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SUMMER 2008

FITS AND STARTS IN NATURAL ORDER
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CutBank is pleased to announce the finalists and winners of the 2008 Montana Prize in Fiction, Montana Prize in Creative Nonfiction, and Patricia Goedicke Prize in Poetry.

The three awards were founded this year in the spirit of the Richard Hugo Memorial Poetry Award and A. B. Guthrie, Jr. Short Fiction Award, which CutBank awarded for over a decade in the ’80s and ’90s. The goal of the Montana and Goedicke Prizes is to recognize work that showcases authentic voice, boldness of form, and a rejection of functional fixedness.

Our congratulations to the winners and finalists, and our thanks to everyone who entered. Very special thanks to guest judges Aimee Bender, Suzanne Paola, and Michele Glazer for the time and thought they invested into each submission.

MONTANA PRIZE IN FICTION
Winner: Kate Lane, “Spectacle of the Missing”
Finalists: Buffy Cram, Kara Levy, Joe B. Sills, and Marc T. Wise
Judge: Aimee Bender

MONTANA PRIZE IN CREATIVE NONFICTION
Winner: Kim van Alkemade, “Severance Pay”
Finalists: Kelley Calvert, Matthew Clark, Jackie Shannon-Hollis, and Jane Satterfield
Judge: Suzanne Paola

PATRICIA GOEDICKE PRIZE IN POETRY
Winner: Rusty Morrison, “Insolence”
Finalists: William S. Barnes, Ariel Goldberg, Jennifer Chapis, Karyna McGlynn, Dan Chelotti, Jennifer Metsker, Derek Henderson, Michael Sikkema, Nathan Hoks, and Jen Tynes
Judge: Michele Glazer

Winners received a $500 honorarium, and their work appears on the following pages.

Such strangeness in Malone with its harbor of clear fish-laden lakes and the shadowy tree-crested high rise of forty-two Adirondack peaks. There’s the demented elderly man named Ronny stooping and mumbling with a trail of cigar smoke chugging from his lips, stealing tips from the counter jar at the coffee shop, his face frozen in a scowl, eyebrows sprouting upwards like tiny ragged vines. The child named Anna-Lee who cannot speak the truth, lies about the color of the walls in her bedroom, saying they are painted with green giraffes and blue gorillas and red toucans, though everyone knows from her stuttering red-faced mother her walls are just plain pink. Hurrying down the streets at a frenzied pace, the mother tries to keep her child from saying anything, clutching the girl’s hand, tugging and half-dragging her along. And there are those crippled by accident; Blaine reduced to near catatonia at only twenty-five from a fall at a construction site; Benny at thirty-two without the use of his arms or legs from a corner he took too fast on his motorcycle, striking the gravel and pavement at eighty miles per hour; Naomi, an angel-faced thirteen-year-old who lost her legs in a snowmobile accident, the machine flipping up and landing on her, crushing her legs so that muscle and bone and tissue all ground together into mortar. And there’s Lib, though no one’s sure if her missing tongue is due to an accident. Some say she bit it off purposefully, out of spite or insanity. Others say she fell. Others still think her mother had something to do with it.

From a willow branch dipping and cracking beneath his weight, Evan squints through the darkness into Lib’s bedroom. Lamplight falls through her window wedged open just high enough to let a well-traveled breeze gust through. He can smell pine from the mountains and taste fish from the lakes. He sees Lib open her mouth.

In a mirror she studies the dark lump, semblance of a tongue, hunching at the back of her palate. Her tongue’s what a neck might look like severed from its head. She knows Evan is outside her window and wonders if he can see
into her mouth too, wonders if her parted lips are seductive, wonders if he gets just a glimpse will he look for more. She snaps her teeth shut, turns out the light, disappears, her life suddenly sealed off by the absence of light.

Evan had heard about this girl. She existed for him mostly as a myth growing up, or as a warning from his mother. "Don't go running around the house in your stockings like that. You know about that girl over on Indian Lake who bit off her tongue when she slipped on the wood floors." Evan, not really considering her real, thought of her as only an empty threat. A flimsy attempt for parents to control their children. Like at school the myth about making gruesome expressions and your face getting stuck that way.

In the dark cavern of Lib's room, she imagines her own voice, low and breathy, like the wind when it rains, teases and whispers through the crowns of the trees, hisses and rumbles its unhappiness until the leaves are left dripping, quaking, trembling, shaking off the weight of so much water, misery like so many drops of rain. Her voice if she had one. Her voice that sometimes calls to her, though it was severed long ago. She hears the boy move in the tree outside her window; the willow's branch threatens to break beneath the weight of his desire. He is climbing down, down, down towards the soft thump of the ground. She's climbing down into a darkness of her own but there is no bottom for her feet to find.

In the morning Evan follows Lib to the lake where she wanders along the grassy and wooded shore to a rocky beach. Evan sits on a grassy spot, tucks his knees against his chest, and watches from a distance. He picks at a pimple on his chin until it bleeds. Horseflies orbit Lib's head like some sickening red halo. She works her fingers through her hair, stopping to press her fingertips to her nose and clean her nails with a stem of grass. The sky is gray, the water is gray, the same gray tangled in the blue of Lib's eyes. An osprey dips down to the surface, rises back to the sky and then dives, wings tucked close at its sides, crashes into the water and reemerges with a fish in its talons. Lib doesn't seem to see this. She gazes at the water splashing her toes and butting against the rock where she sits, a battering of liquid against solid. It's easy for Evan to believe that she doesn't hear anything, isn't a part of this world around them.

Tangling her hair. The pain is not enough, and yet is enough to keep her awake in this lonesome silence, to remind her that she is alive. Her scalp is her center, a place of release, and she finds her permanence in the blood letting. She scrapes away the scabs, leaves unseen scars carved into her scalp. Gritty blood beneath her nails. Granular like sand. And there's always buzzing in her ears, like the steady hum of an abused piano, the chords holding a chaotic blend of sound that's not quite music.

They sit at a distance from one another as the sun creeps forward in the sky, a hazy globe inching like lamplight into the grayness. Lib stops moving for a while and Evan observes her like a statue, like a landscape, static yet beautiful. Her hair is cropped at her chin and hangs in matted clumps. He wants to untangle her hair with his fingers and separate the fine tendrils, but sits on his hands so he will not reach out. When he was a boy he used to brush his mother's hair, a great pleasure for him to untangle things and put them in order. He feels himself too old to do this for his mother but feels it would be easy to brush Lib's hair for her, that it is somehow allowed. She would never be able to tell anyone, would not be able to say no. At the same time he is afraid of her. Her silence is foreboding and her eyes are almost purple, such a bruised and brooding blue. If only he could touch inside her mouth, he might discover the secrets of her mind. Somehow he believes that inside her nothing would make sense to him, that she is filled with knowledge without language. The thought makes him shudder and sicken. He breathes deeply and can taste the pickerel and the rotting water plants. Eutrophic scents, the lake mudding over and crowding with life. The busyness of it makes him dizzy.

The boy with the shadow self sits slouching not far from Lib. A ghostly shawl clings to his shoulders, casts a shadow as if it were a living thing, more living than the boy who tries to be invisible. Naturally a shrinker, a lurker. He is surprising here, along this abandoned lakeshore. Usually she can sit all day without meeting another person. And if they do come they look her in the mouth and scurry away. Afraid of things they can't see. He cringes when she looks towards him. His eyes are slippery and do not fix themselves upon her two chapped lips, the fingers tangled in her hair. His skin's so pale she can see blue lines running up his jaws. She imagines her finger rubbed along that jaw would come away chalky, the blue exposed even more. She stares and waits for him to go. Horseflies mumble in her ears, tangle in her hair. Water plashes against the rock she sits on. She dips her toes into the water, subtle warmth on the surface, icy pinprick cold beyond, itchy heat of the muck beneath. She's buried to her knees and the water tries to move through her skin and bone, as it
tries to move through everything, as it will eventually move through the rock she perches upon, one particle at a time. She embraces the erosion, though she does not wish for it, simply accepts the process. Knows it’s inevitable and plunges herself in instead of struggling against.

Evan, crouching, moves towards Lib, as he would approach an animal, close to the ground, his hands open and slightly extended from his sides. He hunches forward watching her from downcast eyes, not sure if he should hold eye contact or approach without looking at her. Her eyes are unwavering and opaque. He has the same uncanny feeling he gets when he sees an owl and stares into the jaundiced eyes. There is cruelty there, and hunger. There is always that moment when Evan will start to feel as if he might know the creature’s thoughts and then that feeling will flit away and the bird will break eye contact, leave Evan locked on the other side of some unknowable thing. Perhaps the secret of flying.

