CUTBank 47

Featuring:
Rob Carney • Nicole Chaison • William J. Cobb • Peter Henry • Rich Ives • Mark Anthony Jarman • William Kittredge • Corey Marks • Wendell Mayo • Karin Schalm
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CutBank is published twice a year by the Associated Students of the University of Montana (ASUM). Subscriptions are $12 a year or $22 for two years. Sample copies $4; guidelines available with SASE.

CutBank accepts submissions from August 15 through March 15. Manuscripts must be accompanied by an SASE for return or response. All submissions are considered for the Richard Hugo Memorial Poetry Award and the A.B. Guthrie, Jr. Short Fiction Award.

CutBank is indexed in The Access to Little Magazines and the Index to Periodical Verse. It is available on microfiche from Gaylord Brothers, Inc., P.O. Box 61, Syracuse, NY 13210. CutBank is printed by BookMasters, Inc. of Ashland, Ohio.

Printed on recycled paper.

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On the front cover:

Byron Thompson
Jim's Flower, 1996.
Oil on Canvas, 20" x 30"

On the back cover:

Edgar Smith
Small Family, 1996.
Oil on wood, 20" x 30"
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Brenda Tao Lee
Nesbitt 86 Missoula, September,
1996

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ACCIDENTS

The silences which drifted in the linoleum-floored rooms where my grandparents lived in the whitepainted house which was headquarters for our ranch always left me ill at ease. Out on the lawn, under the Lombardy poplar, I would flip my jackknife to stick in the ground, over and over. Maybe I was just a sullen boy. Maybe I didn’t want to be a useful man.

Years later, Annick and I packed in a few miles to Wall Lake in British Columbia, just out of Waterton Park, at the foot of a great vertical wall of stone with mid-summer ice at the top. The next morning we saw a creature which resembled a reddish dark badger: a wolverine. Implacable and almost feverish in the quick absolute way it went about foraging on a gravel bar near the water, it was there, then aware of us, and gone.

It was the only wolverine I ever expect to see. They have been almost exterminated from tame world. It was good for my soul to encounter such a creature so utterly unavailable to our agendas, to see that such a way of going at life was still possible.

These memories move in my brain like little fires, reigniting the knowledge that the electricities of this world are in fact always flowing through us like blood. We are inescapably like trout in the dazzling stream of what is.

Maybe we should disregard ideas of significance and go through life like that wolverine; the wolverine, I am willing to at least try believing, cannot be coerced or co-opted; they are as secretive as anyone could wish, insulated and invulnerable, emotionally untouchable, alone. Wolverine belong to no one but themselves.
Maybe we should feel capable of being loved without having to give anything back, like house cats, honoring only the most compelling agendas—joy and food, sex in the night and the hunt and the kill and a good night’s sleep.

Or, maybe we shouldn’t.

•  •  •

Maybe we should put together a catalogue of revered places and people and the stories which make them invaluable, a listing of times and ways people have been driven to acknowledge their political obligations to things they refuse to do without, like each other, clean water in the tin bucket, a certain grove of great yellow pine on warm late summer afternoons before the rain, a living wage, and/or freedom.

This catalogue would be a mirror in which we might sometimes get to see how people come to inhabit the politics they act out. We could hold their experiences beside ours in hopes of getting closer to fathoming the reasons we come to recognize in what we take to be our own obligations.

I’d like, for instance, to understand the sequence of experiences which led Rachel Carson, the environmental activist, to identify her intentions toward the world (her politics), then the events both mental and physical which led to acknowledging an obligation to act on those intentions. I’d like to know about the same sort of sequences in the lives of many people I admire, to see if there’s a pattern in such evolution, and if it could be taught, as a technique.

Rick Bass, in Audobon Magazine (October, 1995), says “I never set out to become a pagan. It just kind of happened. It’s as if, rather than my moving toward it, a
whole lot of other things receded, leaving me stranded on some peninsula of paganism. More and more, it seemed, everything else around me looked dumb, or dishonest.” He goes on to talk of fires and trees and interconnected energies.

How to participate, how to proceed? Some of our most enduring stories involve divesting ourselves of the trappings of wealth or power, stripping the body, as in a robbery, as a start toward cleansing the self.

* * *

From Oklahoma, haven’t seen her in thirty years, Trudy Gunderson called me. When we both lived out in the logging truck and cowhand country of southeastern Oregon Trudy tended bar in a roadhouse we called “Hunter’s Hot Lodge”—hot pools to bathe in and no questions asked about your companion (or companions) if you rented one of the rooms.

Trudy had her mind, like always, on the main sparrow.

“You must be getting old,” she said. “Do you miss it?” She was talking, of course, about the real world, where the score was a joke.

Paul Finnegan (a concocted name for a real man) was, as is said, a long Irish drink of water, but he was never interested in water. Paul drank gin all summer, scotch all winter. He was always sort of drunk but never too boring as he told laughing anecdotes about the drinking trade (none of which I can recall—except one about a man who bought a $70,000 logging truck and never used it for anything but to drive into town and get the mail and maybe another couple cases of beer to ice down for the afternoon—the man I’m calling Paul Finnegan would act it out, doing the police, as Dickens
said, in different voices.)

We wasted long swales of time on stories like that, splendid hours. I had recently begun drifting toward the thought that there is no meaning to life but life, and I was in a state of shock; I had until that time thought of pleasure as doing God’s (nature’s) work, making the world habitable.

What I liked best, talking to Trudy Gunderson, was the way she seemed to still be enjoying her days, sans ambition.

Me, I went the other way. Breaks my heart.

In first light over the roll of the Palouse wheatfield hills out south of Pullman, a white '69 Dodge van idles in the silence. Bob Helm is going to drive away, most often alone.

Every possible morning he goes for these drives, a way of inciting the imagination to awaken, going back into himself. It’s a way to start being an artist for another day.

It’s also very western. Helm reminds me of old blacksmith men I’ve known (my grandfather on my mother’s side), who would go down to the shop before daylight, just to rap the hammer off the anvil, letting steel ring off steel as they took their first cup of coffee. It was a way to wake up. Later there would be the fire, and white hot metal to be worked and tempered.

Helm says he is particularly looking for beauty in the intricate and unnoticed, on the undersides of railway trestles in the wheatfields, places he returns to in various seasons, or just in season like the alleyway in Spokane where Concord grapes drape new growth over a fence in ways that seem striking.
“Too much artificiality makes people crazy.” Helm doesn’t think there’s much wilderness left. He was uneasy in the Ross Cedar Tree Grove, a gorgeous Montana State Park on the Bull River below the Cabinet Mountain Wilderness Area. “It’s like Disneyland,” he says. “All those boardwalks. It’s not wilderness, it’s a theme park.

“We need to find a fall-back position,” Helm says. “The few square feet under a railroad trestle can be wild and saving, a kind of micro-wilderness. Like Japanese gardens, which are a way of creating space through illusion. Neglected spaces where nobody has looked since they were built. Where nobody’s watching.

“I’m interested in places where people spent their energy, and the way those places are repossessed by nature.” He goes back to visit a 1930’s pickup truck, abandoned amid lilacs on a farmstead in Colton Canyon, by the Snake River. “It’s been shot so many times the steel looks like lace.” It’s both utterly of our habits of random violence, and abstractly lovely. It’s heartbreakingly funny, and simply heartbreaking.

“I go courting accidents,” Helm says. “I use a map, I pick a road, I pick a mileage, and set the speedometer. My mileage comes up and I stop. I get out and try to get some feel for a place picked at random. I get a chance to see things people don’t see so often. It’s like when your car breaks down, and you’re stuck in a piece of roadside world you didn’t pick.”

Accidents, he’s saying, trick us into seeing. So of course can art. Helm starts from ceremonies of precise seeing and ends with the exacting work, making things to see—pears in a melting snowbank, elegant dogs guarding the edge of eternity as we sneak glances over the precipice. We have no choice, Helm is saying, but to live without guardrails.
How to plan for freedom, and consequent (oftentimes) joyousness? How do we persuade citizens to enjoy the pleasures of being generous, playing the world by ear, giving themselves away?

It's a tough sell to people who've spent their lives inhabiting a society like ours, so determinedly adversarial and committed to win-lose models of economic behavior and social justice, people who've all their lives been educated to think the world is made of "things" rather than interpenetrating energies, driven to believe in the virtues of ownership.

One of the reason we're having such difficulty with our society lies in our inability to initiate citizens into any coherent sense of the uses of pleasure. Initiations imply a culture which is sure of its values and methods, but we live many-cultured lives and have no other choice in the system of interwoven societies we are inevitably creating; other models of the future are suicidal.

Following no plan that we can enunciate, allowing our bellies to lead us, what are we creating? We awaken, many of us, much of the time, with bitterness in our mouths. What do we say when love goes haywire? "The taste of ashes."

One antidote is frolic, the taste of possibility. Another, which works the same way, is striving. Down by his garden Bob Helm maintains a fermenting, rotting compost pile. "It's my friend," he says. "I think I'll go out and piss on it right now."
Betty Jo begins with hand circles. Her middle finger is a compass needle that points towards Tokyo. The pointing's easier if she imagines herself in a juniper hedgerow, making her way towards saffron tulips. It's something felt, she says, like the robust tumor growing in a notch on her knee.

It's rough for anyone to play hopscotch with a tin can full of milk, but politics aside, Betty Jo's only getting older, and I'm reminded of golden grass every time I see her.

Today she's an ostrich standing on her left leg with a silk bandana wrapped about her face. She balances Tommy's expensive Nordic microscope on her forearms and a glass of chocolate-covered sprinkles with her upright knee. I want the glass to be holding something different, and Tommy claims Betty Jo should sleep with him in the tomato fields because she borrowed his prize possession without asking. Tit for tat: the Hoover Dam is just another concrete wall.

I know what the glass cannot contain. We're temporarily out of salt pork and mottled potatoes. (I feel feverish over the loss.)

The circles only get bigger, so Betty Jo puts the microscope on her head with sprinkles on top. Her hip bones punctuate the center of each motion.
FEEDING THE GEESE

One hand holds corn, the other pebbles. I want to swim back. Which hand can I open? I’m anxious about the geese. Last time I saw them, I tied a string to their tails—by now it must be broken. They fly all day in the middle of winter. A voice says, “save yourself.”

My dog, my silly dead dog. I reach for the lamp, cracking its glass with my clumsy fingers. Corn spills out. All the pebbles sink deeper. I want to pet my dog in the close, dark water.
ENTENDRE

She wraps red flannel dipped in camphor around her knuckles. An amber ring dimples her middle finger, poking through the homemade bandage, shining in the fire light.

Her name means "Destroyer" in English. She has learned to call the ring her "resignation." Its cold metal band sends a sting up the left arm to her breast. Pain knots up like sea weed clumped tight around stone.

She took scissors to her shirt down at Beaufort Coast, thinking the operation simple. And why not? Hadn't she chased the giant with just enough pluck to make him tumble off the edge of the world?

Two sandhill cranes tear her coarse sacks piled high with imported rice for winter. The large cinnamon-colored birds sing as if they had marbles rattling in their throats. Their song becomes a race, the gurgling tune running faster until a creamy film covers their grain-stuffed beaks.
DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOUR CHILDREN ARE?

