistols, with Ruby-Inlaid Finish(TM). It turns out they're very popular. Even I sort of recognized the brand name from somewhere. The product is exactly what it sounds like. It's a fully-functional, totally operable handgun, plated in gold, encrusted with rubies along the handle. Laid in deep, so you don't get an unsightly imprint on your palm when you grip it. Or when the ferocious kickback on this otherworldly cannon of destruction knocks you to the ground. You can get it for a thousand dollars up front, or three monthly payments of three forty-nine each. Which is a pretty reasonable price for the hand of God itself. They'll have it at your house, saving lives, in five business days.

Now, it's not like I'm not used to seeing stupid products sold to me in manipulative ways. I've bought knives from late-night television before. I'll admit it. I didn't see the harm. It's a knife;

it's cheap; unless the handles have blades sticking out of them, I'm fine. And so on the one hand, I almost respected this manufacturer, because here's a product that is exactly what it promises to be, only with a little...kiss. A little extra on top. And it's obviously not the only...frivolous item on the market right now. But, I've got to say, there's really nothing more useless, in a time of massive panic, than a pretty gun. And for a whole bunch of really good reasons. For one thing, any gun will get the job done. A shotgun; a Tommy gun; a grenade launcher is probably too much, but, if you live in a rough neighborhood, OK. A little Dillinger pistol for your wife's purse—they're all the same. They're designed to kill shit. This golden paperweight is designed to fit in a handbag. You can get a more effective gun than for way less money. And think of all the things you could do with the money you'd save buying an actual Old West pistol. If you settled for a boring old six-shooter. You could get a spa treatment. You could fly to Las Vegas and befriend a prostitute. You could even buy two guns, and then, when you're home alone and the neighbors are away, you could take one of them into the backyard, and load it with ammunition, and shoot yourself in the leg, just to make sure it worked. You could do anything.

And for another thing, you don't even technically need a real gun. I've got neighbors with long-standing, liberal fru-fru opposition to bullets who keep high-velocity air rifles in the house. They hunt deer every weekend. You'd never know they didn't have a fetish for these fucking things. Every Saturday morning they're loading up the van with provisions. They've both got on their little camouflage gear; "I'm so excited." Pre-dawn, they're out there. And they come home happy. There's anger and frustration being worked through on these trips. Plus, they get like a month's worth of dinner. But they do it all with air guns you can get at a sporting goods store. You can shoot anything alive in the eye with a pellet and kill it so quickly, you'd never know you weren't shooting bullets.

So anything that shoots projectiles will suffice, but, honestly? You don't need a gun at all. All you ever need to protect yourself, from anything, is a long, blunt object, and an attitude. I've got a son-in-law. My youngest daughter's husband. He's one of these daredevils you hear about, roving the countryside with his friends looking for danger and excitement. He gave up smoking pot when they had the second kid, and then he started doing this, so now we're trying to get him back to smoking; it's a whole thing. When he and his buddies go out, looking for creatures, they carry anything but guns. He's got a pile of *instruments* in one corner of his garage. It's a two-car garage, but really it's a one-car garage, because of all his killing sticks. He's got a bunch of baseball bats—aluminum ones. He's got a real pickax he took out of the wall of an old mine shaft. An old-timey mallet for bolting railroad ties into place. You name it. All kinds of golf clubs. Because they break after a couple good swings. A bunch of swords. Shovels and chains and all this shit. He collects it. It's almost impressive. It looks like he robbed a sporting goods store, a hardware store, and a bondage club, all in the same very confused night. He's got a mace. Like he's an ogre, guarding a dungeon. He showed it to me one time. Every time we go visit them, at some point I find myself in the garage, holding a light beer, getting the grand tour of this carnival of sadism. All the mace is is just a stick, attached to a great big iron ball, with these spikes coming off of it. There's one giant spike. With a bunch of goo, running down it. Partly dried. And a great big clump of hair, stuck on, at the base. He told me I could swing it. What he said had happened was, he was out one time, he started to swing it, and the creature he was targeting just watched it move. So he teased him with it for like five minutes. Then he hit him with it, and it got stuck in the guy's head. The big spike is too big. He couldn't get the mace back. He had to push the creature down and stand on its shoulder and yank. And when he did that, the head just came off the body. The whole way home he's smashing the mace against the

ground, breaking the skull into meal. So he told me, it isn't very effective as a weapon. He's kind of a bully, this particular son-in-law. I wish he'd start doing drugs again. He'd probably be robbing graveyards for fun if it weren't for the zombie apocalypse. I don't know. Maybe you never know what you're capable of until something makes you find out. Cause I've put myself there; I couldn't do it. Maybe if there'd been packs of bloodthirsty, free-kill zombies running around when I was his age, I'd have hunted them, too. I used to go roller skating to burn off energy. That's the kind of guy I was. We used to skate down to the park, to buy ice cream and stare at women. I'm not an old guy—it's creeping up, but I'm not there yet. But when I think about when I did for fun, twenty, twenty-five years ago, I feel like I need two new hips and a colonoscopy. If I had a doctor's hand in my ass, I might feel better.