When he is close enough that he can reach out and touch her, she looks back down at the water between her legs, the mud covering her toes. He sits beside her, though back a little so he doesn’t get wet. Reaching out, he buries a hand in her hair and rakes his fingers downward, weaving through tangles until he comes out the end of her hair at her shoulder. She snaps away from him and steps into the lake, standing knee deep in water and looking back at him. Indiscernible sounds spit from her mouth and Evan tries to catch a look inside, see what a missing tongue looks like this close. He feels the chill of the water around his own calves, though he sits unmoving on the shore, frozen by her stare.

He tells her, I don’t want to hurt you. He speaks soothingly, in a voice he’s never used before, didn’t know he possessed. You’ve got tangles in your hair. Let me get them out for you.

He holds his hands up and tries to be sheepish, like the brave and innocent men he sees in old movies.

There haven’t been anyone else’s fingers in Lib’s hair for years, since her mother stopped trying to corner her and drag a brush through it. Since her mother stopped trying to touch her altogether not long after Lib’s tongue disappeared. Disappeared isn’t the right way to think of it, but Lib doesn’t want to remember. It happened so long ago that she sometimes thinks she’s forgotten. Then she’ll be talking to herself by the lake and a strange sound will come from her mouth and she’ll remember what she’s missing.

Lib stays up to her knees in the water and Evan picks at the grass around him and studies the ground in front of him, sneaks looks at Lib’s legs in the
water. He talks to her, hoping she will forget herself, unclasp her lips and let him see inside.

I know what it’s like not to be able to say anything, he says. If I say things, they become true, and if they’re true it’s not like I can pretend they’re not anymore. They start having color and shape and sound.

Evan needs to look in her mouth, look at pieces of this girl that aren’t there. He thinks if he’s seen something so profound it will take him out of the brightness of the well-lit world and allow him into a realm of darkness where he can vanish. He keeps talking.

How do you see something that isn’t there? Why do people always seek missing things? Can’t just let them be absent. We’ve all got something that’s disappeared, so maybe we’re just trying to discover the ways we’re all the same.

When she sits next to him again and lets him run his fingers through her hair he doesn’t tell her about his desire to look in her mouth.

Evan comes again in the late morning the next day to run his fingers through her hair and tell her things. He tells her about his mother. Her hands puckered and sudsy after washing dishes. Those pruned and waterlogged hands petting the jade elephant on the windowsill. The elephant a remnant of her marriage to Evan’s father, the only thing she brought to the new home. Evan moves like a shadow through the two houses, his father’s and his mother’s, always trying to be invisible, but somehow never able to go entirely unseen. He sneaks into the kitchen after his mother climbs the stairs to bed and touches the water stains on the elephant’s back, the dark burden it carries evaporates in his hands before he can discover what it means.

Lib lets her hands soak in the lake until they are shriveled and heavy. She presses them to her nose and can smell the pickerel, the water bugs, the sewage from the cabins along the shore. The surface of the lake glints and waves with the sun, slices her mind with bright flashes of yellow and white light, refracts into her face so she is blinded and ceases to know where she is and her own vulnerability. She closes her eyes and parts her lips.

Evan pulls her hands from her nose and brings her back, sniffs out the lake smells meddling her mind. His face casts a shadow on her own, blocking out the bright and shifting light. Blue veins edge his face, float on the surface of his transparent skin. His hands are soft. She could tear them with her nails but she touches gently, her wrinkled fingers pressing into his hands, kneading them. His skin malleable and compliant and strange. She can push them away without using force, deny them from knowing her skin.
Evan speaks to break the silence, to make her forget how his hands sought her.

I’ll build a house of stone and mud so close to the shore that when we sleep we’ll feel like we’re at the bottom of the lake. He’s never spoken this way to anyone. The sun prods her skull with brilliant white spokes and Lib shuts her eyes, smiles without showing her teeth, and hugs her knees. She tips her chin towards the sky, waiting to feel Evan’s fingers working through the tangles in her hair.

Her head snaps back and she’s dragged by her hair across the stone and mud. She sees three figures, tan-faced boys with scabbed knees and cracking knuckles. She can hear their bones creaking like trees groaning against the wind. Their shouts are short and excited, yipping orders that she hears and doesn’t hear. She kicks against them but her legs flail, her skin slicing and bruising against reeds and rocks in her struggle to be free. They pinch her nose shut to block out air. Blood reddens her lip and slides around her nostrils. She can see hands and legs, shirt sleeves and cuffs, muddy sneakers coming untied. She clenches her teeth against them but her lungs exhaust. They keep her nose pinched until she gasps wide for breath. Pry at her mouth once it’s open, leaving it raw at the corners. She feels fingers wriggling in her mouth like dry worms. Can feel eyes peering down to the redness of her throat. She kicks and writhes but it does nothing.

Evan goes to her, pushing and bellowing at the boys who had kicked him out of the way. Lib keeps grappling and hissing and striking even as he struggles to lift her from the ground, as if she doesn’t know him from those other boys. There is shouting all around him, rattling his brain and the air in front of his face, muddling colors so that the sky is trembling green and the air is shattering orange.
My brother's been up all night, waiting for sunrise to dial the phone. The metallic ring yanks me from sleep. I pick up the handset, pulling impatiently at the tangled spiral cord.

"Dad didn't come home last night," Rob says. That's all he has to say for the connection between us to tremble like a string pulled taught between two tin cans.

"Did he say where he was going?" I ask.

"He said he had a date, told me not to wait up," he tells me, but we both know right off this is a lie. In the seven years since our parents' divorce, our dad's only had two girlfriends, both disasters. The chances he's struck up something new with a woman we've never heard of are nil.

"I'll catch the next bus to Racine and be down in a couple of hours. Are you going to school?"

"No, I'll wait for you here," he says.

"Okay, see you soon."

I put down the phone carefully. I get myself together without apparent haste, ignoring the flutter in my gut. I shove a change of clothes and the book I'm reading for my literature class into a backpack, spill a pile of food into the cat's bowl, pull a red beret over my head, and shrug on my second-hand wool coat. I close the door on my studio apartment, leaving a mug of herbal tea cooling on the table, the futon bed unmade, and dirty pajamas strewn over the round rattan chair that balances on its base like a satellite dish. Outside, I wait in the plastic bus shelter, looking for the Number 30 to come down Prospect Avenue. It's January in Milwaukee so of course it's freezing, but it's the chill wind off Lake Michigan that makes me shiver.

When I was a little girl, after my mother had gotten us ready for bed and the fish in the tank on my dresser had been fed their pinch of foul-smelling flakes, my dad would come to tuck me in. Holding his burning Chesterfield out of the way, he'd stoop down to give me a kiss. The contents of his shirt pocket
would spill across the bed when he leaned over; we made a game of pawing around for his lighter and his pens.

“Goodnight, lief meisje,” he’d say, using the Dutch for dear little girl. Then he’d turn out the light, becoming a red dot glowing in the darkness

“Goodnight, Dad,” I’d say, turning my face into the pillow. The smell of smoke lingered on my cheek where he’d kissed me.

On the Badger Bus from Milwaukee to Racine, I rest my forehead against the cold window. The glass feels good, but then the bus hits some rough road and I smack my skull, so I sit back in the upholstered seat. I’ve got The Golden Bowl open on my lap, but I can’t force my eyes to follow Henry James’s convoluted sentences. Instead, I watch farm fields sliding by, wide and flat and white under a heavy gray sky. Ochre stalks of last summer’s corn poke through an icy blanket of snow.

Maybe he’ll have called, I tell myself. Maybe by the time I get to Racine, my father will have come home.

I think of my fifteen-year-old brother, up all night and waiting alone. Besides our dad, I’m the only relative Rob has in the state. Our mother and stepfather have moved down to Sarasota; our brother Glen, the engineer, is in Chicago; our grandparents are wintering in Miami; Dad left his family behind in the Netherlands when he came to America. That leaves the job of first responder to me, and I’m nothing if not qualified for the position. Ever since my mom left him, I’ve been my dad’s go-to person, accompanying him to office parties, picking out his furniture, dispensing advice, and fielding his emergency phone calls. The job wasn’t steady, but it had become something of a career.

One night, after my mother got us into bed and my dad tucked us in and the lights were switched off, I heard a kind of frantic, splashing sound. I called out, and my dad came back in and turned on the light.