It was a Wednesday night in Manhattan and the two men Vince and David were finished playing chess had taken the vodka Absolut of course nothing but the best for these two limes and shot glasses a little of the hard stuff never killed anyone did it to the roof of Vince’s place on 28th and 3rd were listening to the sirens and honks experiencing the voyeurism of watching a total stranger below someone you’ll never meet it doesn’t matter anyway you couldn’t save them if you tried watching them scurry through the crosswalks somehow fascinating for no reason really other than the distance the oddness of it if you had a gun you could shoot them easily surprised it doesn’t happen more often the air rife with the chill of early December the roof tar smell the magnificent city cleaner and nobler and wiser from this height sometimes you rise above it all sometimes you don’t

but it being a Wednesday anyway Woden’s Day Vince pointed out Woden like Odin the Norse god, head cheese, Mr. Big and out of the blue like David says

Judy Hashamoto missed
Judy Hashamoto? Holy lawsuits, Batman. You mean Judy Hashamoto as in Mr. Hepburn’s-not-here-right-now-can-I-take-a-message?

David nodded.

And the offspring is of your loins?

He made a face.

Oh ho ho ho ho. Merry early Xmas, Mr. Hepburn
It’s isn’t funny. She wants to have it so Vince said

Now is that Wednesday’s child is full of woe or is it Wednesday’s child has far to go?

She said it’s the size of a thumbnail

Did you suggest this earthling might be better off in a heavenly sphere?

Jesus, Vince

Pardon me, Reverend

I mean, I want to do the right thing here. I’m not an asshole

Vince poured them both shots of vodka and made David raise his to his lips in unison and called

Down the hatch

with the heat of it still in their throats Vince clasped David roughly by the shoulder and said

Buddy, you wouldn’t know the right thing to do if it came up and bit you

Thanks for the vote of confidence, Vince

Much obliged

there was a pause as both licked their own wounds considered their own plights both were semigood friends both worked at NBC Vince a publicist David a market research consultant had started out in advertising tried to sell their souls to the devil but it’s not as easy as they say sure you make a lot of money but then you spend it all on the dinner menu cocaine grams Bermuda towels chablis glasses dry cleaning bills Barney’s suits a decent apartment costs an arm and a leg and you end up an indentured servant bowing to Mastercard and wondering Where did I go wrong?

both were midforties divorced both wearing faded jeans black leather jackets expensive wristwatches eyes
bloodshot they shouldn’t be up this late they both knew that but both were lifelong insomniacs so what can you do?

and sometime later the Judy Hashamoto thing hashed and rehashed three more shots of Absolut down the hatch both were getting rather droopy were getting rather sluggish it being four a.m. when Vince asked

What would you do to stay alive? I mean how much do you value this time we have, this fucking life, this world?

and David answered

A lot

well a lot, how fucking profound. Let me be specific. If you had to, would you kill someone to save your life? Would you eat someone?

Eat someone? You know you are one sick fucker

It happens you know

Not that often

Well what about that movie Alive you know those guys on the Uruguayan soccer team whose plane crashed in the Andes they had to resort to cannibalism

Why do they always say ‘resort to cannibalism’? It’s no fucking resort I’d ever want to visit

Club Dead

Club Eat Your Dead

No, I mean, it’s something to think about. I mean, it’s not just that soccer team either. Would you?

Sure I guess I would if I had to but I don’t plan to

I mean it’s pretty fucking rare isn’t it?

Maybe maybe not

I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it

Yeah but sometimes you’re just walking along and all the sudden you’re on a bridge and you didn’t plan on it it’s just there and it’s like do I fucking cross this thing or not sometimes it happens in a split second or at most
just a minute or two and you’ve got to think fast you better have thought about this before or you’ll be fucked big time

I somehow doubt I’ll have to decide whether to eat someone or not in a split second
true but
but what?
sometimes in life you face a test sometimes you know when they’re coming like a final exam you can stay up all night on black mollies cramming for it but sometimes you face a test that isn’t scheduled then it’s like those school nightmares like all of a sudden you’re in class naked or something or you show up to class and everyone is set to take the final exam everyone but you they’ve all been studying the fucking French Revolution for two weeks Robespierre The Reign of Terror the guillotines invitation to a beheading that kind of thing except you and you sit there staring at the pages panicking wondering what the fuck?

well I’m not sure what you mean maybe if you had some specific instance
you gotta promise never to tell anyone about this okay I promise
I’m not fucking joking here David, I mean this, okay? Either you promise seriously to carry this story with you to your grave or let’s just end it here, I’ll save my breath

Okay I promise. What’d you do, eat somebody? Just forget it
No, I’m sorry. Go on and tell your story
I said forget it
You can’t tease me like that. Go on. I’m listening
Okay but you ever breath a word of this to anyone and I’ll fucking hunt you down and kill you
Okay Brando
I’ll do this for you, I’ll give you this example. And I regret nothing. I’d do it again if I had to.

**Blood Drive**

This was eight years ago when my wife was sick she needed a transplant is what it was *harvest* they called it yeah right harvest like the wheat is ripe is golden get out the john deere the heartland of America and all that jazz but heartland is the term alright harvest in the heartland that was eight years ago and we were waiting for a harvest euphemistically speaking but what they were really talking about was a heart in that heartland as in aorta as in ventricles as in Michelle’s ticker was on the blink and the woman I loved I would live and die for and had told her so many times lying in bed inside her even You are the one for me I told her You are the one I’d do anything for you I’d die for you and in my jealous papa bear moments I told her If anyone touches you I’ll break their arms you say that shit you know don’t you? well most of the time you just say it it’s just words but this time I meant it

Michelle was the one for me she was electric she had a fineness about her there was nothing I wouldn’t do for her whenever she mentioned an old boyfriend I wanted to kill him hunt the fucker down and bash his head with a pipe I felt that strongly about her she was the world she was my reason to live

and so it was April and planting time not harvest time but that was what we needed a harvest we were running out of time that is the doctors said it was aortal fibrillation a congenital heart disease thing hers was about to peter out not like that battery rabbit that just keeps going going going no hers was about to stop she knew that I knew that we all knew that and we needed
a donor fast

I remember thinking before I heard about Michelle that this organ transplant thing was a bit much like Isn’t that carrying this recycling idea a bit far? but once it was someone I cared about worshipped adored might be the better word I warmed up to the plan and got an idea during the blood drive that’s right blood drive when we were all filing down to the Bloodmobile a little Winnebago thing blood donation center on wheels where they hook you up to a plastic bag suck out a pint give you orange juice and cookies and send you home with a t-shirt what they’ll do to get some blood you never know and on this particular blood drive I was trying to get everyone to join I was like fucking Jerry Lewis on a muscular dystrophy telethon because Michelle was in a bad way and was always needing transfusions and if any heart came in if we were lucky with the harvest she’d need a lot of blood then and oh yeah I need to mention that she was first on the list of heart recipients in her region in her area finally she’d been moving up on the list for two years it was all a matter of organ donor compatibility and blood type and everything so there it was the big blood drive and I had my daughter Lisa from my first marriage with me and she hated the idea of giving blood It’s disgusting she said Gag me with a spoon the selfish little bitch I know I’m not supposed to say that but it’s the truth so sue me okay and I had to talk fucking bribe her for her blood even though she said

Why don’t we just donate to PBS or something? but I said No we need to give blood Michelle might need it so let’s do the right thing
You know I’m not that crazy about Michelle and I hate needles
Is that all you ever think of? Yourself? For Chrissakes don’t be so petty
I am not being petty it’s just that I hate those ugly old fat nurses poking things in my arm I think they hurt me on purpose because they’re jealous I can’t help it if they’re so old and grody

Vince pauses in his story to down another shot then he says
I never told you about Lisa did I?
I didn’t even know you had a daughter Well there’s a reason for that namely it being the fact that she was one royal grade A bitch
Vince. Whoa. Don’t go pulling any punches now Exactly. She was one dyed-in-the-wool bitch. Her mother, Ginger, made sure of that. She was spoiled and self-centered and beautiful and sexy and trouble from the word go
So did she give the blood?
I mean, you know there’s this myth about how mothers and fathers are supposed to feel about their kids, about unconditional love, you know, I’ll love you no matter what, and it’s all a bunch of bullshit, really, because love is always conditional, how you feel about someone or something is always tied to what they say or do or how they act in a given situation like when I bought this bracelet for Lisa’s 14th birthday and she laughed at it and said
You don’t expect me to actually wear that do you? and even her mother bitch that she is though I once thought I loved her god knows why said Lisa, that’s no way to act but I just shrugged and said You can throw it out
the fucking window for all I care Here I’ll do it for you and they were living in Weehawken then in this high-rise on Boulevard East with a great view of Manhattan and I took the bracelet and threw it off the balcony closing the sliding glass doors behind me pulling the patch of curtain out of the door jamb where it was pulled by the wind and I know they’re looking at me stunned I guess they hadn’t said anything yet so I said
So much for that and Ginger goes
That was really mature, Vince. What are you going to do for an encore? Toss the two of us out there too?
and Lisa says
Why do you always have to ruin my birthday? Why don’t you just leave
so I did
That’s just a little background a little hors d’oeuvre of sorts to do with Lisa my creation my Frankendaughter I’ve created a monster she was a bad seed she was conceived and raised for all the wrong reasons vanity pride cruelty and I’m as much to blame as anyone she was fifty percent me she was fifty percent me
and being a royal bitch too the day of the blood drive but we made it to the Bloodmobile and while we’re in line she’s saying
You know fathers who love their daughters take them skiing and shopping and buy them expensive clothes on their days off
and she keeps on saying shit like that and complains about the needle how weak she’s feeling afterwards and I’m trying to ignore her trying to tune her out when somehow I see data that both Lisa and I
are type A positive, same blood type as Michelle and that sets the wheels in motion because then I’m back on the road driving home and it’s raining, the road wet and slick and in the background of the wiper noise I can hear Lisa’s voice whining on complaining that’s all she did would do and I couldn’t tell her to just shut the fuck up because that would only make things worse but there she is right beside me whining and I start thinking Why does she deserve to live and Michelle deserve to die?

I know this is not a question I should have been asking there’s no rhyme or reason and that old hokum that the Lord works in mysterious ways might be fine for some Bible chump but not for me so I start thinking about this and I start thinking about that how I had always told Michelle that I would kill or die for her and this is when I faced my test I didn’t see it coming it happened so fast but yes to give you an example sometimes you’re faced with a test that you don’t plan or foresee suddenly they drop it in your lap

Vince pauses to light a cigarette but David is wide awake now waiting to hear the rest

So what was the test, then? Don’t keep me hanging

The thing about Michelle was, she was like no other woman I had ever known. I vaguely remember the good times with Ginger, even the early years when Lisa was a baby and we were happy, I guess, kind of but with Michelle it was different. It’s impossible to describe I guess but sometimes I’d look at her and she’d be like fucking electric, like a charge that was going through me, and at times I’d kiss her and her mouth her breasts her cunt her ass everything would be
almost too much for me, like I couldn’t get close enough to her, like I would wake up in the morning wanting to lick her and taste her, I’d put my fingers in her when we were at movie theaters, I’d get hard just thinking about when she’d get off work and come home to me and we’d get in bed immediately but it wasn’t just sex of course it was the sound of her voice the way she’d make me feel

how she read in the bathtub every night, how she would take these long hot baths in the water steaming turning her lovely lily white skin a bright pink from the heat and she’d lie in the tub one arm propped on the side with the bathroom door open reading and sweating her beautiful blonde hair slicked away from her face and our favorite cat Ernie would hop on the side of the tub and rub his face against hers, lick her hands, because there was something that drove animals to her and made them want to lick and nuzzle her

after she got out of the tub the pages of the books would always be rippled with dampness and the edge of the tub would be marked with the cloverleaves of Ernie’s paw prints

and later, I would pick up my novels and magazines and all the pages would be wrinkled and crinkled from her wet fingers, from the beads of her sweat fallen from her face

lying in bed at night with her in my arms with Michelle in my arms I felt engulfed by her beauty swallowed by it the way I wanted to swallow her and I would swell with this feeling and it would scare me, really it would, I’d be lying there frightened because my life had been so fucked up to that point that I knew or at least I suspected this was too good to be true, this could never last, so when I found out about Michelle’s heart condition her heart problem I wasn’t completely
surprised really, I knew this too would be taken from me, this was too good to be true and the world out of jealousy at least would step in to stop it to put an end to it to us to everything how does Poe put it the angels not half so happy in heaven went envying her and me?