But this product—the Royston—it just blew my mind. I can't remember the last time I saw something so unnecessary, being held up so triumphantly. They were promoting it as something essential for both your safety and your comfort. You know what one of the slogans was? “Self-defense, with a glamorous edge.” That made me wish I was still married, so I could wake up my wife and vomit on her. You want to talk about—we've got a for real, honest-to-God emergency going on, for years, with thousands of people dying all the time. And millions of people affected, and whole neighborhoods and cities cordoned off, and other whole neighborhoods full of still-living, still-breathing people abandoned. They're citizens. And we've told them basically, “You're on your own.” And you're selling a golden gun with a ruby handle? For defense? The only people that gun's going to bother are the ones who get shot in the tit by accident when some rich prick with wrists like the cardboard they spool toilet paper around shows it off at a cocktail party. I've seen dildos more threatening. The people spending a thousand dollars on a pretty gun don't need the minimal

protection the gun offers. They don't live in areas where you need guns at all. They live in Lower Manhattan and Beverly Hills and Grosse Point and the other cleanest, safest, most well-lit parts of the country that we have left. Places where the gates are so high that no one who lives behind them will ever be bothered. But everyone's got an armored car and ten bodyguards anyway. That's who buys the Royston banana split. People who can pay other people to worry about shit that they were insulated from in the first place, for them. I just picture a whole team of great big broad-shouldered guys in tuxedos and sunglasses conducting a sweep of the nicely-manicured perimeter of some estate, before signaling the all-clear so the lord and lady of the house can make the thirty-foot journey from the front door to the car waiting for them in the driveway. And they're getting into the car, and another big tuxedoed security guy bursts out of the house and bolts down to the car with the ruby-handled tuition payment in his hand, and he says—real sincerely—“Sir, you forgot your pistol. And the guy takes it and hands it to his wife, who's all catty and grateful because she's sleeping with the bodyguard. And then he and the guy shake hands very formally, cause they're sleeping together too.

I'm sure that everyone who owns that gun doesn't leave the house without a whole crew of bodyguards. I know it. It's gotten a lot easier to put people in categories, I've noticed. And be right about them. But, it's just another one of those things. It's one of those things that we do because when we do it, we feel better about who we are. We love the illusion of safety. That's what it's all about. You know, they don't sell lessons, with the gun. Just having a gun doesn't mean you'll be secure. That means your kids have another way out when they figure out no one loves them. You can put the cleaning supplies back under the kitchen sink. If we don't think we're safe, we'll do anything to change that. And, if we feel OK, we'll allow anything. Anything else can happen, in the

whole world, as long as we get to go to the gym and dinner and dessert.

I saw a TV show recently—it was the middle of the day. On a Sunday. Also not the best time to watch TV. Everything's pastelly and washed out. If you don't go to church, and you don't like football or commemorative plates, you're better off standing in the yard and staring at the grass on Sunday afternoon than you are watching television. Your options are limited. But this show, it was called *The Power of Faith*. That's what it was all about. It one of those revival, miracle-type shows, where the preacher gets everyone excited and heals the blind and the crippled and whatever. I think I was tied to the couch, is why I kept watching it. I think someone snuck into my house and wired my couch so if I got up, it would explode. They had a guy come up on the stage, a real short guy, maybe five-six, and he weighed three hundred pounds, easily. He looked like a Volkswagen stuffed inside of a human body. He got onstage, and he was dressed head-to-toe in athletic equipment. Not a fat, like, made guy-doing-his-collections track suit; I mean running shorts, neon running shoes, a tank top that probably used to be a bedsheet in a hospital, he had on a headband, all of it. Completely decked out. He's standing there, looking pretty uncomfortable, and the preacher starts to tell the guy's story. He used to be thin and employed; he got depressed after survived a plane crash that killed his whole family; he started eating a lot. But then, somehow, God had come into his life, and he was ready to make a change. He hit bottom, he brushed the potato chip dust off of himself, and he was gonna start over.