“The fish are jumping,” I said. He frowned and turned to the ten-gallon tank. A handful of Neon tetras swirled through the water, disappearing behind the plastic castle, emerging through the bubbles from the aerator. The red Swordtails glided along placidly: the female with her round belly and blunt tail, and the male, sleek and lean, his black-tipped tail trailing behind him. In the corner of the tank there was a net suspended under water full of tiny baby fish. We’d been excited to watch the female Swordtail give birth until we noticed the male was picking off his own babies the same way he gobbled up the stinky brine shrimp we occasionally dropped into the tank for a treat. The
pet store recommended the net, where the baby fish could swim safely until they grew big enough to join their father without danger.

"The fish are fine," my dad said, turning out the light. "Now stop your nonsense and go to sleep."

But the noises started up again, wet and urgent, and again I called out. This time my mother came in, turned on the light, and observed the calmly swimming fish.

"But they're splashing, they're trying to jump out!" I insisted.

I could tell she didn't believe me, and my faith in her was so strong I began to doubt it myself. My mom came over to the bed and pulled the blanket up over my ears, tucking it tight around my chin.

"There," she said. "Now you won't hear anything."

She was right. In the dark room, with the blanket over my ears, I had no trouble falling asleep.

The farm fields are giving way now to the outskirts of Racine. We follow Highway 32 past roads that tick off distances: Six Mile, Four Mile, Three Mile. Angling into the city, we pass run-down bars and muffler repair shops, Swedish bakeries and take-out taco restaurants. An hour south of Milwaukee, the bus hisses to a stop on Wisconsin Avenue. Stepping down from the bus, I wrap a scarf around my face against the cold and start walking the three blocks up Main Street to the apartment my father and brother share.

I thought I'd left Racine behind when I moved to Milwaukee for grad school, but I keep being pulled back here. There's the post office, square and gray, where I used to protest Reagan's policies in Central America. At Monument Square, I pass the old Zahn's department store, where I got caught shoplifting when I was in high school. I cross Second Street and Lake Michigan comes into view. Cold waves shoulder up against ice-covered breakers, the rhythmic sound of splashing water blending with the low drone of the Coast Guard foghorn. Further out, the lake's restless waters look like an unrolled bolt of gray silk snagged by an angry cat.

It's 1987, and Racine is in the process of reinventing its run-down commercial harbor into a recreational marina. So far, the project consists of little more than a large sign depicting gleaming condos and bobbing sailboats under a painted summer sun. Past the sign, an abandoned crane stands stiff with rust. Across the draw bridge that spans the Root River, I see the public dock from which, every July, sport fishermen launch into the twenty-two thousand square miles of fresh water, hoping beyond reason to snag one of
the fish tagged and released for the annual Salmon-O-Rama competition. The fish are filleted and wrapped and packed into freezers all over the city, but the local news warns us not to eat too many, lest the PCBs hoarded in their flesh begin to build up inside our bodies, too.

I cross the street to my father's apartment, a renovated loft above an art gallery on the corner of Third and Main. Rob buzzes me in and waits on the landing as I climb the stairs. At fifteen, he has the same gaunt look our father wears in photographs taken in 1957 after he arrived in New York from Rotterdam.

"Hey," I say, walking in. I drop my backpack and start to pull off my beret.

"Let's go out and look around," Rob says, reaching for his parka, the kind with a hood that zips into a periscope around his face. It seems he's been stuck inside, alone, for way too long. I turn and follow him into the cold.

Outside, Rob and I set off down the narrow strip of salted sidewalk that's been shoveled between the brick storefronts and the parking meters piled in snow. We turn into the alley behind the building, kicking at snow banks, looking for clues. On television, detectives like Columbo and Rockford always seem to find a receipt or a ticket stub that solves the mystery of the missing person. If they can do it, why can't we? But only empty plastic bags emerge from the dirty snow crusted with gravel. There's a green dumpster in the alley with a black-and-white "Drugs Are Garbage, Just Say No" sticker on its lid, but picking through trash would be taking the act too far. We trudge on in the fading light of the overcast day, turning our faces into the wind and squinting against the freezing air.

"Maybe he just took off somewhere for a while," I say. "Maybe he needed time to think."

"Maybe we should go to the police," Rob says.

"But it hasn't even been twenty-four hours yet," I say, acting, as usual, as if I know what I'm talking about. "You can't report someone missing until they've been gone twenty-four hours."

"When he left, he sounded sad," Rob says, looking away.

After the divorce, my dad finagled a transfer from Ji Case's corporate headquarters in Racine to their small foreign office in Athens, Greece. My brothers and I traveled back and forth often for visits and vacations, but my father was alone when he suffered a stroke. His office manager called me in Wisconsin to report that my dad was in the hospital, unable to speak or move. I arranged for Case to buy me a plane ticket, arguing it was a business expense. I'd imagined so often having to make this trip in response to some crisis—a car accident from
the insane way my dad drove along the narrow mountain roads to Delphi, a tipsy fall down the marble stairs leading up to his apartment in Kifisa—that the drive down to O'Hare, the flight to Athens, and the taxi to the hospital all seemed strangely familiar, as if I were reliving a dream.

My dad had a private room, stark and white, no beeping monitors or IVs, just a chart clipped to the foot of the bed, a pitcher of water on the bedside table. He was stretched out under a thin blanket, his hair more gray than I remembered, his right side stiff, one corner of his mouth turned down slightly. But he'd made some progress in the time it took me to get to Greece. When the nurse asked him to, he could lift his right arm and uncross his ankles, but his limbs soon dropped, exhausted. His speech was coming back, too. At first he could only speak Dutch, his co-workers told me, but now he was saying some words in English.

"It's me, Dad, I'm here now," I said, taking a seat beside his bed.

His eyes teared at the sight of me. We managed to talk for a while. It wasn't nearly as bad as I'd feared, but he was frustrated by his weakness and confused at the way words were eluding him, languages slipping into each other in his mouth, questions dying on his lips. As I got up to leave, he began pawing at my purse.

"Drop," he said, using the Dutch word for a kind of candy.

"Drop? I don't have any drop." The salty black licorice had always been a rare treat in our house, packaged with the Christmas presents that arrived every December from my Oma and Opa in Holland. But he pulled harder at my purse, tugging it open.

"Drop!" he insisted, until he got his hand inside and grabbed my crumpled pack of Marlboros. Relief swept his features as he pulled out a cigarette and placed it between his slack lips.

"Drop," he sighed, falling back against the pillow.

What else could I do? I leaned over to give him a light.

"Let's go look at his parking space," I suggest to Rob. "He could've dropped something getting into the car, a note or something. Let's go see."

My dad rents a parking spot in the Shoop Ramp, around the corner from their apartment. We walk up to the second level, following the curve of the ramp until his space comes into view. Our father's car, a gold 1985 Chrysler LeBaron, is parked in its spot, cold and mute in the gathering shadows. We stop, baffled. Wherever he's gone, we were sure he'd driven there.

I can't imagine a destination that wouldn't involve driving. The furthest
the city bus could take him is Sturtevant, a smattering of small houses and seedy bars out by the Johnson Wax factory. Other than the bus depot, I don’t know of any other way out of Racine—there’s no train station, no airport, in the winter not even a ferry to Michigan. Somehow, I just can’t see my dad taking off on a Greyhound. He likes driving fast on the Autobahn, upgrading his international flights, and booking first-class sleeping compartments on European trains.

I spent a week in Athens. My father recuperated in the hospital while I made arrangements to bring him back to Racine for further treatment. He was getting stronger every day, soon able to get out of bed and shuffle down the hall in his underwear to a small room set aside for smoking. He’d fall into a plastic chair, his strong leg draped casually over the weaker one. His right arm hanging at his side, he’d pull deeply on one of the cigarettes he’d cadged from me. When he ran out my cigarettes, he’d bum one from another patient, a Greek woman in a loose hospital gown who spoke no English. I found them there one day, sitting in companionable silence, barely clothed, smoke seeping from their mouths and noses.

I talked Case into buying us first-class tickets back to Chicago so my dad could stretch out, and I booked a flight through Amsterdam, so his family could meet us during our layover. At Schiphol Airport, I pushed my dad in a wheelchair to the waiting area where his brothers and sisters were gathered. For an hour they sat awkwardly in fixed seats, these middle-aged siblings who together had survived the blitzkrieg on Rotterdam and endured Nazi occupation. When the boarding call for our flight was announced, they said their goodbyes as if they would be their last. If we weren’t flying first class, I doubt KLM would have waited for us to come barreling up the jet way, me running behind the wheel chair, my dad clutching a carton of duty-free Winston 100s.

He was dismayed to find we were in the no smoking section of the big Boeing 747. After sipping aged Dutch gin from a frosted glass and smacking his lips, he shuffled up the narrow aisle to lean against the bulkhead in smoking, chaining one Winston to the next.