So I was driving along this rainy wet road coming home from the Bloodmobile riding along the blood drive in a way with Lisa my bitchy daughter thinking about the words I’d said so many times to Michelle, how I would gladly die for her, or kill for her, and thinking about her heart problem knowing that there were two perfectly good hearts in this car thinking how if I could I would rip my heart out and give it to her and

I realized that if I simply sped up put a fraction more pressure on the gas pedal that the car would be forced to swerve veer wildly out of control and all I had to do was hurry, that was all, and I’d been an impatient man all my life and quickly I couldn’t think of a reason not to, not to do it
and Lisa said
Hey slow down Where’s the fire?
and she didn’t even have time to say another word before I slammed on the brakes we spun crazy out of control and
I learned later
we hit a tree

His voice stopped and for a brief moment, it seemed as if the enormous city itself were holding its breath, David could still see the Chrysler building in the distance uptown, was chilled and shivering slightly inside his leather jacket, until an ambulance there’s always a tragedy happening somewhere a rape every three seconds a murder every five heartbreak beyond
numbers and seconds as David was thinking this is no joke this is real

We hit a tree, said Vince. And Lisa flew through the windshield sixty feet through the air landed face down in a field of wet wildflowers. She never wore safety belts she refused to do it because she said they wrinkled her clothes and she didn’t like that

I broke my collarbone my right ankle both wrists cuts all over my face lost a lot of blood which was dangerous from already giving it that day but still after three weeks in the hospital I walked out on my own two feet while Lisa

Lisa lived but her spine was severed. Never walk again, that kind of thing. She gets around pretty well on wheels now, though. And you wouldn’t believe the way she’s changed. She’s a sweetheart now, would you believe it?

Michelle’s heart gave out when she heard about the wreck. I never saw her again, alive at least it felt pretty weird I felt pretty weird about the whole thing as you can imagine but after a year or so I told myself

Well at least now Lisa’s heart is in the right place

For a moment a collection of hearbeats Pulse and Other Stories David doesn’t have a clue he stands there looking out at the sooty eyelashes of the city sleeping Manhattan grimy grimy night stumped he is like an aborigine considering a periodic chart of elements though he knows he should say something anything at least you didn’t kill her maybe but he doesn’t say a word & after that dead air Vince says

So when I’m telling you sometimes you face a test and you can’t always see them coming I’m not kidding you see I faced one you wanted an example so there it is
there's your example Michelle died Lisa's a cripple but altogether a better person for it what do you think? Pass or Fail? Don't worry don't answer that I live with it every day every night every fucking minute you understand what I'm saying?

Vince lit a cigar, a Romeo y Julietta, and puffed it, sending blue clouds of smoke into the gray light of the dawn over New York sounds o nice you have to say it twice he said and did so New York New York so what are you thinking over there Davey boy What's going on in that knotty mind of yours?

David didn't answer so Vince said
Vince drew one a question mark that is in the sky with his finger swerve and curl of hand and elaborate dot not an eye but point at bottom
Nothing, said David. My mind is a blank
Vince nodded and puffed his cigar, knocking the ashes off, edging the gray fluff onto the building's walls I'm going to keep an eye on you, capiche?
Don't worry, said David. My lips are sealed
And in turn I will not inform the office of your impending fatherhood. Deal?
Deal

IF YOU WERE IN MY SHOES

David Hepburn was not a man without convictions. He believed the guilty will be punished, the weak but worthy will be rewarded; there is ultimately justice. He had cheated on his wife, had copulated with other married women on their living room sofas where hours later their children would sit and eat microwaved popcorn, and believed he had been
punished for this betrayal as he had lost the gentle and gorgeous woman he loved and now she was in another man’s arms, breathing to the beat of another man’s pulse. He had no children but had fostered the issue of three abortions number four on the way and had come to see these children as gaps in his life ghosts in the machine I am an old man a dull head among windy spaces. Now forty-three years old he had come to believe his life was a porridge of events which he failed to understand at the moment and only in retrospect had realized his many, many mistakes, missteps, misspeaks. After losing his lovely wife Karen for whom his love still flashed he had promised to do better, to live his life better, to be a better person, so when Vince told him of the wreck, of paralyzing his daughter, he was thrown into a crisis. To rat or not to rat. The man had mangled his daughter. He’d schemed to place her beating heart in the chest of her stepmother. This a crime. A sin.

And then there was Judy Hashamoto. Twenty-three year old Judy Hashamoto his administrative assistant who could be his daughter could be carrying his daughter who when he asked one night You hungry? You want something to eat? she said That would be nice and one thing led to another she was tiny child-size like a miniature human had jet black hair tiny hands and ears so meek she was he wanted to wrap her in his arms protect her from the world the taxi drivers the squeegee men the zombies lurking in the lobby full lips and dark eyes she spoke so softly at dinner he couldn’t hear half of what she said and hours later he kissed her throat I should be going home she said Yes you should. But you aren’t
defrocked her skin was like a dream of skin so smooth and ultrawhite like rice paper a dark mole on her the soft underside of her left breast like a small and misplaced button it was she shivered during as he moved inside her her sex like a small tightly clenched hand around him and when he eased to sleep that night it was not without a sense of nostalgia luck and confused remorse rootless and as he faded to black she whispered

This is going to change everything isn’t it? Maybe I don’t know Maybe for the better Yes that’s it Only for the better I hope

Me too

But by the third sleep over he was thinking Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea after all. At work as predicted she was changing and already asked one night while they were having dinner again sushi this time Where are we going? You and I? I don’t know he said which wasn’t good enough he could tell so when he flew to Milwaukee for a presentation he refused to return her calls and tried to ignore the subject act as if they had never happened until she said the morning he returned Can we talk? Of course we can talk. We talk every day don’t we?

She nodded and said I’m going to have a baby Oh he said and blinked blinking his mind a blank Your baby You said you couldn’t get pregnant That’s what I thought. That’s what they told me. There was supposed to be something wrong with my ovaries
I guess they were wrong
I guess so. The doctors are calling it a miracle
A miracle. Do you want an abortion?
Would you kill a miracle?
Now come on
I don’t want one. Never
Never say never
Never
There you go. Saying it again
Never. Never never never

He told her he’d have to think about it think it over how he’d panic with the situation
I’ll get back to you he said
That was the day before, a Tuesday. Then Vince told him the Lisa slash Michelle story and he wasn’t going in to work that day and he woke at noon with a headache in his cramped one room place on Stuyvesent thinking Vince-like Maybe she’ll get hit by a bus but no he didn’t want that it’s just that it would make things easier hello child support hello deadbeat dad hello hollow man
now he has to do the right thing
but what is the right thing?
so he calls in sick and calls in sick his penis burns slightly when he urinates and he wonders if it’s some kind of infection thing or just guilt the pangs of and Friday Judy Hashamoto calls while he’s asleep in the middle of the afternoon on the sofa and she says
Were you asleep? I’m sorry
No he says irritated I’m not asleep it’s two in the afternoon Why would I be asleep?
You’re sick right?
I think it’s a flu or something he says wondering if it’s the Asian flu but knowing that wouldn’t be the
right thing to say at this moment
  Why didn’t you return any of my calls? I left some messages for you
  The machine must be on the fritz he lied I haven’t got any messages at all in the last few days why don’t you come over tomorrow and we can talk I’ll be better by then
  and Saturday morning Judy Hashamoto arrives at his apartment with a book of names saying What do you think of this? Larissa. Monique. Silver. Candy
  I think we should talk about this
  Judy smiled. We always talk
  Okay, he said. Two can play. I don’t want to be a father
  But you are. Or will be
  This isn’t fair
  If it’s a boy, what about Leo? Jason? Craig?
  We’re not finished talking
  You don’t know what you want, said Judy. That’s it in a nutshell
  and David wondered if she was right actually women were always good at figuring him out knowing him better than he knew himself as Karen said “You’ll never be true to anyone” and he hoped she was wrong but he feared it was right on the money money best set aside for baby’s bills and diapers nannies Nintendo games expensive sneakers where does it end it never does with three abortions before he’d dodged a bullet and there was Vince of course ramming his car into a tree to put his daughter’s heart in his love’s chest remembering that public service announcement on TV years ago It’s 10 o’clock—Do You Know Where Your Children Are? or aren’t as the case may be and sometimes it’s hard to know the right thing to do but some skeletons are best left in the closet and so he said
But Judy, the thing is, I don’t love you
He waited for an answer, for her to speak, as she paged through her book of names.
Love is nice, she said. But I can live without it. I have for most of my life
So David tried to formulate a snappy comeback but all that he could think was if it’s a boy maybe Rock or Stone would be good
a name with heart
a word without ambiguity
unlike the world this world no a name for another world where hearts are always in the right place and if you think long and hard enough you will realize the right thing to do when it walks up and bites you
PETER HENRY

AMBUSH

The day comes when we cease being brothers. It has been waiting in ambush all these years, like the one poisonous spider men still fear too much to become.

The rain continues digging its tiny nests in the field as our grandmother grows slowly deader, two ice cubes clasped inside each fist like unlucky dice.

My brother & I stand back-to-back. We begin walking towards the electric fence wrapped around the field & the charred crows swinging beneath it.

This could take decades.
CHORES

The van is black & its only door opens lazily. I am leaving this block of single-story homes, the mounds of compost set out each night for the dead & the one secret every carport keeps.

I am leaving 1973, its turnstiles of ice & the summer unrolling its gauze as the worm eats its slow way out of my knapsack’s single black peach.

I am leaving the suburb’s sad bars, where the strippers begin their bodies’ cold circles for blind men, who, contented, smile & nod their heads. Each of them is facing a direction that is different & wrong, & tonight, as they stumble down the sidewalk on their way to disappearing forever, their eyes fill with a mist that is useless and everywhere.

Despite all this, I wave as I go by them, anxious to be anywhere that is not the past, or Richmond. I am leaving the smile stitched unremarkably into my face & my neck’s stillborn freckle. I am leaving the grass, the green, malarial grass, drowsing in its dewy web & I am leaving the small, blond hearses snails are.