All right. So they're doing this show in a big stadium. There's probably fifty-thousand people there. And you can see at the top of the screen, when they switch to a side shot of the stage, there's a track—like a jogging track, all around the stadium floor. So after he tells the guy's story—and the guy is sitting there stretching, on the stage, just to have something to do to distract himself—he says



this guy, this...submarine, of regret and good intentions, is going to run a four-minute mile. Right there, in front of everybody. He's been training, apparently, but, most importantly, he's been praying, a lot, for guidance. Or a miracle. For something good to finally happen to him, to snap him out of his funk. The guy finishes stretching and he gets up and starts bouncing around the stage, getting limber. The crowd starts to get excited for him. Everybody's making a little noise. You can see the security guys clearing chairs and moving the crew members off the track. The preacher invokes the power of Jesus and the good vibes the crowd is giving off. He's roaring slogans and clichés about power and positivity into his microphone. Everyone loves it. It's holy noise to them. We're following this guy—Dan, his name is Dan. There's a camera over Dan's shoulder, following him down the stairs, over to the track. There's a reverend with the full collar-thing waiting for him, and he's silhouetted against the crowd, which is a sea of camera flashes. And he's holding something. The reverend has what I sincerely hope is a starter's pistol in his hand. It took me a minute to realize that that's what it was, because what they're broadcasting is a black-clad silhouetted figure holding what's pretty clearly a gun. So I'm imagining that a cult of thin, holy Aryan figures are leading poor Dan to his death. Like they've decided that what God wants is a human sacrifice, to make the bad things go away, and so they've duped stupid fat Dan into thinking that this would be his big moment, and instead they're going to shoot him in the temple while he's poised in the oversized starter's blocks, and then burn his crackling fat body on a pyre. And then eat him. Or maybe not eat him. I don't know how human sacrifices work. This all just happened in a *second*, too. “Fast” doesn't describe it. Almost immediately I saw the dude's collar, I knew it was a starter's pistol, I went, “Oh, Dan is going to run the race now.” But just before that, I thought the program was going to take a hard right-hand turn, into unmapped, and inappropriate territory.

OK. So Dan is pumped. He looks focused. He looks just like an athlete, from the neck up. The preacher-emcee guy asks him if he's ready a few times, and he gets louder every time. He's the front man, counting off the hit song. The gun goes off, and Dan starts running the race. He's not bad. He's got pretty good form. He's using his weight to his advantage, somehow, cause he's kind of—tossing himself forward at the shoulders with every stride, and using the *slosh* of his fat-momentum to build speed. I'm not a physicist. It's clear he has very powerful legs. He's not the prettiest thing to look at. No one's ever going to confuse Dan with a Kenyan. But he's moving surprisingly quickly. The only time I ever run is if I've misjudged the distance to the nearest bathroom, and he's going way faster than I ever do. And the crowd reacts to this; you can tell they're all shocked, because all of a sudden there's real enthusiasm in their voices. It's easy to tell that before they were only cheering because they knew they were supposed to. “This morbidly obese man may actually be impressive. I will share a little of my own energy and hope with him, verbally, in order to aid him in his quest.” That kind of attitude. The kid with Down syndrome who gets voted prom king. Which most of the people in that crowd probably did in high school, to make themselves feel good.

Dan finishes a lap. They flash the time up on the screen. It was like a minute and a quarter. And I remember very clearly my first reaction to that information; it was “No fucking way.” I was so sure that my addled, drooling self had a better internal clock than the clock the people who were timing the race were using. I thought they were trying to dupe me. The viewing audience. I mean, come on. He's moving pretty fast but he's not running a five-minute mile pace. And even that would still be slower than they said he would be. There's just no way. So, alright. My watch has a stopwatch. I at least want to expose the lie for my own smug satisfaction. I get the watch out. From

the time I start it to when Dan finishes the second lap, it takes thirty-eight seconds. The time they flashed on the screen was one-oh-one. And he was about halfway through the lap when I started clocking him. It occurred to me I've never observed runners before. Other than seeing somebody running from the cops—or towards them—I don't have much experience with foot races. I don't know what a fast runner really looks like. But Dan is, he's moving along pretty good, there, on the TV. Maybe he is that fast. He's sweating up a storm. Just, rivers of salty fat-sweat pouring off of his face. His tank top is thoroughly soaked. He reached up to wipe the sweat out of his eyes and you could see the backspray, when he flicked his hand away. It looked like rain. Very thick, lipid-based rain.