“If he’s ill, he shouldn’t be drinking and smoking so much,” the stewardess said to me.

“Try telling that to him,” I said.

I woke up in the morning and pulled the blankets down from around my ears. Then I spotted something on the floor, a red comma on the blue carpet. It was the male Swordtail, dead and shriveled.
"I told you it was jumping!" I said to my parents, showing them the dead fish. My dad pried it up and carried it away in a tissue. I was sad about the fish, but also glad to be proven right. I knew I hadn't imagined those sounds, knew the splashes were real, and there was the proof of it, swirling away down the toilet. Now that the threat was gone, we were able to release the baby fish from their protective net, and they joined the female Swordtail and the Neon tetras in the larger tank, little red apostrophes drifting through the water.

Still, when I went to sleep that night, I pulled the blanket up over my ears.

For a few years, my dad had been saying he was glad to be at the Athens branch, out of sight of Case's corporate headquarters. With the economic downturn of the 1980s, there'd been fewer sales for him to finance as the developing nations he worked with invested less in the tractors and earth-moving equipment his company manufactured. He'd actually considered quitting Case and taking a job in Saudi Arabia, working under contract. But I'd talked him out of it.

"There's no retirement plan, no health insurance," I pointed out during a summer visit to Greece while I was in college. "You've got ten years to go until you can retire with benefits, why give that all up for a contract job?"

So he stayed with Case, and now he was back in Racine. On his first day out of the hospital, I went with my dad to company headquarters for a meeting with the human resources manager.

"What we have to decide is whether you'll be returning to the Athens branch or working from an office here," the manager said from behind his desk.

"Returning to Athens would be preferable," my dad said, the words slurring in his mouth. I was sitting just behind him, out of his field of vision. The manager looked over my dad's shoulder at me. I met his eyes, and shook my head no. I was afraid he wouldn't be able to manage in Greece on his own, afraid I'd have to go back again if his health failed, or worse. I wanted him close, where I could keep an eye on him, help him out if he needed me.

"Well, we'll have a meeting and make a decision, Mr. van Alkemade."

They decided to keep him in Racine. An international moving company packed up everything in my dad's apartment in Kifissia and shipped it all back to Wisconsin. My dad found the apartment downtown, and Rob came
to live with him and go to high school in Racine. Before he could go back to work, though, my dad needed a car; the blue Renault wagon we'd driven across Europe having been left behind. I pushed for an import, telling him Consumer Reports was raving about the Toyota Camry. But he'd been inspired by the charismatic Lee Iacocca and had his heart set on a Chrysler. At the dealership, he'd been drawn to the LeBaron right away. My dad didn't care about the performance statistics the eager salesman was spouting; his mechanical knowledge of cars was limited to the location of the gas cap. No, it was the name that appealed to him, so masculine, so continental.

"Let's take it for a test drive, shall we?" he suggested gallantly.

It was the first time my father had been behind the wheel of a car since recovering from his stroke, and that right leg was heavier than he'd bargained for. We careened out of the lot, swiveled around the corner, then jerked to a stop at a red light. In the back seat, I checked my seatbelt and gripped the door handle. Up front, the salesman paled. The light changed and off we went, surging ahead a few blocks before my dad turned the nose of the car sharply back in the direction of the lot.

At the dealership, seated safely behind his desk again, the salesman wiped his brow and proffered my father a bill of sale. I think the sticker price was around fifteen thousand dollars, but they were having an end-of-model-year clearance sale, so there was room to maneuver. My dad settled in for negotiations.

"Here's what I'll pay," he stated, laboring to form a commanding figure eight on the page with his stiff right hand.

"Eight thousand?" the salesman asked. "Are you serious?"

"Just take that to your manager," he insisted. He leaned back in his chair, lit a cigarette, and blew a cloud of smoke in the salesman's face. When the salesman left, my dad turned to me and said, with relish, "This is my language we're talking now." I knew my dad was in finance, but I'd never seen him negotiate a deal before. I just thought he was crazy.

The bill of sale was shuttled back and forth a few times, numbers scribbled and crossed out until a deal was struck. It turned out my father knew what he was doing after all. We reeled away in the LeBaron for around eleven thousand dollars.

My dad made the short drive to work in the LeBaron for about a year before the executives at Case realized that there wasn't enough business to justify having an international finance officer dedicated to Africa and the Middle East. He called me one morning to give me the news.
“They let me go,” he said, mournfully.
“Just like that? No notice or anything?”
“No, no notice. They told me this morning.”
“What happens now?” I asked.
“I guess I’ll collect unemployment while I look for another job,” he said, sounding weary at the thought of it. “And I’ve got my severance pay, sixty-thousand dollars.” I was getting by on a six-hundred dollar monthly stipend from my teaching assistantship, which covered everything from rent to books; sixty-thousand dollars sounded like a shit load of money to me.
For the next month or so, my dad tried looking for comparable work, sending out resumes and waiting for interviews. But in the Midwest in the mid-eighties, downsized middle-aged executives were a surplus commodity. Out of work at fifty-four, divorced, and with health problems to boot. I feared he might fall into the deep statistical trough of male mid-life suicides. Instead, he announced his decision to use his severance pay to open an Indonesian restaurant.
Cooking had always been his hobby, and for the colonizing Dutch, Indonesia provided the ethnic cuisine of choice. For years, I’d assisted my dad at extravagant dinners for which he began preparing months in advance, serving the dozens of dishes that make up an Indonesian Rijs Tafel. At one dinner, some guests who didn’t know us well asked my father how we’d met. “We met at the hospital,” he answered, enjoying the little misunderstanding, “on the day she was born.”
“You’ve got to talk him out of it,” my mother called to say when she heard about the restaurant. “He’ll waste all that money, then how will Rob ever go to college?” But for once I was determined to back my dad up all the way. When he showed me the menu he was working on—dishes like Nasi Gorang and Saté Babi and Gado Gado listed in his nearly illegible hand—I offered to write out his menu with my calligraphy pen. When he told me he’d found a restaurant for sale in Milwaukee, not far from my place, I was excited to meet him there.
Just last night, I waited for him at a restaurant that didn’t seem to be going out of business, sitting alone at a table, checking my watch and ordering nothing. Finally, assuming I’d mistaken the date, I bundled up and walked home. At the same time, my father was getting ready to go out, tucking in his scarf and pulling on his gloves. “I have a date,” he was saying to my brother. “Don’t wait up for me.”
Not long after my fish died, I woke up to find my dad sound asleep on the blue couch, his face hidden in the cushions, feet tucked up, back curved out like a comma. My mom and brother were shaking him, but he wouldn't budge. I thought he was being silly, so I went to get a glass of water to splash in his face. But my mom's hand closed on my wrist, and something in her touch told me this wasn't a game. My brother and I were hustled off to a neighbor's while an ambulance took my dad away.

He spent a few days in the hospital. I think I remember visiting him there, but I'm not really sure. I do remember my mother's explanation—that my dad had taken too many aspirins for a very bad headache and had to have his stomach pumped at the hospital. I had no reason not to believe her, but something about her words didn't seem right. He came home a few days later, tired and thin. If I'd been looking for it, I suppose I would have noticed my mother's tense vigilance, my father's deep sadness. But as far as I could tell, everything was fine. By day, I ignored the weird feeling in the pit of my stomach. At night, I covered my ears.

In the parking ramp, Rob and I peer through the windows of the locked LeBaron, but we don't see any maps or brochures on the seats, and there aren't any matchbook covers or ticket stubs on the ground. As the sun deserts the winter sky, we trudge back to the apartment.

We peel off our coats in the welcome warmth. Little puddles of snowmelt form around our abandoned boots and our socks slide on the wood floor. I look around at all the things my father had shipped back to the States from Greece. The modern Scandinavian furniture imported from Denmark is arranged at right angles around a wool rug. Dark carvings collected in Tanzania and patterned tapestries woven in Turkey hang on the walls. An inlaid backgammon board that was given to my father by the chief of a Bedouin tribe sits next to the Bang & Olüfsen stereo system. On the glass-topped coffee table, there's an overflowing onyx ashtray from Tunisia, a polished brass coffee service acquired in Damascus, and a ceramic Greek vase decorated with a pornographic scene featuring well-endowed satyrs and a willing nymph.

"Maybe we should look around in Dad's room," Rob suggests.

Our father's bedroom is a mess, the sleek lines of the bed frame muddled by piled blankets and crumpled sheets that smell like they've gone too long since being laundered. We begin to sift through the stuff on his dresser: pens, folded papers, utility bills, handkerchiefs, socks, bank statements. I pull open a drawer and there, on top of the undershirts, I see a white letter-size envelope with my name scrawled on it.
I pick up the envelope. It’s thick and heavy. As I tear open the flap, the idea that my father’s arranged all this falls through me like the floors of a collapsing building.