I am leaving this vernacular of silence, with its drawl that is slow & persistent, like the hair of the dead. I am leaving the drowned children to the river, to the nights they spend swatting minnows from their eyes & I am leaving the slow parade of washed-away livestock.
Nothing else will change. Lovers will go on
muttering their names into each others’ mouths,
the clouds will still gather & hatch their simple plots
& everywhere
car thieves will remain briefly free. Like a Bible on the
counter of a burning house,
I pass quickly & without notice. The streets are empty
& can only grow more empty. Whatever the burning
circuitry of sewers
carries out beneath me will remain important
& unknown, as I leave this city, as I set loose the one
syllable trapped inside my tongue,
as I give away everything until all I have is my one life
& it is not this one.

Tonight the matches sleep in their small cabins,
keys lose themselves into their own pockets, the future
carries out
its lonely tense & I return to the chores that keep me free:
lacquering the darkness, hanging the stars out to dry.
SEVERAL OF THESE COULD MAKE A LAMP

Because the sky is our story told by another, this is the fire I tend, wearing an erect posture like a weapon.

And when you found your voice, it was not done, its face the color of a dog’s bark. I lit the match and waited for the shriek.

I don’t know what this means so I think you should hate me. But don’t hate me.

I had been lost for weeks and no one had noticed. So I went back to my life and no one noticed that, either.

And when something I said finally broke its chains, the neighbors gasped and the relatives who hadn’t heard me heard them. Heard them because they mattered and the beast, the real beast, became again invisible.

Silence on its knees.
Knit some mufflers for the soldiers.
Send a little something for the broken tailight.
ARE YOU PLANNING TO TAKE PART IN THE DARK?

Instead of smiling, she placed her fingers in his mouth.
Instead of removing her skirt, she cupped her hand and lowered it, stepping forward.
Instead of keeping a safe distance, they wore hats.
They ate licorice. They chaffed.
Instead of a dead person, a large cow, which is so much bigger.
One fly.
I can see the danger in it. I can see the fear.
Slick with violence like a sweaty young boy.
A coffee cup engulfed in her swollen hands.
Well, then, could we enter?
As if the room had swallowed a cloud.
MELISSA THORNE

Gold Ring, 1995
Charcoal, 38" x 50"
BRIAN ELLING

Torso

Photograph
COLLINS BONDS

Afterthought

Charcoal on paper
MARTY FROMM

Untitled, 1989
Photograph
CARMEN MALSCH

*Cycle I*, 1996

Wood engraving, 8" x 10"

CutBank 44
GREG MUELLER

Untitled

10" x 15"

CutBank 45
MATT JONES
Wave, Acorns, and Trail
Wood engraving, 4" x 5"
MARINE BOY

Of course, most rainy days it's nice:
Judy in the door of her snack van,
drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, her apron
dangling on its peg, long hair
untied, and Heidi pushing Swush-ah Swush
about his feet,

and divers, deliberate lobsters, cleaning his tank.
No one minds the quiet man
come in from the beach to drip dry,

his metal detector propped against the wall.
He winds watches, shakes them,
holds them like shells to his ear.

But raise the sun, fly the colors—Thar she blows!
Greyhounds spout Midwesterners.
Vans and family wagons roll on the lot.

Everywhere kids, whole schools of them,
and summer youth-camp leaders casting nets,
weighing their catch.

All crowd around Marine Boy, elbow
up to his face, short ones
standing on his boots
to peer through his eyes: Whoah...!
Stingrays ghost through the water, glide by portholes
silent and white.
Purple beds of mussels, urchins.  
Anemone gardens in bloom.  
Starfish scattered like petals, autumn leaves.  

Over there salmon. Over there smelt—a shimmery cloud.  
They rap on his contacts: *Hey Octopus.*  
*Hey you stupid squid.*  

Then it’s snuffle away, leaving noseprints.  
It’s shuffle off to watch the dolphin show  
(popcorn, saltwater taffy, Cokes,  
munch munch munch, spill spill),  
dolphins leaping, giggling, sommersaulting,  
getting kissed by volunteers.  

And now Marine Boy’s mind is free to wander  
off along the boardwalk,  
through dune grass,  
out to the waves. Fluttering kites.  
*God,* he thinks about the ocean, *that’s something.*  
*That’d be one helluva difficult gig.*
CAPTAIN KIRK

Flaps move on the plane and we move off the map. I’m stuck in the tourist-econo seats back beside the barking vowels of the engines and I can’t hear half of what is told me. I possess dull nausea and cocktail napkins for earplugs. I’m breathing beside a raven beauty who is journeying back to North Carolina. We flirt, tamper mindlessly with the movement of blood from heart to hair.

“Captain Kirk has turned out the seatbelt light...”
Passengers snicker, whisper: Captain Kirk, ha ha.
Captain Kirk goes crazy. “You think I don’t hear you? God I wish that damn show had never been on.” We regret our snickering and turn to the windows for solace. At 33,000 feet the high plains are a thing of beauty, water-worked with scars and depressions, oxbows and crazy twists. We swim over them and I see a flimsy matchbox town built in an ancient riverbed; what if the big river returns, brown and swollen, hungry as the next virus?

We fly straight through an electrical storm. From the back, I watch a glowing unearthly ball roll down the aisle toward me, a ghost’s bowling ball, a whirling of lit knives. I’m looking for a parachute, I’m looking for God.

“Ball lightning,” says the calm North Carolina woman. “It happens to me all the time.” She feels she may attract this particular phenomenon while in the air, just as my face attracts sticks on the ice.

Years ago on Long Island I took Billy Smith’s goalie stick to my chin: 18 stitches and a piece of wire that won’t go away. There wasn’t enough skin to close
it. I have several sizeable screws in my ankle. I now wait to trigger the more delicate airport alarms.

Our plane stops at the mountain airport. The snowplows are out roving the runway. Everyone recalls what happened before with a plane and snowplows at this exact crappy airstrip. A red light flashes on our wing and reflects in a glass an older man holds over his chest, precisely where his heart would be, as if I am hallucinating his pulse. The plane jerks to the right and his red heartbeat is gone. We are a line of portholes flung into the black air, over Doukhabor colonies, our small plane lurching between sawtooth peaks. I reflect on the plane being made of the same material as beer cans and I reflect on the rows of rock teeth below and beside our alloy skin. There is too much time to think on planes, on buses, lost in the ozone. The river loves its channel but seeks another. For a while. I’m reminded of Marilyn Monroe slumming in Jasper. My polite father.

Waitress X is leaving in August for journalism school down east. I both dread and want this. I don’t know what I want. To touch her blouse. They’re still there, she says. Now I know what you do, says Waitress X as we hug. First you grab my ass and then you touch me here. When she tells me this I realize we’ve hit an expiry date of sorts; I’ve become predictable. I have to stop. It’s over. But what if she calls me on Tuesday? Say sorry? I don’t know that I can. But I know it’s over. Waitress X can’t pay her rent, is moving back in with her mother to save for school, yet she’s always trying to buy me things. I in turn offer her an airplane ticket and can’t believe I’m doing it. My cells vibrate after I see her. I forgive all. What are we going to do, I kept saying to her at first.
"What are we going to do?" she asks one day.
"How come when I finally stop asking that, you start?" I say.

She had a slow night but made $100 in tips. Her girlfriend Judy said to her, I saw your new boyfriend with his wife. Meaning me. Her friend doesn’t approve, doesn’t like me and I don’t blame her. Judy says to her, So it’s just sex then. JUST sex? I wonder. Waitress X asks, Can’t she smell my perfume? Good question. Isn’t it written on my face? I wonder. Can’t everyone tell?

Waitress X pilots an old-fashioned $5 bicycle, skirted long legs lifting, a basket of fat blackberries and speckled eggs as a gift for breakfast, my favorite meal. She smiles, we don’t really know each other. Her father drank and died in a plane. When young she found a note from her mother to her father, pinned to their pillow. She was not meant to see it. She ran away to the ravine briefly because of what she had read, part of which was a sexual slight related to her father’s drinking. Will this happen to me? A note on the pillow or a fax singing through the lines? There was a cave she hid in before returning home the next night. Her mother made her see a psychiatrist; now she sees me. We’re necking. I want to run off with her to a cave in Mexico to solve things, to have a happy ending. Her black bra is visible under her loose knit sweater. Laughing, she points this out, “See?” I see. I see that this won’t last, that she’ll tire of the problems, of sneaking around in the afternoon, and I could tire of her body, I suppose, though it does not seem likely at this particular moment. It’s wilder because we rarely can see each other, can never just go to a movie, go on a nice date, eat supper at home, laze on the couch. It’s "just sex." She picks up every lunch tab, pays for everything, says she pays for all her boyfriends, they’re
always bums. She finds this somehow amusing about herself. On my birthday she brings more gifts: pepper paté, purple grapes, barbecue chicken, mums. I push it; I gamble. I abuse her, call her my plaything, my sex object, knowing these words are forbidden, and she just laughs, says, You’re funny. She has her own wit.

Waitress X gives the pack of dogs a good talking to. The dogs snicker at first, then, realizing their mistake, they try to look more serious. Her hair streams into a city and lanterns of a metropolis swim under her bare feet. Down the hill we make out pink trembling neon of Babel, of Babylon: Girls Girls Girls, say the signs, Cold Suds, Karaoke, Ask About Our Famous Deathburger. I have no name for the color of her eyes. There’s a sign on the Team entrance: WINNING STARTS HERE! We lose. Coach shoves the talking heads from our locker room. Get your fat sorry asses...get...and stay away from the damn coffee machine...bunch of freeloaders...wouldn’t piss on us if we were on fire...Put that in your column, ya backstabbing deadbeats!

I have too many women and I’m still lonesome. I know, I know; I complain no matter what. Coincidence 1,2, & 3: their periods arrive at the same time. Both had a sister die when they were younger. One drowned off a pier and one burnt in a straw Halloween costume. A candle in a jack-o-lantern; the sister ran flaming into the evening. Both avoid talking to the surviving sister.

Yet Another Weird Coincidence: My Intended gets a hot new job in film, in an office right beside Waitress X’s apartment building. I mean thirty feet between a metal desk and an iron bed. What exactly are the odds of this happening in a city of 700,000? I can no longer drop by during the day. Of course Waitress X
finds this hilarious. What are we going to do? We’re going to do nothing.

I didn’t ask but am told the latest opiate of the peoples: speedwalking, Universal, Nautilus, gravity boots, 50 situps a day for a new order. Listen: I have spent the family retainer, the advances, the signing bonus, the salaries, the money from local carpet commercials, from Mr. Plywood ads. I have borrowed from women I slept with who hate me now, from dipso players who wanted a drinking buddy. I bought the world a drink. I ran up my Visa, hit the limit five times and they kept raising like it was a poker game. 50 situps is not going to do it.