The third lap is when it started to get weird. Because he wasn't moving all that much. Other than forward. There was this—it's hard to explain. It was, this, almost like an optical illusion, going on, because he looked, at first, like a great big rippling ball of flab. You know those old film clips of pilots doing G-Force exercises, where their faces ripple up and mash together, and the skin billows out and back? That's what this guy's whole body looked like. But what became clear to me is that all that rippling was just surface movement. His skin and flab were just the waves on the surface of the ocean. His actual body—the deep...skeleton-and-muscle deep water body of this awkward metaphor—that part of him was entirely separate from the waves. I don't know if you can picture those two things inside of each other. It was hypnotizing. He was churning out these long, confident strides. As if a great big man had swallowed most of a wiry little guy and they were fighting for control of the master body. Writhing, angry flesh on top of a cool, collected, Miles Davis of track and field sort of inner self. I'd never seen anything like it—I never will again. I knew that, at the time. And the third lap was the first one where he broke a minute. I think it was fifty-seven

seconds. So it was a long shot, but everyone in the stadium, at the exact same moment, gasped. I did it at home. We all realized. A three-hundred pound, four-minute mile is now a real possibility. The crowd is going apeshit. This is easily the most passion a church crowd not led by James Brown in a movie has ever had. Before, there were pockets of prayer, here and there, behind the emcee's dumb announcements. "Let's go Dan!" "He's got real belief in his feet!" Awful things. Awful. Everybody in the stands is praying. And they're praying the same thing: they're all going "Da-a-an, our faith in Da-a-an." I don't know if it's like a fill-in-the-blank prayer that this particular sect uses all the time. People are swaying in the stands, hugging, banging down on the seat backs in front of them; you can see people on the ground shouting and stomping their feet up and down. Every one of them, fifty-thousand, all pouring their hearts into this guy's effort. And he's *moving*. Dan is—it's clear to everyone how fast he's running. His legs are totally focused. They—I almost said they were a blur. They *weren't* a blur. His movements were distinct. Maybe it was something about that moment, being in that moment, where it all made sense, but each separate movement of each of his legs was obvious and foreordained, right as he completed it. As he was doing it. The placement of his left foot, and the way he rolled it down from heel to toe, and then sprung off of the toes—that was all evident. Just like knowing how your next breath is going to feel. You don't think in terms of how you're going to take your next breath; it's just gonna happen. It happens before you can think how to do it. Spring from the toes, thigh up, knee at its peak, and then the force of the thigh driving the leg down, and the tension in the calf as the foot rolls, and then *bam*—spring forward. "Da-a-an, our faith in Da-a-an." I had an erection. A big old boner. And even that made sense. Every part of my body was...ready. I didn't know what was going to happen, but if I got left out it wouldn't be for lack of preparation.

But he rounds the final turn and comes into clearer view, and you can tell, even though his body is an engine, that Dan is not doing very well. You can see what he's giving up to become an engine. That was where the spell broke, for me. It was when I remembered, "This is a three-hundred pound, terribly obese human being, doing what his body isn't prepared to do." His face was *dark*. He looked like a plum. He wasn't slowing down. He was faster than he'd been the whole race. He's somehow managing to ignore the pressure that has to be building inside of him. The shouting didn't get any quieter. He's not slowing down, he's running, he's sprinting—he looks nimble, in those last lunges; he's got the grace of a ballerina—he falls across the finish line with three seconds to spare, and collapses and dies. Nobody knows he's dead. They announced later it was a huge heart attack. Killed him on the spot. The moment he crossed the line, and started to stop moving, all the pressure burst back into his body, and his arteries, everything—explosion. In that moment, though, as soon as he collapses, he's mobbed. People rush from their chairs. A whole big crowd breaks off from the stands and hops the fence. They're all over him. The emcee's shouting his name over and over and going "The power of faith, ladies and gentlemen!" The crowd gets ahold of him, and they hoist him up—they hoist above their heads a dead man who just justified everything they say they believe in. There's a big swell on the ground, as more and more people fill in to try and touch him. They're passing him around, people are slapping him on the shoulders, slapping his big fat belly. They were all so happy. You've thought they traded Jesus for the thief. It took—this is horrible. It took fifteen minutes for them to figure out something was wrong. They started to push him to the stage, because the emcee, who's wiping his face with a handkerchief like he's got any reason to be sweating, is calling for him. So they push him in that direction and then give him one last hoist up onto the stage, and he flops there, and is still. And even that didn't tip anybody off. They're still going nuts

for poor Dan, who, by now, is not any less red in the face, and still immobile. After about sixty troubling seconds of this, the emcee, who has been asking rhetorical questions into his microphone the whole time, says maybe they could use a medical team. Which they didn't have on standby, at the finish line. They didn't even have a bottle of water for the guy. That's either a more confident or a more ignorant way to proclaim your faith; I'm not sure there's a difference, at that point.