There’s a sharp report as falling metal hits the wood planks at my feet. Rob and I look down to see the silver keys to the LeBaron splayed on the brown floor.

I look inside the envelope. There’s a thick sheaf of notes. I pull them out, ruffle them with my thumb. This is what my father’s left me: ten thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills. No words, only cash. He didn’t have to spell it out for me to understand the message he was sending. In the only way he knew, he was letting me go.
Rusty Morrison

Insolence
Winner, 2008 Patricia Goedicke Prize in Poetry

1 Insolence

: living past their deaths isn’t a deed I accomplish modestly.

: the least emergence is a great oak, elemental, obsessively conceived.

: I was listening for rain. But it’s a stroking of hair, a rhythm deep in my breathing. Impossible now to say a thing, without a quieting hand falling upon it.

: my sky of going forward comes unwound, releasing its long tether of origin.

: in the story that I call memory, which won’t retrieve like a good dog running after a ball.

: I won’t be the single green stem in the silhouette.

: I won’t be bound to stillness, or to tremor, as asserting a thing’s substance. Wind is just as easily what cracks under the weight of an unforeseen branch.

: not heaviness, but the friction, makes resistance. In memory, which is only one form that motion takes.

: I say “Father,” the view roughens in reply. I say “Mother,” and the sandy shoal underfoot tosses and flows, school of startled minnows.

: not death as the word it was, but an opening where the whole history of ideas might pass through, undetected.

: down from the high mountains comes only the wind of my own contrivance, the demented nodding of branches.

: “sky,” I say, over and over, which is not “death,” until the meaning turns its back, knobbed and ribbed, showing its bones.

: I have stepped laterally from the keeping that I once thought should oaken, with all its leafy caprice.
each night, more drops of a thick and sticky sap on the tacit tiles, the stepped roof of future.

in certain dusks, trees turn the smoky white of inherited furniture.

I will mar the varnish, the vestments of elegy.

their deaths let me.

2 In-solving

not death, but testing the meaning I make of mother, father, like repeatedly drawing together the two sides of my tongue.

birth certificates, marriage license, news clippings, unfold only a little landscape.

the shape of knuckles, taper of fingers, easily recalled. Not faces.

at the least sound, every glance up, banked for a steep and empty rise.

plight of my signature, letters fall down the well and drown in the welled up.

believing nothing is message, I zealously endorse.

"livid," says evening light. Even to suggest transcendence, lacerating.

the lark's sequin flash, my eye is quick enough to know only that it couldn't catch.

their deaths simply give in to whatever I ask.

even to want to touch this, I tangle.

I want to ask communion. But even to open my mouth, I individuate.

I would offer them the broken china cup that I found in their backyard shrub, but artifacts belong only to the living.

3 In-sensate

nowhere to say "daughter." Just gentian clusters rising gaudily from a brazen forest floor.
only the shame of fixing oneself in one's own foreground.

the blue owes me no soliloquy.

my mother's and father's deaths are my field-sight, but not to be stored in a leather case I keep on my shelf.

there are hours that belong to the empty panes of westward-looking windows.

there are mirrors that I might make of death, where whatever I think of this new terrain will be all that looks back at me.

any meaning in their dying will only be the one I've made for it, as tyrannical as the best tyrants—those who practice without rage or reluctance.

obscurant, to observe. Rather than to gather the grace of an obscured background.

no more than sun playing across the sensitive skin of afternoon shadow.

each long-falling step.

4 In-structures

I've already made the memory that I call "Father" into the shape of a root, but isn't it my father I ask to help me bury it?

in this leaf, there are intervals I mistake for destinations. In this branch, the question of what I could meet at eye-level.

is the visible all reproduction?

I finger my deepest wrinkles. The craft of their accruing correspondences.

by draping dark leaves on opposite sides of a cloud-scape, the great painters made a stage and placed us outside it.

less important to measure the length of time it takes to steady the eye to its watching, than to test the filament of watching's tensile strength.
into the heroics of making meaning, sky draws down its fog. The sound is everywhere at once, but how to stand still for it.

weather is only untrustworthy, not insufficient.

each vista I walk today curves round the corner of my eye. A measureless but un-ignorable direction.

blame today is distant and northerly.

mountain range, a line of lit fires. Busy is the eye that thinks it can watch them all.

In-strictures

demanding from my mother's death a first order of place within the place where I have lost myself, and there will build my house.

composing it of neither blood, nor testimony, nor memory, nor retrieval.

immigrant wisteria will obliterate the wall's face, will obligate the questioning of form.

in through any open window will come a white unfastening of clouds.

but here, still in the open slope of valley, in the mimetic measurement of every object that her death has now become.

the inrush of evening shadow narrows the shadow-claim of my feet on soil.

In-significance

the dead, today, are flushed to fever with my own fending-off.

let the cloud-face be a proposition of finding no face at all.

the axial force in a tossed-away stone. From which I gain no center, yet go on encircling.

the day is a thin, blown-glass nest. Each of their deaths is an egg in it.

there is no disarray at the binding line between light and shade. No uncertainty or censure between sky and branch.
where has nothing gone, and everything missed before it went missing.

listening for the split twig's tact, the someone is coming, its faux benevolence.

the suddenly red crow, glazed with evening sun's light, as if to convince existence of its presence.

for our death party, I wear briar embellishments.

7 In-severing

"my father and mother," I say. Words are a promontory. For sounding out the voiced and voiceless.

as if I could hear each act fall all the way to the end of memory.

I will bury the two urns of ashes. But not to distinguish gods from objects, objects from gods.

the answerer, who stands behind my grief, signals archly.

a linen to morning's linger, which I hasten to call morning light.

as the brindled grays of gravel gather to become what I can make out as more than pure distance ahead of me on the gravel road.

what disrupts even the most obstinately ordinal; fallen twigs on the earth nearly, but never re-fashion themselves into what was once an abandoned nest.

small possum's carcass at roadside. Too simple to call it death—a something more solid than the flesh that surrounds it.

today, the tinsel flicker of saying anyone's name aloud cuts quick and sharp.

how long to achieve the calloused fingers that can strum the saying dexterously.

8 In-selvage

verdant today, and labial with many likenesses.
rather than demand that existing points be given co-ordinates, I let every dying
organize the figurative.

I try to affix myself to it, like a rhyme.

stylize the grieving in every vowel differently, and not diminish it.

apply the least punctuation, and the moth wing collapses in my palm.

aspen leaves, liquid in wind, hurt more ways than I thought death could store.

roots of the elder oaks push up through the grass, thick with their demand to go on
with their living, farther than the known of soil.

I'd wanted the thrush—a winged rush from wood's underbrush—to be causal, not
construed, not accusative.

9 In-salving

then simply to say their names as dangerously as I might walk out onto a mirrored floor.

as I walk the lowland into tall grasses, wistful for the thrush's shrill tumult upward.

how to throw a glance, even once, outside my caution, my en-castled formality.

will I die as I have lived, counting?

moth pearl and morning pearl and bread pearl, and the pearl that breaks between
ridges of fingernail.

how to demand of composition that its contrivance come apart, but leave
the pieces intact?

how might I live death all the way to the edge of its form, not its fixity.

10 In-solace

how fragile, the dry, orphaned banks of an evaporated stream.
the flesh-cuts in a once cultivated vale. Dirt uproarious in wind.

dangerous, to make every object into a doll with a name, a meaning with a past, a met equivalent, and call this witnessing.

a witnessing that thinks it can brush away its objects, like mayflies.

if I hurry the tufts of new grasses into depiction, I feel the warning signs of indifference, as essence withdraws.

all the grasses, brutal with repetition, as though nothing ever really happens.

even haggard and chopped, every landscape will start up again where I thought to stop it. Between skies, art of unmarked crows.

here the path opens into a glade. Here is only the need to go on walking. It studies me.
The Kingdom Hall’s machine answers when I call, announcing service times and promising to call back. My phone rings the next day. North of Iowa City, over Interstate 80, I curve and roll down Northgate Drive, past the sod-covered lawns fronting businesses that specialize in repair: Clinic of Electrology and Laser, Orthopedic Clinic, Oral Surgery Associates, Iowa Foot and Ankle, Urologic Associates. In the deserted Jehovah’s Witness parking lot, curbed islands of birches flutter like palms. The sound of traffic speeds through ubiquitous fields of unharvested corn. Advertising to the highway, a billboard exposes only its skeletal supports to me. I duck my head to the wind and walk the pavement. Over the entrance of the Kingdom Hall hunching at the back of the lot, a concrete awning suggests valet hospitality.