Once more our plane moves off the map and once more I’m planted in the tourist-econo seats, flaps altering their stance as our celestial metal flophouse crosses Mountain Standard Time, crosses the standard dangerous mountains and doomed bears snoring in their sparkling caves. This trip there is no ball lightning, no calm woman from North Carolina. The team plays cards and wears garish ties to denote a road trip. The great plains are flooding: the brown river returns to cover its ancient bed and wipe out the matchbox town, dead cattle and broken oaks and renegade coffins spinning in its place. Under the No Smoking sign, under her makeup, the stewardess sings her weary pantomime and Captain Kirk tells us again what we can and cannot get away with in his narrow hurtling kingdom.
HEART OF ASH

A boy crouched
In the low branches
of a tree the sky above
empty of flight

The boy said I want an apple
And he climbed down

He followed a road to the orchard
Where an old woman stood
Beneath the apple tree

She was his mother

There was no fruit on the tree
But round bee hives hung
From each branch
And silent there were no bees

She said
They were dying
He heard the bees in her voice

She put her hand to her belly
And the boy heard them now in her body
In the cage of her body

She said
But you haven’t come to see me
And the boy looked away
She said Look
And she opened the skin of her arm
And bees flowed from her
Yellow blood spilling into her hand
The hundred moving wings

Couldn’t fly the stream of bees
Fell to the ground
And then she was falling
Her body fell away

A cloud of bees it broke like rain
On the earth

But her heart remained in the air
It was a hive
Heart of paper heart of ash

And he took it from the air
Broke it open and inside was the apple
He put it to his mouth
And took the first stinging bite
WHAT FIRE WANTS

She rides the trolley down St. Charles and into the evening, staring into the shiver and twist of flames in the gas lamps, the flickering doorways, and thinks the fire’s shawl of light strains to open,

until, at last, she sees her father beneath the consummation of smoke and dust drifting from a rural road a few years before he died, the narrow strings of flame dragging through the grass, combing it down, untangling it into ash, into what fire wants of things. She wanted to step a little closer, to feel the tender pulse of heat like the blood ticking the lines of her wrist, but her father waved her back. The fire flushed grackles into the sprawling mesh of smoke, and they squelched warnings the way a radio spits from a car as it turns down a street and into the city. But it isn’t enough, the splinter of a song. Or the lamps. No, she wants to tell how her father walked into that field, the smoke draping like muslin walls, until she could only see the taut threads of fire and the black birds torn from gray sheets. But the man slumped next to her glances again and again at her hands where they pool in her lap, and she’ll tell him nothing, not that her father wanted to know how it felt to stand in the field’s unscorched center and watch the closing flames, that he left her, a child, to wait and do nothing but watch him disappear . . . though instead of waiting she imagined her father
collecting strands of fire, imagined he tied them into a flashing blanket he would bring . . . Now she says nothing, and slowly shuts her eyes to the flames gesturing from the doorways of houses—*stay*,

*stay back*—and she feels the car the car filling with grackles. They settle on the vacant seats to hunt for string and thread to weave their nests of what's lost, and call out with voices like hinges.
He knew that his acquaintances—Lautrec, Renoir, even Manet—spoke about him behind his back, accusing him of snobbism and worse. Walking by Deux Magots that night, he had heard *misogynist!* whispered in unison, rising over the clinks of many spoons and demitasses, then falling to rustle with the crisp and sibilant leaves at his feet. Raging, he turned his collar up and walked against the wind for seventeen additional blocks. Those whispers burned, made his wax paper ears with their visible webs of blue and red veins flush bright in the cold air. His ulcerous stomach pulsed; he could feel the acids churning and rising in hostile bobs, jerking upwards like thermometer’s mercury, until his esophagus was coated and he tasted bile at the back of his tongue. Twice, he spat over the stairwell before Louise answered his impatient knocks.

She opened her door just a crack.

“Edgar!” she said. Already he could smell her. Slightly sour and tinged with the reddest wine. He realized that beyond her yeasty burgundy, he was probably smelling his own upset insides. So when she pulled the door back and let him pass by, his nostrils were gratefully filled with the musky tallow from at least a dozen white candles which burned on her mantle.

Degas removed his hat and kissed Louise’s hand. This time he caught the essence of cocoa, and noticed,
upon closer inspection, that her fingers and palms were smudged with the sticky remains of what must have been chocolate. He felt thankful for Louise on that night, for the warmth of her sitting room, for her soft hair. His nostrils had become accustomed to her aromatic abundance, which had first washed over him like a strange sea.

“What are you doing, walking the streets so late, Edgar?” she asked him.

“I don’t know,” he said.

She moved to help him with his coat, but he brushed her away, and folded his arms against his chest. Knowing him, Louise let him be. She instead went to fix him an aperitif.

“Where have you been?” she called out. “I haven’t seen you in months.”

This was true. Degas had known Louise for years, but they saw each other infrequently. They had first met when he sat sketching on stage at Le Grand Ballet during dress rehearsals. The other dancers were put off by his presence. He seemed to be looking through them, intently, even though he sketched every detail of elbow and waist, poised neck and pointed toe. Some of the girls complained. Melanie had once cried, *How ugly he makes me—all the green and the blue!* *And always he paints from below!* Then she had skittered off stage like a mosquito, with bobbing tutu. One of the girls—it was Nadine—flew into a rage when Degas, in a preliminary sketch, captured her standing in the wings, pulling up her brassiere with puffy breaths. Aware that Degas had been watching her, Nadine snuck away during break and discovered the sketch while the artist was using the toilet. She tore it up, but did not stop there; she spat on several sketches of other girls, caught in more graceful moments. It was Nadine who stoked his ulcer, putting
him in the hospital.

But Louise. The day they met, he sat to the side, his eyes moving carelessly over the other girls. She was stretching, alone, at the barre. He saw her and for minutes forgot he held a pencil. Finally, when she began to dance, he began to sketch, although he was not conscious of this. She was a flame—the most graceful extension of particles—so that all he needed to do was sweep what he felt with his charcoal or brush. He captured each gesture without effort, filling his palette with globs of red and oranges, burnt sienna and creams. But even without the application of color, in his charcoal sketches alone, Louise conveyed all the warmth of those hues. *Enough!* Degas thought. Enough of the cold whispers of others that bit at the back of his neck like the fibrous teeth in his wool collar.

"I’ve been painting," said Degas. "I’ve sequestered myself."

"My goodness," said Louise.

Degas sat drinking an aperitif in one of Louise’s soft, green armchairs near the fireplace, his hat on his lap. By choice, he had no comfortable furniture at his own flat. He knew that such furniture would beckon him away from his easel, would lull him into eventual complacency. But how soft this chair of hers was—how it cushioned his elbows and shoulder blades. Louise had swept her skirts aside and poked the fire soon after he had arrived, and had added one more log, so that now the embers were active again. Degas noticed that the fire was perfectly composed; fingers of flame held the cylindrical log, crackling softly between serpent-shaped andirons.

As he drank and watched the fire in Louise’s drawing room, Degas heard himself telling her the
Deux Magots story. She listened with folded hands.

"Especially Manet," he said. "My god! I thought he was my friend."

Louise believed that Degas had been hearing things. "You said to me before that you haven't slept in days," she reminded him. "Perhaps your ears are deceiving you."

"No," he said, sinking deeper into the chair. "No. I heard."

Louise stood up and walked to his side to rest her hand on his shoulder. He flinched at first, from the strangeness of female touch: pliable palm, the trace of sharp nails above fingertips. But when she started to turn away, he grabbed her hand and pressed it to his hot and clean-shaven cheek. She cradled his jaw, surprised by his affection, resting her index finger on the skin between his mustache and the corner of his mouth. Degas had the impulse to bite it. He spoke instead.

"Just weeks ago I explained to Manet why, when it comes to my work, I appear removed. This is what upsets me. I told him that my only wish is to be an eye. I cannot let myself feel too much for what I paint. If I did, I would place more importance on one thing than another. I would sacrifice my eye. Don't you see?"

"Yes," said Louise. She played with the soft hair at the back of his head.

"And Manet nodded when I told him this. He nodded as if he understood. He patted me on the back." Degas made a fist and punched the top of his hat, smashing it down, inverting its shape.

"Poor Edgar," Louise said, picking up his hat. She went back to her chair and sat down lightly in a whirl of petticoats. She pushed the hat right-side-out again, and smoothed the felt down with her fingertips. Then she placed it on her own head.
Later that night, growing warmer still and sipping on a third aperitif, the idea struck him. Louise was still sitting in her chair, her legs jutting out toward the fire, her feet turned out the way dancers’ feet do. She was drowsy, and her soft voice had died away with the growing heaviness of her eyelids. As her head began to fall slowly forward toward sleep, the rim of the hat moved, too, obscuring bit by bit her moon-shaped face: first her eyes, then the tip of her nose, and now her chin. The fire waned, casting great, long shadows on the ceiling. The orange light licked at the spray of auburn hair that poured out from under the hat and curled over her thin shoulders and the bodice of white dress, over her tiny breasts. Even in this stillest moment, Louise glowed with the energy of anticipation.

Yes! Degas thought. He would ask her to pose for him, starting tomorrow. He would place her, motionless, just like this. He would turn her away from the canvas, so that her round and most beautiful face wouldn’t distract. On his canvas he would build a tribute to women. To the Louise in all women. Because it is the beauty in anticipation that fascinates the true artist, thought Degas. And the artist is the eye.

As he watched her nodding by firelight, he thought how his spiteful acquaintances at Deux Magots would be forced to swallow their words along with their café crèmes.

It was an unusually cold autumn. They could see their breath inside his studio even as afternoon sun slanted through tall windows and glinted off the white-washed walls. Degas twisted the right side of his
mustache into a pencil-thin curl and excused himself. He descended the basement stairs in search of kindling wood so that he could use the furnace, and left Louise alone in the vastness. Her high-heeled boots clacked on the floor as she filled the room with herself, whirling around to make her skirts puff out. There were no chairs and Degas’s easels, propped up without canvases, looked like wooden crosses in a soldiers’ cemetery.

All the space made her ravenous. Her stomach growled and she thought she could hear her insides echo off the walls. She crossed her arms and paced around for a few more minutes, annoyed with Degas’s absence. She could wait no longer. She walked over to the table—the one piece of furniture in the room—and grabbed the picnic basket she had brought for them to share. Louise crouched down and began unloading: bread, still warm from Madame Bisou’s oven, fresh strawberry jam Madame had given Louise for being a loyal customer, a sack of apples just in from the north—she could smell their tartness through the burlap and it made her mouth water—a tin of Camembert—mellow, not too strong, because she liked to mix it with the jam on pieces of bread—a slab of goat cheese wrapped in cloth, a chocolate bar—her favorite, from Switzerland, with bits of hazelnut inside—and two bottles of good burgundy that she had been keeping for occasions.

Louise was nervous about posing. At the ballet she had been the subject of many of Degas’s sketches and paintings. But never like this—alone, naked—and in such an enormous room with all the sunlight, without even a chair to hide behind.

She gave up on waiting for Degas and poured herself a large glass of wine. She drank it down and then made herself a Camembert and jam sandwich, taking bites off the chocolate bar every so often.
“Look, Louise. I found an old tin bathtub,” Degas said to his model, who sat on the floor, eating a second sandwich.

He had discovered the tub in the basement behind his wine rack, along with a lantern, a pail full of screws, a jar of cold cream called *Toujours Mince*, and the skeletal remains of some small rodent. The tub, something that previous tenants must have left behind, would be perfect for his composition. Since he wanted to give the feeling of a woman caught unaware, he decided to paint Louise in the midst of her toilette.

Degas arranged the props he had gathered. He placed the tub close to the table by the windows, over which he had hung long, white sheets to soften the light. On the table he arranged a yellow-flowered ceramic pitcher, a copper coffee creamer, a hairbrush, and Louise’s hairpins and rust-colored scarf.