So that broke up the party. And now Dan is dead and buried, and his little story is something we all remember vaguely, from the recent past. But that *happened*. That was an amazing thing, and a terrible thing, and we all saw it or heard about it. And apart from being used by the people who were there as an example of the power of their religion, no one ever talks about it. But the thing to remember is, that guy, running the race? That's us. Those are our choices, in this country. That's what we do, every day. We have all the information we could ever want, about anything, at our fingertips. We've got reason staring us in the face. "You know you weigh three hundred pounds, you probably shouldn't do any intense aerobic exercise for awhile. Maybe check back around two-ninety." We know, more or less, what we're supposed to be doing—what's good for us and yet we've also got this incredible, persistent belief, that none of our problems really matter, because everything we do is the right thing. Everything's fine. There's no wrong choice, because we'll empower ourselves to glory. And, to be totally fair to that belief, we're all still here. We've only irradiated millions of people and a couple hundred thousand or a couple million more to die. And we've got an eight-figure number of zombie...like...things, to do something with. But that's only around a quarter of our population. A quarter of our resources. The worst disaster we, as a country, have ever committed, we did to ourselves, on accident, and we still only managed to fuck up about twenty-five percent of our stuff. That would be like if you got drunk and set the house on fire when

your kids were at summer camp, and you only burned down one of their bedrooms. It's not a crippling injury. So, from the perspective of the guy on stage with the microphone, Emcee Fuckpants or whatever he goes by, we're doing okay. Except, we can't just be Emcee Fuckpants running the show. There has to be an audience for a show to work. We're also the fifty-thousand people in the stands, and we're also the depressed, lonely, easily manipulated person, committing himself to something ill-advised and dangerous at least somewhat because we don't care. When you believe you can do anything, what that means is, at least a little bit, you don't care what happens. Cause you think you can fix it. And I think that level of delusion is the mental equivalent of morbid obesity. If you're convinced that you can do anything, you've got the same handicap as a person who needs a rascal scooter to get around the grocery store. We're not in real trouble unless we're all morbidly obese and irrationally optimistic at the same time. The emcee wasn't in bad shape, but he didn't look like he'd have a hard time helping you find the food court. You've got to ask yourself how much you believe in what you believe in, and whether willing yourself to accomplish something is worth the potential cost. Whether you need a gun with blood diamonds in the handle to protect you from a thing whose arm you could pull off of its body and beat it to death with if you let it disrupt the order of your daily life and get truly, life-affirmingly angry. If you aren't sure how you feel about those things, you're going to be really surprised the first time you find yourself collapsing at the end of a race. But if you believe in yourself enough—if you believe with all of your poor, overworked heart—the first time will also be the only time. And you'll never have to know.

Ana Carmachel

New Athens, IL

Okay. I am...I'm on my way home, to be a paramedic. That's the first time I've said it. I'm headed there now, actually. I've spent a lot of time thinking about this. Truthfully, it's all I've thought about for awhile. I've been going to film school for three years and I don't know why. I'm going to all my classes and getting good grades, but, I have a hard time seeing why I should. Nothing about it makes sense to me. I think I've been walking around in a daze for a long time. Nothing woke me up from it. I don't have an epiphany to talk about. I don't feel better all of a sudden, but I do feel...resolved. You expect a transformation to *happen*. It doesn't work like that. It takes a long time. If I were going to have an epiphany it should have happened a year ago. A year ago this summer I was with some friends, walking home from a movie, and one of us was hit by a car. Not "one of us." A friend of mine. She stumbled off of the sidewalk and a car was coming by too closely. It clipped her on the hip, and she spun around and fell over and cracked her head open on the curb. The car didn't stop. We didn't get the license plate. Later we couldn't even agree on what color it was. All there was was blood. I don't want to say her name. There was blood everywhere. So much of it. Every imperfection in the concrete. The gap in between the blocks. Too much. You couldn't see the cracks where her head had broken open. Her hair. She looked—unreal. There was too much blood. You could have done anything with it. Enough to make you forget about everything else in the world. Just you, and the blood. And eventually, just the blood.



We took her to the emergency room and after a minute a doctor came out. He came right over to us. He said "I have some information I'm going to share with you, now. Please believe me when I say I do it as carefully as possible. I don't want to hurt you your friend is dead." That was it. He was very informative, very matter-of-fact, and...that was it. He left us there. I remember crying. We all were. I was in my head. I was remembering my father and some other men coming through the fields after working all day at a mass grave. They looked exactly how you would expect them to look. Covered in mud. It wasn't mud. They looked how I felt. Walking to the car. I've never been that far into my head. I never thought I'd say that. But I see that it's true. Normally I'm so far inside it all you can see is dirty feet. I used to be so concerned with my appearance and how I present myself that I was inside and outside of my head at the same time. I'd think about what I was doing and how I looked and how others were reacting to me, and then I'd start to criticize myself for thinking so much instead of participating, and then it was all I could do to stop thinking about everything and recording everything as it was happening, and get into the world instead. That night was the opposite of that. I don't remember anything about walking to the car, or how I felt. I don't know how I got home. I just know I was thinking about what had happened. Nothing in the day could have foretold it. It was just a thing that took place. That had nothing to do with creatures. It was a freak thing. But the feeling...I didn't have to wonder about it, anymore. For a year I've been living in that moment, more or less. I don't think I was traumatized. Maggie. Her name was Maggie.