I see him, the Elder I spoke with over the phone, sitting in a room at the rear of the sanctuary. He stands to introduce himself and encourages me to shorten his name.

“Matthew,” I say. “Not Matt.”

Of course, he says. He’d love to help me understand the truth about Witnesses.

The table between us, set like a dentist’s tray neatly with literature, is too small for our large frames. Whenever I lean forward, he leans back. Whenever I lean back, he leans forward. He shows me one of the texts, a colorful evangelizing handbook, leather bound and titled, *Benefit From Theocratic Ministry School Education*. For Jehovah’s Witnesses, there is no dichotomy between lay worshippers and a spiritual class. Every member is a minister. I open the burgundy cover to a table of contents referencing 53 Studies. Study 1 covers Accurate Reading. Study 2 promotes Words Clearly Spoken. Studies 8, 9, 10, 11: Suitable Volume, Modulation, Enthusiasm, Warm and Feeling. Study 50 teaches An Effort To Reach the Heart. It teaches Naturalness. It teaches to Rely on Jehovah. Honor Jehovah. Know How You Ought to Answer.

Don’t quote me, he grins, his Words Clearly Spoken. It would be best if he remained nameless because, he says, Witnesses do not self-promote. It isn’t
important, he’d say, that his small teeth are like kernels of corn on the cob, that his hair is thin and white and parted, that his thick eyebrows arch when he inspects his bifocals, that he stands tall and straight, that his pleated dress pants billow, that his blue dress shirt reveals tan forearms. He doesn’t want to inject himself into this, he says.

What I know about the globe’s 6.5 million Witnesses, I’ve plucked from the grapevine: You mean, Jehovah’s Wickedness? Whenever we saw them coming, my mom told us to pull the shades and lock the doors and turn off the TV. They made her quit her job and abandon her friends. They’re spooky, confused, wrong, not right, desperate, gullible, lost, nuts, crazy, creepy.

Apostates, he shrugs. People, he says, fear what they don’t understand.

He offers me the SPECIAL November 2007 issue of *Awake!* magazine. It is the familiar size of a blue university test booklet. On the cover, a trim young man—white, wedding band, watch—studies in warm library light above the title, *Can You Trust the Bible?* I flip through and find Shakespeare quoted alongside King Solomon. “Trust not,” it reads, “to rotten planks.”

On average, 28 million *Watchtower* magazines, the better known twin of *Awake!,* arrive biweekly at Kingdom Halls worldwide. Begun in 1879 as *Zion’s Watch Tower and Herald of Christ’s Presence,* it has been published continuously ever since, distributed gratis on street corners, slipped under doors and shared with those who, out of whatever sympathy, frustration, or curiosity, accept them. Now, *The Watchtower* has become a household name, reaching an audience nine times larger than *Newsweek, Sports Illustrated,* or *Playboy.* Despite the apocalyptic illustrations of venomous skeptics in sandals, babies bloated with starvation and imminent orbiting missiles, articles maintain an essentially optimistic message: *You can endure!*

All of the literature, he says, is available on the website free of charge.

There are fourteen titles on the website. The Bible, bible study aids, brochures, and magazines are all composed in obsessively accessible prose, rife with rhetorical questions, summary headings, and dated colloquialisms. Witnesses also publish Braille materials for the blind and sign language videos for the deaf. Multilanguage Electronic Phototypesetting System software, developed by Witnesses, translates the literature into over 432 languages. Other mainstream publications, like *The Atlantic* or *Nature* or *The New Yorker,* are cited for corroboration. There are personal stories. There are study questions to aid retention. The purpose of the literature, professedly an altruistic one, is salvation.

He invites me to come to the Public Meeting and *Watchtower* Study on
Sunday, smiling broadly, opening his arms. He knows I’ll like it there. There’ll be families and folks my age. There won’t be a collection plate or anything, he says. It’ll be just like school. I don’t have to wear anything special. He’ll save a seat, he says, in the back with him and his wife. There’s nothing to be afraid of.

Low ceiling fans circulate the air-conditioned air inside the Kingdom Hall. Blinds shade three South-facing windows. I sit with him and his wife. Though I’ve told him I only want to observe, he’s treating me as an honored guest. He gets me this week’s *Watchtower*, the Bible and a hymnbook from the bookcase in the back. Keep them, he says. He fetches a footstool for his wife. There are four other assemblies during the week and, like the Sunday Meetings, they all follow a strict procedure. We voice a subdued hymn, no single voice distinct from the unison. After bowing our heads in prayer, we sit. Over half the 150 heavy cushioned chairs are full. Iowa City is not this diverse. Accents, postures, and colors, surprise me. Here, men’s haircuts are almost military, parts shine with gel, bald patches gleam, tight Afros fizz. There are braids, highlights, weaves, bobs, hair-sprayed bangs. There are pearls and there is mascara. This is Sunday best. Women wear dresses. Girls wear dresses. Boys wear suits. Children color with crayons. They bounce and whisper and crawl across laps. Men wear suits. Beside every Brother’s chair, in brown leather or black leather, with brass buckles or solid flaps or Velcro or snaps, leans a briefcase.

An Elder from a neighboring congregation, maybe Muscatine, maybe Moline, or the Quad Cities, or Kansas City or Silvis, delivers the Public Talk from an unremarkable podium. Gesticulating with subtle precision, as if he were holding something delicate between thumb and fingers, the Elder speaks with an emotion that feels rehearsed, forced, psychiatric. He invites us to consider his talk with an open mind. He is middle-aged or young, slim or bellied, bent or upright. An Elder is always a man. As written in 1 Timothy 3:1-6, he is “irreprehensible, a husband to one wife, moderate in habits, sound in mind, orderly, hospitable, qualified to teach, not a drunken brawler, not a smiter.” Above all, he must be, the Bible says, reasonable.

The Elders who speak have all been trained to deliver talks in a consistent manner at the Witness’s sparkling complex in Patterson, New York. There are 160 Public Talks approved and outlined by the organization, though each speaker is free to flourish:

- Small rudders steer tremendous boats.
- Love is like a muscle.
Human speech is unquestionably a marvel! Everyone highlights passages and everyone jots in notebooks and everyone follows along and so do I. Study 35: Repetition for Emphasis, comes to mind. Isn’t that a nice example? 1 Chronicles 29:9 is such a nice passage. Now isn’t that a nice comment? What a nice chance to help someone.

One week, we learn that *Money Cannot Buy True Friendship.*

Another time, the lecture teaches *How to Keep a Clean Conscience in a Sinning World.*

We hear about *Showing Respect and Love in One’s Marriage.* Forget Barnes and Noble and all those self-help books, one speaker says, Jehovah wrote the authoritative marital guidebook. True Christians, we are told, sometimes must sever ties to nationality, culture, friends and family. As Jehovah’s Witnesses, it is comforting to know our six and a half million siblings are the best family we could ever have. On this point the speaker is emphatic: we all belong to Jehovah. Our Christian identity, he continues, is so valuable that Satan and his Demons are constantly trying to steal it. Would you not agree that identity theft is common in the world?

A herd of puffed parkas, scarves, hats, hoodies, mittens and ear-muffs wait for the walk-signal to cross. The wind blusters even the shadows. Men armed with bags from the pet supply store hustle past in an effort to stockpile cat litter. I’ve got a window seat at the coffee shop where we’ve arranged to meet. He’s late.

The Witnesses are used to waiting. Theirs is a history of delayed prophecies. The world keeps surprising them. It spun right past 1878, the date set for a pre-apocalyptic reunion in heaven with God. Then 1881 passed without the expected ascension. Biblical chronology indicated the End in 1914 and WWI seemed to concur. A mistake, they said, 1915 for sure. Then the sun rose and it was 1920 and they speculated: 1925? 1975? Today, the literature terminates the wicked system of things at an unspecified, but imminent tomorrow.

Students sip bubble tea from straws.

A Pumpkin Latte, please. Make it a double tall mocha. Soy thanks, not skim.

He calls to say he’s on his way, he says, if I’ll wait just a little longer. “Sure,” I say. It’s not like it’s the end of the world.

He arrives wearing a dark suit and a sky blue shirt and apologizes again. It’s cold out there, he says, he’ll have a hot chocolate. He asks about my parents, my friends, my hometown. Milk-foam coats his upper lip. He tells me a bit
about his former congregation: twenty-three members, Tipton. The contours of that farm country, he says, are as familiar as bible verse. He and his wife have just moved closer to town, he says, because she doesn’t like winter driving.

“Of course,” I say. “A little ice can send you spinning.”