“I made you a sandwich, Edgar,” Louise called out. “My favorite. Camembert and jam.”

At first the thought repulsed him. His stomach was tight with the rushing urge to paint. But then he realized that he had not eaten that day. And watching Louise eat her sandwich—she first licked the jam from around the sides of the baguette—was appealing. He decided that he, too, was ravenous. He sat cross-legged on the floor next to her and let her pour him a glass of wine. Today Louise smells sour again, a bit like wine and chocolate, he thought, and noticed that the bottle was almost empty. She passed him his sandwich and he took a careful bite. After a few sips of wine and a few more bites, watching Louise’s lovely mouth as she brought the wine glass to her lips, Degas decided that the sandwich was the most delicious he had ever eaten.
They finished the bottle of wine. Louise opened the sack of apples, took one out, bit into it, and then held it in front of Degas’s mouth. When he lifted his head to bite it, she pulled it away. He scowled. Louise laughed and took another bite, exaggerating her pleasure at the crisp taste. She held the apple out for him again. As he went for it, she pulled it away a second time.

“Don’t be a bitch, Louise,” he said.

She laughed, covering her disappointment in his short temper.

“Anyway,” he said, “it’s time for work.”

Louise was glad she had brought the wine; she was warm and her nerves were calmed now. But before she would undress, she asked Degas to open the second bottle. He himself couldn’t drink another glass, for he had tried to work after too much wine before, and it made him sloppy. He couldn’t afford to be too loose. He opened the wine for her, poured some into her glass, and then sent her into the walk-in closet which he used as a changing room for his models.

“There’s a silk bathrobe hanging from a hook on the door,” he called out to her.

He thought about the last time he had seen a naked woman. It had been Madame von Hennenberg, last spring, whose husband had commissioned Degas to paint her portrait. At the time, Degas had needed the money. Besides, he had rationalized, the von Hennenbergs had traveled all the way from Bonn. He remembered how Madame had shed her clothing while he was preparing his palette. When she flung open the closet door, she was wearing nothing but stockings, and her fleshy thighs poured over the tops of her garters. *Take me, Degas,* she had instructed. *My husband doesn’t please me.*
Christ, Degas had thought, his ulcer raging. He had scared Madame away by spitting up blood on the floor.

Louise opened the closet door and walked out, a dancer, her arms lifted and curved in front of her. She was silly from the wine and ran, with tiny but powerful steps and pointed toes, to the middle of the room, where she leapt in the air. The robe, in a silky flash, flew open, and she shed it while still in mid-air. When she landed she curtsied, right leg extended, and then stood up straight, hands at her sides.

“Where do you want me, Edgar?” she asked.

As Degas worked, Louise crouched, her back to him, her braided head lowered. In the shallow, circular tub, she leaned forward and rested her weight on her left hand. She held a sea sponge to the back of her neck with her right hand. This position, he knew, would suggest action without being action itself. The anticipation of action.

By placing her in the tub that way, Degas thought, I am able to capture both sides of Louise—her breast and the delicate ribs underneath, her thigh and hips, as well as that beautiful spine and back. He was amazed by how slight she was, but how strong. Standing at his easel, he was riveted to the colors and light; his model and the props were in perfect balance. As he sketched, the rest of his body dropped away, and in losing it, he became an eye.

Louise grew ill. She had eaten too much—the chocolate, the sandwiches, the apple and goat cheese and jam and Camembert—and had drunk too much wine. Her head buzzed with the alcohol and the frustration at her dilemma: how was she to rid herself of all that food and wine while she was held captive, naked
in this tub? She shuddered to think at how gross her stomach must appear, imagining it bulging out in great lumpy rolls of flesh. She glanced down at her thighs, seeing how the fat flattened out and spilled over the bones, how they touched at the tops. And her left hand, how swollen and dimpled, pudgy and repulsive. Louise was amazed that Degas had not commented on her pitiful chubbiness.

She tried to breathe deeply, hoping to speed up her digestion, to get rid of the feeling that she was suffocating in her own flesh. God, she thought, my picture will be the fattest anyone has ever seen. How disgusting.

"Louise," said Degas, "please don’t breathe so heavily. I’m painting your back."

... ... ...

Luckily, Degas had a weak bladder and soon he needed to use the bathroom.

"Yes. Hurry, please," Louise said. "I have to use it myself." She picked up the silk bathrobe and walked around the studio, which by this time had warmed up considerably. Her head thick with wine, Louise felt as if she were moving through bath water. She couldn’t wait to be rid of the food. It sat in her stomach like a huge lump of slop. Like a cow, she thought. I am a cow.

While waiting at the far wall, she discovered a row of small Japanese prints which Degas had mounted and framed. She stood there, craning her neck up like a child in a museum, looking at scenes of eating, drinking, lovers, and orgies. As Louise moved down the wall, the pictures got more erotic, and the more sex they showed, the longer she lingered in front of them. One showed a naked, grinning man holding his
disproportionate penis in front of himself, which stood up like an obelisk. A woman—unclothed except for the chignon sticks in her hair—lay on the floor, legs spread. In the next picture, several men stood naked in a semi-circle, holding their obelisks. Meanwhile, women crouched and squirmed and kissed and bent over backwards, their breasts hanging and swinging, making a show of it. They all wore ridiculous expressions—not of pleasure, but of strained performance—their eyes all focused on the men, their mouths open like dogs or twisted into lascivious sneers.

Louise heard footsteps behind her and turned around quickly. It was Renoir.

"Quite a lot of man up there, hey, wouldn't you say?" he said, his smile so big that it disappeared somewhere in his thick, black beard.

"I suppose," Louise said nonchalantly, "if you are referring to their fantasies."

Renoir raised his eyebrows and took off his hat. Louise tightened the tie on the robe and walked over, extending her hand.

"I am Louise L'Amante," she said.

"Auguste Renoir. I—of course—am charmed by your acquaintance." He took her hand with both of his, large and hot. And when he bent down to give her hand a kiss, he farted. It was low in tone, but loud enough for Louise to hear. He carried on, as if unaware. "You know, I discovered those prints myself at La Porte Chinoise," he said. "If you like them, I shall take you there. They are really quite amazing."

"I've been," Louise lied.

"Have you?" Renoir said.

"Edgar is in the toilet. We're taking a break."

"So I see." Renoir walked over to the easel and cocked his head at the sketch. "Degas never does any
woman justice. Look! He has you turned away from us! What good does that do?"

"He thinks my face is too distracting. He wants to capture my essence."

"Distracting? Hah! Essence? Hah hah!"
Louise ignored the big man. "Edgar thinks that when the artist draws what strikes him—he calls that the essence—then memories and fantasies are freed from nature's tyranny."

"Very good!" Renoir shouted, clapping his hands. "Have you memorized that for posterity, my dear girl?"

"No, I remembered it because I thought it well-said."

"I see," said Renoir. "And do you love him?"

"Who? Edgar?"
"To whom else would I be referring?"
"As a man?" said Louise, pausing a moment. "I suppose that, yes, I do."

"As a man! Well, my dear, you must know. Degas is incapable of love. Just yesterday evening I enjoyed an aperitif with my good friend, Manet, at Deux Magots. And Manet—who sees and understands love better than you or I could ever possibly hope to see or understand—said that Degas cannot love. Manet believes that Degas is incapable of loving a woman, to tell her so, to do anything."

Louise was disgusted. "Those who were at Deux Magots last night are sadly mistaken," she said, brushing past him and over to the wine and food on the floor. Looking at it—the bread, the cheese—made her stomach contract. She swallowed deeply. "Would you like some wine, Monsieur Renoir?" she asked him.

"Yes, my dear. And if I may say so, you should let me paint you. I will do you justice. It will be then you will see this essence you speak of!"
From behind came a series of dry coughs. Louise and Renoir turned their heads to see Degas standing in the doorway.

"Degas, my friend!" Renoir bellowed. "Come and have a drink. I was just making the acquaintance of your model."

Louise used the opportunity to excuse herself. She rushed past Degas and ran upstairs, to the toilet.

"Lovely," said Renoir to Degas. "Much too thin for my taste, but lovely just the same."

Renoir left after finishing the other bottle of wine and the chocolate, bread, and cheese. Degas stood in the middle of his studio, his hands on his hips, watching Louise as she stretched on the floor before they continued their session.

"Louise," Degas said. "Come here for a moment."

She rose, tightened the robe, and walked over to meet him. When she was within reach, Degas took her hands, pulled her to him, and kissed her full on the mouth. Then he stopped and took a step back.

"Louise. Why is it that you vomit up your food?" Degas asked.

She stood there and stared at him flatly, taken off guard. Degas watched her.

"I smelled it on you last night and this morning and again just now," he continued.

Louise breathed deeply. She did not think to make up an excuse, as she had other times—to her mother, her lovers. Blood was rushing to her face, flushing her cheeks. She pressed at them with the backs of her thin wrists.

Degas waited.

"I am a dancer, Edgar," she said. "I love to dance. But I also love to eat."
"It doesn't seem as though you love to eat," Degas said. "You tear through your food so it is not even tasted, and then get rid of it just as quick."

Louise blinked, but did not take her eyes from his. "Don't you understand?" she asked him. "You of all people. I have no choice. If I didn't do it, I could not dance. And dancing is my love."

Degas's eyebrows plunged in the middle as he considered this. Then he raised them, replying, "But Louise, you just said that you love to eat."

Louise smiled and stepped toward him. Rising up onto her toes, she took Degas by the shoulders. "Don't you think one can have many loves, Edgar?" she asked.

Degas stood firmly, thinking.

.......

Later, the light in the studio began to change, becoming softer and infused with yellow. Degas had anticipated this and welcomed it; before they had started he had spotted his palette with madder and gold.

But now, standing near her, he suddenly had the urge to pick Louise up, just to see how light she was. So he did. Taking her around the waist, he felt her ribs beneath his fingers, the ribs he had sketched so carefully under the skin. Louise enjoyed being carried by him, as she always loved surprises. She laughed and leaned back so that her long braid touched the floor.

He held her like this for a moment, feeling—for the first time since he was a child, because of her very lightness—the strength in his own body. Then he jostled her gently so that she sat up in his arms, and, whispering into her ear, carried her over to the tub.
All I can think when I hear this Linda from the Montessori school in California shouting in a whisper outside my door,

*Danguolé! Danguolé!*

is—

What can she want now?

Last week I had to have the Key Keeper in the lobby of the Viesbutis Vetrungé fired because when Linda asked him to find a toilet seat for her room, he used the word “svoloch” in his reply—“dirty swine” in Russian. Now, people who use Russian here in Lithuania after Liberation are, how shall I say, “frowned upon”—but I am not sure I can blame this Key Keeper. There is no equivalent to “svoloch,” with all its vulgar imaginative force, in my native Lithuanian tongue. And though this Montessori woman from America happened to know that one word in Russian and English, she could not have possibly understood the context this Key Keeper (who was stinking of Stakliskes mead, I might add...) used this Russian word, “svoloch.” The Key Keeper explained to me that he had simply told this Linda, in Russian,

“You want a toilet seat? Be grateful you have a water closet. Some dirty swine are not so fortunate.”