I don't want to be a paramedic because my friend died in front of me and I saw it. She died right away. The paramedics couldn't have done anything for her. My fiancée's cousin is one and he likes his job. It seems like a good thing to do. Those are the reasons.

I used to wish that AIDS had happened sooner. Years ago. I wished it had rained AIDS on

the Dust Bowl and then migrated west. I thought that that would mean that God was sick of us and wanted us to die. Because instead of that, we had zombies, which meant that He wanted to rape us to death. And how are we supposed to fight back against that? You can't resist God's will. You can't push back. I was resentful without resenting anything. I was afraid. I was so frustrated with everything. I wanted so badly to do something that would stop me from being afraid. Maybe that's why I went to film school. I honestly don't remember how that came about. I don't feel that way anymore. That's the result. That's the change. I don't wish we could have a second chance. I don't want to do anything over. I just don't. Why would I? I don't wish we were all just dead. When I think about the person who wished that, I shake my head. That was me, wanting something even worse to happen so I could feel justified in self-pity. I can't spend my life planning a trip I'm never going to take. What's a threat, if you know it's there? I'm not unafraid. I know what I'm afraid of. That's a huge difference. It feels better. None of this bothers me, the way it used to. This is the price we've all chosen to pay for the way we live. We don't change. It's harder to change than it is to keep doing what we're doing. Everything that we've done to the world happened because of something we did to it. But we don't want to admit that. Fine. But there are consequences for turning our backs on things we don't want to see. And we don't want to change. I can accept it. The thought of that used to bother me, when I could bring myself to think of it, that I didn't have the courage to live differently from other people. That can't bother me. This is what's happening, and there's nothing anyone can do about it now. The events were set in motion long ago, and we could have stopped them then, but we can't stop them now. All this talk of the end. It doesn't do anything. When the end comes, we'll have enough time to accept it. It doesn't matter what causes creatures, or even whether the government's manufacturing them. What if we found out, tomorrow. That wouldn't

change anything. It would just be more knowledge. They're just one more thing to exist with. They're as big a threat to us as we let them be. As anything is.

I've heard about alcoholics, who wake up from blackouts and have no idea what they've been doing. How long they've been doing it. The thought of all that unaccounted time is what changes them. It might be a few weeks or just a night. That's what the bottom looks like. Trying to remember and not knowing. I remember the last few years, and I have almost no idea what I was doing. I can remember certain events. I remember my coffee shop. My grocery store. I remember certain people. I swear it isn't because of Maggie. She wasn't my best friend. I didn't have a sister named Maggie who died at an early age. All my siblings are alive. I don't know what did it for me. I'm not going to interrogate myself.

I'm going home. I've been in California three years. It's nice, but it isn't me. I haven't put down any roots. I want to do that. My older sister is a nurse and she and my cousin are going to help me with the coursework, and a year from now I'll be in ambulances. That's good. I think I should do that. I might be terrible at it. If it doesn't work out, I'll find something else. I think I know what cautious optimism means, finally.

So, all I wanted to say is that's what I'm doing, and that's why I'm doing it. I have no idea what's going to happen. But should you never hear from me again, that's okay. One way or another, what's happening to me will happen to everyone. We're all waiting for the right time to permit acceptance. I might not be around to witness it, but I couldn't wait for it anyway. I'll take comfort from the belief.

Anonymous

Unknown

We're on our way to a rather wonderful apocalypse. We always have been. Nothing's changed about that. The innards are easier to see now. We display a certain claustrophobia of the soul that I find interesting. I've always been intrigued by social scientists and people who study great shifts in societal temperament. The ability of a president to dictate mood. The effects of popular entertainment on the national spirit. How does one calculate them? Accounting for each of the variables alone must be a particularly daunting task, but it seems to me one very much worth our effort. And now we have the hardest evidence yet of the power of massive events to dictate how we think and feel and breathe and speak—mounds of raw data from the most profound event of our times, and really the only event, in many respects. The zombie apocalypse! There's a thing to get your attention. True? An event to grab us by the hair, and force us to reconsider the terms under which we are willing to admit the defeat that in fact came long ago. It says to us “Your allotted days of stupor have ended. Make your peace and begone.” The world's become all monks and furnaces. We are, at last, exposed. Earth is a tiny little vessel in emptiness. From emptiness, to nothingness, to a brief burst of existence, to nothingness again. That's us. Has there ever been more than love and death? More than that for us to see and share? I don't think anything has changed. We should have had more time like this.