The conversation skids and slips from weather to baseball to paradise.

We do not want to die, he says, earnest and open. But, he says, we do look forward to everlasting life. Would the Creator limit our ability to learn and improve to a life span of just seventy or eighty years? From the earliest times, he reminds me with ever-present doubt-silencing conviction, mankind has dreamed of living forever. We see that Jehovah put the notion of everlasting life in our head in Ecclesiastes 3:11. Now why would Jehovah do that, he asks, if He didn’t want us to enjoy everlasting life?

For Witnesses, the everlasting is not a figurative infinity, or a self-annihilating nirvana, or a personal heaven. Witnesses do not believe in hell or an eternal soul. Paradise is literally here, on this Earth, repopulated with the people who have lived before. Jehovah, he continues, encourages us to picture ourselves on the coming Earthly paradise. He pictures it often. He can’t really tell me exactly in five minutes, he says, but that’s it in a nutshell. Witnesses, he says, do not self-promote. Let’s look in Isaiah or Revelations. He opens the Bible to address the points of my metaphysical confusion. No, he says, boredom will not be an issue. Natural disaster and aging and sickness and sorrow will cease. Relatives, he says, will be reunited. We will get older, he says, and then younger together. It will be just like life now. Only, he says. The creased skin, the hubbub, the promotions billboarding the mall across the street, the pamphlets clogging sewer grates, the dim autumn light, they will all disappear.

He removes his glasses and I am touched by all I see in his eyes: longing, fatigue, years.

Only, he says, it will be perfect.

Following the Public Lecture at the Kingdom Hall and concluding hymn #161, ninety-thousand congregations across the globe will turn to page sixteen of The Watchtower for today’s Study. Ninety percent of all congregations study the same article every week. Millions of briefcases open. Millions of magazines turn to dog-eared pages, highlighted passages, underlined phrases.

At the front of the Hall, a Brother reads into a microphone from this week’s Watchtower. Another Brother poses the corresponding questions that footnote the bottom of each page. Two young Brothers patrol the aisles with microphones so the Witnesses can be heard. Millions of hands go up. Tens of mil-
lions of fingers: brown fingers, pale fingers, smooth, wrinkled, ringed fingers, manicured fingers, missing fingers. Yes, Brother—. Yes, Sister—.

The Witnesses publish four bullet points instructing HOW TO COMMENT AT MEETINGS. The fourth bullet suggests that each Witness try to comment in his or her own words. The answers come straight from the text. They come straight from personal experience. They repeat. They ramble. They make no sense. They are common sense. There are more hands than we have time for. Millions of answers are one answer:

Everyone’s going to lose their life, and that’s the Truth.
When we put all these things together the Truth makes a lot of sense.
The Truth makes good sense because it comes straight from Jehovah.
The blond boy in front of me can’t be older than nine. His mother pulls him close with an arm around the over-sized shoulder of his sandy-hued suit coat. He leans into her chest to read from the Watchtower on her lap. That’s where his notes are. He starts to read, but the microphone isn’t on. With remarkable composure, he waits. Because, he says both shy and sure, his small voice amplified when the mic clicks on. Because Jehovah loves us, that is why we follow His Truth.
The young Brother looks to his mom with big eyes.
Yes, she squeezes him to her. Good job.

Paragraph four. The next question has two parts. Yes. Thank you, the Brother leading the question session nods. Paragraph five. Six million hands, one answer. Thank you. Six, question, hands, answer, thank you. Seven. Eight. Nine.

At a later date, the coffee shop is crowded with University students in University sweats. The man in a light hounds’ tooth suit and matching vest attracts admiring gazes. Before sitting, he asks me about what it is I’m writing again. “We all want answers,” I tell him slowly. “And reasons, and reassurance.” We are, after all, rational animals, I continue, speaking generally. We want to know things for sure. We are perpetually asking and seeking and not-knowing and believing. I can see that he, this calm, content, sagely gentleman, possesses something tremendous. He has found something so powerful in the answers he knows by heart, that he seeks no more reasons, needs no more reassurance. If true salvation is possible, if salvation really exists, whatever salvation is, then, I reason, his salvation must certainly be the genuine item.

He sits, cautiously satisfied. He has maybe ten suits he tells me, though
he doesn’t really know. Maybe, he says, it’s closer to five or six. Remember, he says, Witnesses do not self-promote. Last week, when he saw me noting his hometown, he stopped me. It would be best if I didn’t write that down, he said. Today, at this familiar table, I’ve assembled a coffee cup and water bottle barrier, but it just makes his scrutiny more conspicuous and his insistence on personal transparency more contradictory. It’s not that he isn’t interested in me, he qualifies, or that he doesn’t want us to become acquainted. By way of explanation, he hands me a brochure titled *Jehovah’s Witnesses, Who Are They?*

The brochure, like all the literature, credits no authors, though Jehovah’s Divine inspiration is suggested. Whereas the emperor was exposed by his invisible clothes, the Witness is invisible by his Watch Tower guise. There are no portraits on the walls at the Kingdom Hall. We do not idolatrize, he says. He doesn’t know the names of any of the current members of the Governing Body. A little research reveals that when it was created in 1971 it contained eleven members: Frederick Franz, Raymond Franz, George Gangas, Leo Greenlees, John Groh, Milton Henschel, William Jackson, Nathan Knorr, Grant Suiter, Lyman Swingle, and Thomas Sullivan. The Governing Body has never consisted of more than eighteen men, selected for their loyalty rather than for their educational or their spiritual achievement. The majority are septuagenarians. Raised on and never weaned from the organization they refer to as their mother, the Governing Body governs from behind closed doors at the World Headquarters in Brooklyn, New York.

Every one of the Governing Body is one of the 8,000 living Anointed Ones. The Anointed Ones belong to the 144,000 Faithful and Discreet Slaves who will sit on cumulus thrones beside Him in his Heavenly Kingdom after Armageddon. Throughout history, the future rulers of paradise have known in their hearts of hearts that Jehovah has anointed them.

It isn’t important, he says, that he’s met one or two Anointed Ones. They are just like you and me. It isn’t like they have wings or a halo or are trailed by lightning or anything. Abel was the first, he says. Noah and his three sons were also and so was Jesus.

In the BX 8526s of the University Library stacks, there are over four shelves of literature pertaining to Jehovah’s Witnesses. Last week over coffee, the Witness suggested I check the website for information about Charles Taze Russell, the founder of the modern movement. The website yielded nothing substantial. Here, in the stacks, whole chapters are devoted to him along with all seven volumes of his magnum opus, *Studies in the Scriptures.* In one book, I see a glossy
picture of him taken in 1879. He is just a year older than I am, and rich. A stripe of beard connects his lip to his chin and then the trim facial hair follows up his jaw to his ear where it meets thick dark hair, combed so stiffly he might just have emerged from a bath. His wide eyes and his coy lips taunt me with their lack of dimension.

I turn each page hoping for a more intimate knowledge of this man, hoping to know the truth about him. Years pass as I skim. He is born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania in 1852. He would be a minister, his mother prophesized until she died in his ninth year. I see Charles, five years later, possessed. The adolescent feverishly chalks bible verse on cobble sidewalks. He leaves portents of hellfire and damnation in the men’s clothing store he manages for his father. His optimism, like that of any child, is heartbreaking: he believes he knows how to save the world.

There is a game of billiards near the end of his high school term, I read. He’s frustrated by his inability to reconcile the Hellfire of eternal damnation with a just, loving God. Lining up his shot, Charles asks his opponent, “Would you hold a puppy’s tail in the fire for even three minutes?” The ball hits the back of the pocket. He presses further, “A loving Father would never do that to his children.”

But, says his opponent, the voice of reason. In the Bible.

It is the Bible, God’s word, Truth, Charles realizes, that always trumps even the best logic, the most sincere emotion, the oldest ethic. He starts a Bible study group. Over a century later, I read his recollections of the group, “The study of the Word of God with these dear brethren led step by step into greener and brighter hopes for the world.” In the pages of the books I read, the names of his colleagues accumulate like empty shells: George Stetson, George Storrs, Nelson H. Barbour, Professor Fischer, Adam Clarke, Sir Isaac Newton, Dr. Joseph A. Seiss. These names hold nothing of the former selves. They do not self-promote.