This is all beyond my capability to translate precisely, to convey the nuances, allusions, history of this Key Keeper’s expression. It was easier for me to get him fired—for being drunk on duty, I told him, so he would understand and not take it personally. Still, he did not like me having him fired; he did not like the idea of a woman firing him. Key Keepers. They find
excuses for everything—even when you try to show them a little sympathy.

*Danguolé! Danguolé!*

All right! Just give me a moment to check my peroxide treatment. Good. White. Platinum. All the way to the roots. Wipe a little sleep from my eyes. Excellent.

I open my door and this Linda stands in her Care Bears, sky-blue, felt pajamas with her bunny slippers, bunny ears flopping out the sides of the slippers. I do not know how she keeps from falling over herself. And she is hugging that monstrous purple Gucci purse to her chest.

“What do you want?” I say. “Have you tripped on your bunny ears and injured yourself?”

“There’s a man in my room!” she squeaks.

Her big brown Montessori, cut-and-paste, non-toxic, finger-painted eyes bug out behind the lenses of her eyeglasses.

“A man?” I say. “What kind of man?” And I am thinking, what kind of man wants this Montessori bunny anyway?

But I do not want to upset this Montessori bunny or any of the others, so I say, “Well, how did this man get into your room? Do you know it is three in the morning?”

“I just went down the hall to the kitchen to make a nice glass of warm milk before going to bed—and he was in my room when I got back!”

So we go to her room. I put a finger to her door; I push it open.... This man sits in the armchair by the window; I can see him in the purple light from the fluorescent lamps reflecting off the glass of the building where the all-night mugé is held. The white lace curtains flap all around his head, and his eyes are half-
shut; his beard is gray, like a stubble-field, and his hair is long, pulled back in a ponytail.

“Yes,” I say to Linda, “you are right. This is a man.”

“Well, what’s he doing in my room?”

I want to say, How should I know? Maybe he is a fan of Care Bears or would like some lessons in advanced leap frog.... But I am biting my tongue. By the looks of him, this man is a Russian sailor, out of work: filthy jeans and work shoes; denim shirt; sleeves torn off at the shoulders; and hammer and sickle tattoo on one of those shoulders. Brave man to show that tattoo these days. Or crazy.

At last this man lurches forward, out a little from the armchair, and this Linda jumps back about a meter; he gathers the curtains flying around his head with one arm and tosses them aside.

“What do you want?” I ask him in Russian. Good guess. He understands. He says, but in English, for this Linda Bunny’s benefit,

“I would like...” his eyelids droop and close a moment; he is stinking drunk, and I notice a half-filled bottle of Stolichnaya on the floor next to the armchair. “I would like good American woman... for sex.”

I look at Linda. Is it possible to laugh at this situation? Linda is biting her nails and rubbing one floppy bunny ear against her other leg. And then this man in her room adds,

“I have hard currency.”

I am looking at Linda again; I am thinking, typical Russian; even since Perestroika, these Russians do not know how to spend their money wisely.

“Danguolé!” this Linda chirps.

“All right!” I say. I think. I should get the police. But it is so late, and I was told not to create any
‘incidents’ with these Americans. I think, okay, I am responsible for these American Montessori school teachers; just my luck I was elected to the District School Council last winter—the first elections ever in our city. I told them I am an attorney and I have other obligations—children; a husband in the new Lithuanian merchant service, whom I seldom see, but who needs a great deal of attention when he is around; a flat to clean; my hobbies—

“My garden!” I said to them.

But they said,

“You must serve, Danguolé—it is the will of the people, the new democracy—we want you!—besides, no one here knows English.”

And who can argue with the new democracy?—they even convinced me to stay at the Viesbutis Vetrungé with these Americans to be sure they were comfortable—and to take care of incidents such as this one. But how was I to guess I would have a den full of Montessori bunnies in this Vetrungé, former-Russian sailors’ hotel, the best place I could find on short notice to rest their bunny-heads—with Lithuanian Mafia and prostitutes coming and going from cars parked on Taikos Street in front, like this was a national clearing house for vice... and I should call the police? These bunnies will wind up in the jail! Bunny prostitutes. Just what I need. A scandal.

So I think, there is that American professor, Paul Rood, from New Jersey, who reads American poetry to Lithuanian children in the Montessori classes... Maybe he can help. But poetry—? What good is poetry at a time like this? And who can argue with democracy, the will of the people....

So I go over to this man in Linda’s room—whew! He is really stinking. I stand over him, and
think, how can I get him up and out of this bunny's hole? I muster my Russian (a little rusty from neglect) and say to his yellow eyes under his red eyelids,
   "You should be ashamed of yourself!"

No reaction. I knew as much. I look at Linda who backs up—shish, shish—all the way into the hallway.... God, help me. I kneel in front of this man so he can see me good, and look straight into his yellow eyes.

   "You shame your country!" I say.

He mumbles,
   "I have no country."

Who can argue with that? He is right.
   "All right," I say under my breath, "you shame your mother!" (I say this a little louder so the Montessori Linda can hear me in the hallway—I glance behind and see her precious chin bobbing up and down in approval.)

Then this man's apple-red eyelids raise a millimeter or two; the veins in his eyes are ghastly.
   "I have no mother," he grumbles.

"You must have a mother," I say, and think I had better be getting to the point while I have his attention.
   "I have no mother," he repeats. "I have hard American currency."

"I do not care what you have, or where you are from, or if you were conceived immaculately in Lenin's mother's womb! Get out of this room!"

His eyelids drop, he mumbles,
   "American... for sex... I have hard..."

I go out in the hallway with Linda.
   "Look," I say to Linda, "you better not go back in there."

"What am I going to do?" Her eyes are popping out like a pack of beagles are chasing her. "Maybe you
should call the police?"

"No," I say, "they will take forever to get here. I will get Romas—he is just downstairs in the lobby. Go to my room and lock yourself in."

I take the lift downstairs and walk past the vacant Key Keeper's desk (now, why did I have to bloody get him fired?) to the money exchange booth where I will find my Mafia friend, Romas. He is in there with his pea-green Adidas athletic suit and his white Italian alligator shoes. He looks ridiculous, especially this late at night, like some big Batman toy a child forgot to put away. But I guess he thinks I am his friend because last week he walked up to me and said,

"Good day. My name is Romas. I hear you are responsible for these American teachers on the eighth floor. I would like to offer my services. There are thieves or worse in this viesbutis and I can protect these Americans. Would you like to hire me and my associates?"

I was thinking, good God. The Mafia. Just one more thing to worry about. This is too much. And that green suit is making me sick. And his friends? God knows what they are wearing. Just think of these Batmen together with those American bunnies. Did I want to see this grotesque fashion show all day, all night on the eighth floor?

"Look, Romas," I said sweetly. "You are very generous to offer your protection. But you would be surprised how little these American teachers have. Like our teachers in Lithuania. Look at them! Their clothes. Have you seen them? They dress like children—you should know; you are a man of taste and refinement—" I brushed the tip of my finger over his sickening green collar. "Clothes say a lot about a person." Romas, whom I heard had been a teacher himself before Liberation,
then police officer, then black-market small businessman, and finally had worked himself into the higher pay brackets of Lithuanian Mafia movers and shakers, as they say, smiled. “Besides,” I added, “why should the Mafia waste its valuable time on these teachers—you must have more important matters that need your attention.”

Romas seemed satisfied.
And I had done my civic duty....
So now I see Romas again, asleep, still wearing that ghastly green tent in the money exchange booth.... I think, I can reason with this man. I have done it before.

“Romas,” I say sweetly. He wakes up, clutching his chest where he wants everyone to think has some snazzy gun hidden. “There is a man in room 804. I do not think he has anyone’s permission, including the Mafia’s, to be there.” I pat and fluff my peroxide perm a little. “Could you remove him?”

“Oh,” he says, and he wipes a little bit of drool from the side of his mouth with his hand, “so now you would like to hire me and my associates?”

“No,” I reply, “I just want a favor—person to person, mano a mano, if you will—just be a good guy and help me this once.... I will buy you a cappuccino or something Italian at the mugé tomorrow.”

“Small potatoes,” he mumbles in English, and goes back to sleep!
Where did he learn to say that?
Small potatoes!
I can hardly keep up with all these new Western business expressions.
Small potatoes?
When I get back up on the eighth floor, I look
in on the man in Linda’s room. He is still there and more of the Stolichnaya is gone from the bottle at his feet. I take him by his dirty hands and try to haul him up, out of the armchair, but he only groans, “Mother Russia...”

This man does not need American sex. I am thinking he needs Freud. Then I think, that is it. Enough. This is getting to be too psychological for these times—I am calling the police. Then I think, no, I am trusted with the comfort of these bunnies.

And—what? It is three in the morning. Police scare people, as things are in my country—as things were, too; they will scare the whiskers off these bunnies!

The sailor slumps back into the chair. Then I try to lift the whole chair with him in it and drag him to the door, but the chair barely budges.

So I am thinking about getting Linda to help me with this impossible weight; then I worry; maybe she will strain or rupture something in her delicate bunny constitution?

So I use my floor key to double-lock this drunk Russian sailor into Linda’s room—I do not want him waking up and taking any of her precious things... her teddy “Roosevelt”... her collection of stuffed dolls, little blue people with white caps she calls “Smurfs.” God only knows to what depths a drunken sailor will sink!

Then I go back to my door. I knock. No answer.

I knock on my door again. I say, “It is me—Danguolé.”

“Who?” Linda asks.

“Danguolé!” I say.

She opens the door.

“Oh... it’s you.”

Who else?
This Montessori Linda drags her slippered feet to the other side of my room, shish, shish, shish, and stands in front of my mirror next to the water closet. Then I see it—she has tied a pink ribbon around her head and apparently found herself a pigeon feather and stuck it between the ribbon and her forehead. She holds a small piece of paper in front of her face, and looks from the paper to the mirror and back, reading aloud,

"Children, my name is Sacagawea. Long ago, I helped to guide Lewis and Clark on their historic journey through the Northwest Territory of the United States. We suffered many hardships on the way. If it had not been for my excellent knowledge of the American wilderness the expedition would not have been such a great success. I..."

“What are you doing?” I say.

“I’m practicing my lecture for the children Monday... ‘My name is Sacagawea...’” She smiles broadly and lifts her eyes to try to see that filthy pigeon feather poking out the pink ribbon on her forehead. She points at the feather. “See?... Hey, you want to see Daniel Boone?”

“Whomever,” I say. “Sacagawea, Daniel Boone.... I am going to bed. Put out the light.”

“I’m going to bed with you?” she asks.

“Yes. With me. Or you can sleep on this filthy floor or with that Russian Romeo in your room.... I locked him in there. In the morning, we will get Professor Rood at the bendrabutis near Klaipėda University and get that man out of there.”

Morning. I go down to the lobby and ring up the University. But they don’t know where the American Rood has gone. They say this Rood has been talking about going to Nida to view the Thomas Mann Haus. Well, that is very nice for him! But how am I supposed
to move *this* Magic Mountain from this Linda Montessori’s room?

I think about begging the receptionist at the University for help. Maybe a custodian could come over? All right, I think, now I will get the police. They will make less trouble in the daylight. Then again, maybe this Russian is ready to leave? Maybe after so long in the stupor of the Stolichnaya this Russian will leave of his own free will—? Maybe he wants out? Maybe he is banging at that double-locked door right now!—waking up all those sleeping bunnies on the eighth floor?