As for myself, my own existence is shortly to end. I was bitten. No need to dance around

that. I was bitten by a young man in a tattered red scarf as he tried to kill my mailbox. I approached him. It was fascinating. He was in an absolute frenzy. You'd have thought he was defending his mother. I couldn't fathom the workings of his mind. I wanted to. I tried to keep my distance. All I wanted to do was watch him. He yanked the post out of the ground and stood there with it. I think he didn't know what to do. Perhaps he didn't know how easy it would be to vanquish his foe. Then he saw me. He charged me, brandishing my mailbox. His teeth grazed my forearm. That's all. I shouted: "Aah!" He fell to the street and the post clunked him on the head even as he held it. He got to his feet, grumbled a phrase choked with mucus, and ran off. He was a ratty looking boy. I suspect a giant knot on his forehead will improve his appearance; it will certainly do nothing to diminish it.

For quite awhile all I could do was stand there. I was positively frozen. Outdoors, and at night. Deep within my brain I found a cheap thrill in breaking all the rules and not getting in trouble. The foremost truth was I couldn't bring myself to look at my arm. It throbbed so. I was positive I'd lost a pound the hard way. It turned out to be much less than I feared. Only a scratch. Just a scratch. You can know that your mind will play its tricks on you, but never grow accustomed to how. The mind always has another how. A scratch a couple of inches long, narrow, but a touch wider down near the elbow, and beginning a couple of inches beneath my wrist. Absolutely nothing to it. No different in appearance from a hundred other nuisance scratches you get over the course of a lifetime. A thousand. Except that this one—this particular one—broke the skin. There was a thin little dribble of blood coming from the end of it, twisting and turning around my arm according to the invisible laws governing liquid on a surface alive with uncertainty. And, I swear, we're all like a junkie with his needles, so paranoid about cuts and open sores and transference and how you get it,

but I stood out in the street light for as long as I did because I was as sure as I'd ever been about anything that I'd contracted the disease from that young man. I could feel my cells transforming inside me. Turning me into something I couldn't hope to understand, and that itself had no capacity for understanding. I stood there, becoming something else under a full moon and thinking about the fleeting connectivity of all things. *Becoming*. There's a word to give you pause. You are not yourself. A young person takes great joy in what the next thing might be. It isn't until later that the idea itself turns into something else. The wearing away of stone. The impermanence of matter. Everyone else thinks old people love hearing about how young they act, but you're never as sure you've passed the point of youthful naïveté as when you've felt the first rumbling possibility of your own demise. That's the mark of true youthfulness. The time before you've seen that you will die. When you can still say to yourself, "What I agree to do, my conscience will agree to."

So, here I am. A statue, crumbling. To dust, and from that to clay, and from clay to further stone. There's the permanent functionally speaking and beyond that there's just...theater. You are Berlin, fading to ruin according to the plan beyond your maker. It won't be long now before I'm as lucid and mischievous as a sack of cold shit. It's been four days. I have perhaps another week. I haven't told anyone. I elect not to notify my children and have myself strapped to an operating table. The arm that holds the hand that pushed the pen. It got me to this point, and I simply won't go without it. There is no betrayal more powerful than what that would be.

I should also admit I have no way of knowing for sure. The dominant sensation is a merciless torpor. But that's not so different from the onset of depression. A light malnourishment. The boy could have been an urchin. The urchin his appearance suggested: nothing more. Unfortunately, ratty-looking thieves are not uncommon in my neighborhood. I do believe in

intuition. In this instance, I allow it because I'm ready for the belief to be. I'm ready for the end it promises. A good ending is important. Never more than when you've got nothing else. I've seen enough. Nothing can be forced to live. Just as no one can be granted the capacity to survive the onslaught of human consciousness. You have to *be*, in that. The choice of existence is one we make every day, knowing instinctively what it takes to do so. We remember whenever we find ourselves exhausted by the construction of our existence. If you call me a fool for these thoughts I can't disagree. It's how I've lived. Most thoughts are foolish. The world needs fools, too.

It's impossible to overstate the importance of narrative for human life. That's all we are, is meat and stories. I don't know what we would do, without our recollections, our dramatizations. We create lines to stand in, the better to have a teleplay for the evening meal. All of the structures we super-impose atop ourselves, all the systems of existence: they exist in order for us to cast ourselves as centrally as our breath. The same breath we later use to demonstrate how right we were in the face of bureaucratic demons. The interactions we have. Our every encounter. These are narratives. They are us. What would we do without them? Where on earth would we be? You'll hear that a person doesn't need literature in her life to earn a living. It's an eons-old argument that won't end until its participants do. Maybe not even then. And it's a dangerously short-sighted one. Materials and intangibles. The stomach and the soul. Scratch out the divide wherever you like; you'll find, if you look correctly, that the split is always the same. All I can suggest is that a person merely earning her living is not living. We don't require puppies any more than we do salt. But they each fan an ember in the soul that it does us good to feel glowing. So it is with tales. I leave the distinction between terms to others. Their effects are what matters. Are all that does If you can show me a man solitarily happy with his money, I can show you one lying to you from the depths of that cracked

place whence his essence has drifted out and up into his scheming brain. All he has to say to himself is he's doing something right. Is that so? Is he wrong.

I don't know. I can tell you that that story dictates his every action. If he eats well, it's because he wants to take care of himself, to extend his successful life. If he doesn't, he doesn't care. His money, his narrative have made him so. This might not be as plain as it sounds. Look correctly and I think you'll see that everything people do reduces to the stories they tell about themselves. Fortunately for everyone, you have to get very, very close to a person to be able to read her story. To understand it. The most self-involved, vapid person is never as plainly read as we want to believe. Always something. Always more.

It's what we are made of. In a very real sense. It and the way we tell it. It's important. It's important. It's as crucial as protein. That's what we have. Once we've eaten the day's meal and taken the day's leisure and are confronted with ourselves, we are armed with nothing but what we've heard and what we're convinced of. We are narrative. Which is also why there is no such thing as "extra." Nothing that can be called "unrelated," with a person. When you hear a story look beyond the thing being told. You are hearing the person telling it. You may in your lifetime have said "Stick to the story and leave out the fluff," but I ask you if I sound like a woman invested heavily in the notion of some perceived separation. They are close as lovers. In her meanderings, her deviations, her repetitions of phrase, the storyteller admits to her audience the things she finds relevant and fascinating. You may notice when the teller feels she is not getting through or has meandered too far from her "point;" but, in that instance, remember that what you hear is a mirror, and is meant to be as accurate a reflection as possible. To that end your narrator's gaze is true and I won't be the one to stand in the way.



I know this much. I said, long ago, "I don't want an interesting life. I would trade it." I've spent my life in observation. And...it's exhausting. I'll be glad to be rid of it. It was well-spent, but as difficult as...as anything. Good God in Heaven Almighty, there can not possibly be any work left for me to do on this planet.

I'm having a hard time sleeping. I haven't slept at all since it happened. That's the only physical change there's been. It's a disappointment. I'm so weary. I have cats and pillows. Few things are more thrilling to an old woman than a nap. What I get instead is almost the same as the listlessness that comes after having been up all night on a deadline. Too jittery to rest, and too weary to climb mountains. I would knit, if it weren't too late for me to take it up. Nothing to be done.

I don't feel any resentment. No hard feelings. My son thinks I should be angry about having to live in a world that does this to people. Where these types of things exist. He's a good boy. I love him. He has fits of tremendous cleverness. But he's one of those who believes in some vanished elder world for us to look to. A place we've fallen from and can climb back to. He thinks you could fit all the knowledge in the world in a mouse's thimble. And still he holds it cheaply. Existing alongside people like that is a chore. They're always reaching for a missing idol instead of crafting the one yet to come. Stories in the future tense. If you've ever had a task in front of you, and been unable to start it because of a missing piece, and had to search for the piece in the midst of people doing what you are supposed to be doing, you know how quickly frustration can turn to rage. Rage can be a great deal of fun to watch, for the same reason it's such a troubling companion. It often leads to fantastic outbursts and hideous meltdowns. And terrific physical comedy, too. My boy is possessed by notions he can only ever seek. He'll never find them. When I look at it that way, I suppose it's not all bad that so many other people feel just like he does. At least he'll have company.

Admitting weakness is not the same thing as giving up. There's a lot to recommend it. The next time you're faced with a stern face at a government agency, or the prospect of your own sleepy demise, say to yourself, "This is going to be unbearable for a little while, so let's just do our best to remain stoic and patient about it." Say it to another person, if you like. You can double the agony, and then double the relief. Don't be misguided about forever. Infinity need last only a moment longer than a human life. It stretches as far as the active imagination will take it. And the end of activity is the exposure of limits. But not to us. We are granted the final mercy of a death untroubled by boundary. That must be a wonderful thing. That moment.

Soon I will vanish from here. I'll slip away from my family and walk into the desert. It's quite beautiful. Everything is still. Even the light is immobile. It hangs in the air like a smile. All movement has meaning. I'll be a part of that. They'll search for me. They'll send a party. Because I'll be with them. A presence. For a little while.