So I go back up there fast, double-unlock the door—but he is still there, his head resting on his shoulder next to his hammer and sickle tattoo, in the deepest slumber I have ever seen; he snores like a great bear in hibernation; God help anyone who wakes him!

But I have had enough. I go to my room. I pass the mirror by the water closet. I cannot believe my eyes. My platinum peroxide treatment is graying at the edges—and it lays in clumps to one side of my head, like slouching haystacks—and I do not mean those Van Goghs!

Enough is enough, I think. I wake up Pocahontas, whatever her name is. I say, “What do you have in that big purple Gucci bag of yours?”

She rolls over in bed. Her eyes are closed. So I take the purple Gucci anyway, open it, and pull out a large black leather case. There is a camcorder inside, so I take it out.

Now this bunny’s eyes are open. “My Magnavox thing!” she says. I go out my room with her Magnavox thing. She follows, her bunny feet flopping and shishing.
“What are you going to do?” she asks.
I have to think a few seconds for just the right way to respond in English:
“I am going to film a documentary,” I say, “of the sudden economic and social changes in former Soviet-bloc countries.”
Pretty good translation, I think. Almost perfect.
“Oh... neat,” Linda says.
Then I go into this Montessori bunny’s room with the drunken Magic Mountain Russian sailor sleeping and stinking it up with Stolichnaya.
I walk up to him and hit him over the head with her Magnavox thing.
Clunk.
He likes hard currency, I think, so let him have some.
The Montessori woman is speechless. At last.
Then I check to see if this sailor is breathing, but because of his stench I cannot get close enough to see if his foul breath is working; finally, I hear him groan.
“Get over here,” I say to Linda.
She comes. Shish. Shish-shish.
And I am thinking, to hell with her bunny constitution.
“Now. Help me get him up.”
So we each take one hairy, dirty, tattooed arm, haul him up and drag him into the lift. Down eight floors. Linda is holding her breath the whole way down. At the bottom, she is blue in her face, so I prop this drunken sailor against the door of the lift.
“Go over there,” I point to the former Key Keeper’s desk, “and catch your breath—then help me get him outside!”
She goes, comes back, and we drag him past the
Key Keeper’s desk, past Romas, who is snoring and drooling like a swine in his green tent clothes in his money exchange booth. We drag him through the front doors, to the viesbutis steps, and set him there. He slumps over in a lump. Then he wakes up a little and holds his head with one hand.

Shish. Shish. Linda bunny backs away.

“There,” I say to him in Russian. “I know you do not have a country. But I know you have a mother. Maybe she is dead. Maybe she is alive. Either way, go back to her and try to show some respect.”

Now that bunny will be back in her room for awhile. There will be some peace around this viesbutis for a change. All this upheaval can wear a body down!

On the way up to the eighth floor, I stop in my room, look into my mirror, drag a comb through this disaster I call “Haystacks with Peroxide, 1994.”

Well, now, we can fix that...

Then I go back to Linda’s room. I guess I want to gloat. And I am wondering if any of that Stolichnaya is left. I could use a swallow.

So I’m back again in Linda’s room. And this American, Paul Rood, is sitting by the window in the armchair where we have just excavated this Russian sailor! This Rood’s eyes are clear and bright. He is cleanly shaven, and a copy of The Magic Mountain rests neatly on his lap. He looks so rested and cheerful. I am happy someone is!

“Paul,” this Linda is saying, “how was the Thomas Mann house?”

“Oh, I didn’t go,” he replies. “I went to view the statue of Ännchen von Tharau. The legend is that the Seventeenth Century poet, Simon Dach wrote the famous German folk song, Ännchen, on the occasion of
her marriage—but he fell in love with her himself!”

“Ohhh,” this Linda says, “how romantic.”

“Anyway, the square on which her statue was erected is the same one Hitler used in 1939 to proclaim this whole region as part of the Third Reich.”

“Not so romantic,” Linda says.

“But times change,” this Rood says, smiling.

“Last night there was a concert on the square—American country and western music!”

Then this Paul Rood turns to me.

“Labas rytas!” he says with his painted-on smile in his bad Lithuanian. “I’d like to take you both to breakfast—I’m famished!”

Linda says,

“Oh, that would be really nice!”

I say,

“No, I am a mess. I will pass.”

“Oh, come on,” the American, Rood, says. “I’m not budging until you agree to go.”

What is a body to do?

The minute you move one man out, another comes in; anyway, this Rood fellow, he has Scope mouthwash breath—American breath—perhaps his breath is even a little like Stolichnaya, but for the time being a little more tolerable in some circumstances, such as breakfast. Who really knows?

_Danguolé!

That bunny bell goes off. Ding-dong.

If I could just have a minute to myself—to get myself together... this mirror needs a good cleaning... and just a little more curl on the right side... some Maybelline (right off the boat from Chicago last week!)... smack those lips... Another perfect job? I do not know... something is missing...
Another bunny bell,

_Are you coming?_

What can she want now?

I already said I am going to breakfast with that American Rood. I can change my mind. Why not? The sacrifices I make. Sometimes I am amazed.... God, this platinum tint is blinding me!

_Danguolé!_

Red, no... white, no; with just a hint of blue, no; black, yes... tomorrow I will make these old haystacks black to the roots. This democracy is really quite bizarre.... Purple? Which one?... God knows, I could make them any color I want.

_Dan—goulé!_

Listen, that Montessori bunny and that Magic Mountain Man want me. Imagine it. I guess these haystacks will have to do for now.

"I am coming!"

—but first, swish, swish, just a little Stolichnaya to freshen my breath—a little something for my delicate constitution, you know?
MISSOULA, SEPTEMBER, 1996

Even here in Missoula,  
I find my way to water,  
to the streams that run  
through dark, ribbed shadows  
of culverts, to a willow tree  
that bends, leans out  
over liquid space, indented  
with the dangling shadow  
of my own two feet.

Fishes  
circle in the shallows. Ducks  
swim up stream. A gold leaf  
falls, drifts down in lazy  
circles, shivers  
through the thin, breathless air.

In Missoula,  
I find my way to the rivers: the Clarkfork  
and Rattlesnake; find  
my footsteps weaving, pushing  
through the overgrown tangle  
of paths, crawling  
through the scratching arms  
of snowberries, asking for forgiveness  
from the Grandmothers, the Spiders,  
whose webs I unweave.

And then  
I am there, with the water  
glinting off the smooth, round bodies  
of stones. The water rippling,  
pooling in the shallows, welcoming me  
with bright laughter,
like a daughter, like a sister,  
who has finally found  
her way home.

\textit{In memory of our friend, Brenda Tao Lee Nesbitt.}  
\textit{We miss your singing and your dancing.}

\textit{1952-1996}
About the Authors and Artists

Collins Bonds is from a small town in Tennessee. He studied art and received a BA with an emphasis in painting at the University of Montana. He is currently attending graduate school in eastern Washington.

Rob Carney lives in Lafayette, Louisiana. Other poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Poetry Northwest, Zyzzyva, Quarterly West, Atlanta Review, American Literary Review, Southern Quarterly, and other publications.

Nicole Chaison lives with her husband and three cats in Shaker Heights, Ohio. She recently completed an MA in English with a concentration in fiction writing at Cleveland State University. She is co-founder of a writing program at the Northeast Ohio Pre-Release Center, a women’s prison in Cleveland. Her work has been published in Whiskey Island, Word Dance, and Alpha-Bete.

Chris Chapman grew up in Indiana on a farm. He received his degree at the Brooks Institute of Photography in Santa Barbara, California. He moved to Missoula in the spring of 1995. Currently Chris has been exploring the world of fiber. He is spinning and knitting wool.

currently teaches fiction writing in the MFA program at Penn State.

**Brian Elling** spent his childhood in Arizona. Brian received his BFA from the University of Montana. He is known mostly for his wall sculpture, but most of his art focuses on the body in its strengths and weaknesses.

**Marty Fromm** earned a BS in Journalism at Georgia Southern University and completed directed studies in photography at both the University of Tennessee and the University of Idaho. Marty received his MFA in 1992 from the University of Idaho. He has been a freelance photographer, teaching assistant and owner and operator of a custom photography lab. Marty is currently an Assistant Professor in the art department at the University of Montana.

**Peter Henry** grew up in Virginia. He currently attends the MFA program at the University of Oregon and teaches in the English department.

**Rich Ives**, a former editor of *CutBank* (numbers 6 and 7), lives in Seattle. He recently received a grant from the Seattle Arts Commission for his book of poetry, *Tunneling to the Moon*, a “book of days” comprised of 365 poems, including “Several of These could Make a Lamp” and “Are You Planning to Take Part in the Dark?” Other poems from his book are due to appear in *The Iowa Review* and *The Massachusetts Review*.

**Matt Jones** earned his BFA from the University of Montana with an emphasis in painting. For the past few years, he has been exploring the medium of wood cutting.
Mark Anthony Jarman graduated from the University of Iowa and has published work in Quarterly West, Northwest Review, Left Bank, Sub-TERRAIN, and CutBank (number 45). “Captain Kirk” is a novel excerpt; his novel SALVAGE KING YA! will be published in 1997 by Anvil Press (Vancouver), distributed in the U.S. by General.

William Kittredge was born in 1932. After receiving an MFA from the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop in 1969, Kittredge came to the University of Montana, where he is a Professor of English and Creative Writing. His short stories and essays have appeared in Harper’s, Outside, and other national magazines and journals. His books include The Van Gogh Field (1979), which won the St. Lawrence Fiction Prize; We Are Not in This Together (1984); Owning it All (1986); Hole in the Sky (1992); and Who Owns the West? (1996).

Carmen Malsch grew up in Washington state and has been living in Montana since 1991. Currently, Carmen attends the University of Montana, where she is studying in the BFA program.

Corey Marks lives in Houston, Texas. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in Antioch Review, Indiana Review, Paris Review, and Raritan.

Wendell Mayo teaches creative writing and literature at Bowling Green State University. His collection of stories, Centaur of the North (Arte Público Press), is the current finalist in the Associated Writing Program’s Awards Series in Short Fiction. His stories have appeared in The Yale Review, Prairie Schooner, High Plains Literary Review, Western Humanities Review, and
other publications. He has been awarded lectureships three times by the Ministry of Education in Lithuania, where his fiction has been translated and published. "A Drunken Sailor" is part of a series titled *In Lithuanian Wood.*

**Gregory Mueller** was born in Havre, Montana, in 1952. He traveled abroad and within the United States as a child. Greg received his BFA from the University of Kansas in 1975. He has been employed as a graphic artist in Kansas and Montana ever since. Greg now works out of his studio in the Swift Building in Missoula.

**Karin Schalm** teaches poetry to children as a part of the Missoula Writing Collaborative. She and her husband Patrick McCormick are expecting their first child this spring.

**Edgar Smith** was raised in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He received his BA in Kalamazoo. Edgar attended graduate school at Ohio University in Athens, where he earned an MFA in sculpture. He is now painting in Missoula and working at The Crystal Theater.

**Byron Thompson** grew up in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He was first introduced to visual art through the public school system. Byron ventured to the University of Montana, where he received his BFA with an emphasis in painting. He currently resides in Missoula.

**Melissa Ann Thorne** was born in the green fields of West Virginia. She received her BFA from the University of Montana. Melissa is now living in Missoula, where she is continuing her painting and drawing career.
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