The Witness I’ve been meeting seems to believe the opposite: his name contains him. By erasing it, he believes he’s effacing himself. Sitting in the library, I recollect one of our last meetings at the coffee shop: Two of them arrive together with their briefcases and long overcoats, like a pair of Feds about to flash badges and escort me to the station. I recognize my Witness’s partner from the Kingdom Hall, a tall and paunchy black man with gray sideburns and a smile that lifts his cheeks into creases beside his eyes. We shake hands. His grandfatherly grip embodies Study 33: Tactful yet Firm. He straightens his red tie, introduces himself and encourages me to shorten
his name. He’s a Syracuse grad who moved out here to get away from what he calls “East Coast arrogance” and to get a masters degree. His kids are students now. He recollects the perspective he once shared with former friends: Everyone out here in the Midwest is all the same, all corn-fed on ignorance and all dull.

“Funny,” I say. “My friends out East think the same thing. I love it here.”

Me too. He says.

We sit together and chat round a small table. Our chairs are pushed back so we don’t bump knees. The talk is trivial except that the Witness I’ve been meeting, the one who called three times the other morning just to check in, who always knows what chapter and verse to turn to, who is always so sure, keeps incorrectly referring to his fellow Witness as Bill.

But his name isn’t Bill, I say. And we all half-laugh into the tops of our paper coffee cups.

Oh. Yes, he says, he must have been thinking of that Celtics basketball player who won all those championships. He looks up to recollect the last name.

Bill Russell, I think for sure.

Bill Walton, he says.

“Bill Walton?”

Charles was a man, I conjecture from my reading, possessed with a kind of pig-headed innocence, believing with a touching combination of naïveté and conviction. He scoffed at the science of geologists and their timelines. “Of course, if we estimate [the age of the earth], just as these great men do, we should reach the same great conclusions.” Bishop James Usher’s King James calculations regarding the age of mankind, he concluded, had underestimated by 124 years. When Charles was not transported to heaven in at his initial predicted date of 1878, he revised. He interpreted the Greek *parousia* as “presence” rather than the traditional “coming,” and it was common knowledge that Christ’s presence, preceding Armageddon, would be felt during the seventh “day of the Lord.” He knew that the first day of the Lord began after Nebuchadnezzar overthrew Israel in 607 B.C., but converting “days of the Lord” to earthly days proved tricky. Charles finished his formula by equating a Lord’s day with the biblical use of the word “time.” He equated 1260 earthly days with a phrase from Revelation: “a time, and times, and half a time,” or three-and-a-half “times.” That meant seven “times,” seven days of the Lord, equalled 2520 days, or exactly seven 360-day scriptural years. Accordingly; Christ would arrive for the second time in 600 B.C.—six hundred years before the first time.
The contradiction didn’t stop Charles. He deduced that Jehovah had meant each of Charles’s 2520 days to equal one year. So Christ would arrive, invisible, smack in the fall of 1914. There was much to look forward to.

Congregations developed. Sitting in the straight-backed pews of a small chapel with white-washed walls, I see Charles striding and shouting and echoing off the walls. His black coat emphasizes every gesture. Charles, it’s true, is a man of great charisma and zeal. After the meeting, converts chuckle, slap backs, vow to take the literature to their neighbors.

The Studies in the Scriptures open on the carrel in front of me is the 1914 edition. The pages are browning like an apple slice left out too long. As I read Charles’s words, I hear the hymn we sang last week at the Kingdom Hall, Make the Truth Your Own. Charles writes:

“All these things have been hidden by the Lord, in such a manner that they could not be understood or appreciated until the due time had come…. The Truth seeker must, so far as possible, make every point, argument and proof his own.”

To make the truth their own, Russell’s Bible Students all read the same literature and all heard the same sermons proliferated by the same man. In addition to yearly speaking tours covering 30,000 miles across the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, Charles had columns syndicated in 4000 periodicals, reaching millions of weekly readers. By the time of his death, he had published over 50,000 printed pages. Writing at a rate of 781 pages a year for sixty-four years, the stack would rise about twelve feet. I imagine millions of towers four feet taller than the monument at his Pittsburg grave and twice his living height. With two volumes of his Studies under my arm, I carry a little of him home myself. His last words, uttered while suffering from cystitis in his private train-car, outside the little town of Pampa, Texas, on Halloween 1916, are revealing: “Wrap me in a Roman toga.”

We’ve mapped the whole world! he exclaims, looking through the steam of another cup of coffee. Every year, he and millions of others spend more than one billion hours evangelizing. They walk quiet sidewalks. They shoulder up busy streets. They go down dead-end dirt roads. It is, he says, the greatest preaching campaign the globe has ever known. Training occurs once a week at the Kingdom Hall. I recall a lesson: How heartwarming it is to know that even a paraplegic girl in India could turn the pages of her
Bible with her tongue and conduct the ministry over the phone. You too could have your name inscribed in Jehovah’s book. The Bible in the new system of things might read: Brother so and so was a friend of God. Wow! How would you like that?

His conversion story is nothing special, he tells me. There are plenty of conversion stories in past Watchtowers I should read, he says. Witnesses, he says, do not self-promote.

According to their website, Witnesses baptize about 250,000 members a year. As congregations develop, they generally do not exceed 200 members. Brothers and Sisters checkout territories like library books and form car groups to cover the miles. Pioneering, it’s called. They take inventory on a HOUSE-TO-HOUSE RECORD: CA – call again, NH – not home, B – busy, C – child, M – man, W – woman. The slips come in like corn to a September silo.

Generally, he says, it takes more than six months to be Fellowshipped. You can’t just sign up. It involves lifestyle change and informed consent. A committee of Elders interviews you from a list of over one hundred questions. Jehovah, you must know, cannot be seen or known, but He knows you like He knows all of the names of the 200 billion billion stars he created. Witnesses took the name Jehovah’s Witnesses in 1931, and they refer to Him as Jehovah because, he says, you would never deny your best friend his name. Nor would you hurt a friend, he says. Jehovah hates certain things: abortion, manslaughter, violence, hatred, sexual immorality, discrimination, spiritism, drunkenness, idolatry, stealing, lying, greed, improper speech. He loves you. That’s why, he says, he would not sell tobacco if he owned a convenience store. He would not administer blood transfusions as a doctor, nor would he accept a transfusion. An organ transplant would be okay, but only if the kidney was first drained of blood. He would not work for a defense contractor in any capacity. He would not fight in an Earthly war. He is non-political. He does not vote. The Supreme Court has ruled that he does not have to pledge allegiance to the flag.

He removes the plastic cap from his cup of coffee. Beads of condensation cling underneath. Witnesses don’t celebrate birthdays or Halloween or Easter or shake in the aisles or burn incense either, he continues. It doesn’t mean they don’t live joyfully, he says. They celebrate one day a year. See here in Luke 22:19.

His Bible is beautiful. The leather cover shows fond creases. He opens the book. I see his name inked in tilted script on the inside cover and then the pages are fluttering under his practiced fingers. Could he tell me a little about his Bible, I ask.
Yes, he says, the Bible is a practical book. Is it not amazing that some forty men, writing in a number of lands over a span of 1600 years, produced this beautiful consistent book? He describes it just as Charles Taze Russell did: harmonious and accurate. The Bible, he says, is historically sound. The Bible predicted in Matthew 24:9 that Witnesses would be persecuted. The Bible reflects a keen understanding of human nature. The Bible is scientifically accurate. In his Palm Pilot, he’s archived thirty years of *Watchtowers* and the article he references explains why a nuclear physicist believes the Bible. Witnesses remain distinct individuals, he says, but Bible study has allowed them to become happier and more balanced. The Bible, he says, contains the Truth. It says so right here in 2 Timothy 3:16. We know the Bible is the Truth, he says, because the Bible says it is the Truth.

I hold the Bible he gave me weeks ago in the palm of my hand. In 1950, an anonymous Committee produced the New World Translation of the Bible. It is more accessible than the King James version, without all those archaic Thees and Thoues, without mention of hellfire, without a cross, without the abstraction of the Tetragrammaton. In this translation, Jehovah is mentioned by name over 9,000 times. The 1,600 cross-referenced pages are thin as tissue and square as a postcard. The black plastic cover mimics authentic leather. New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures is stamped in gold.

He removes his bifocals and inspects them. He drinks the cooling coffee with big silent gulps. The Truth, he quotes Jesus with unrelenting eyes, will set you free. See here, in Matthew 24:3, it says Jesus will be invisible. Now why would Jesus need to give us signs of his arrival if he was visible? Knowing Jesus is like knowing Truth, he tries to explain. It can depend on just the right question at just the right time.

Is it so improbable to suppose he might acknowledge himself in such a way as to reveal an identity separate from the literature? Take a moment now to marvel at how unique we all are! Look into the reflection in your coffee. Look at the man across the table. See all of that man with those small cartoonish ears and that gracious concern. In his hand, he holds a book that eliminates mystery, has seen everything, can give sight to those who have none.

One blind man exclaims the elephant is a snake, while another insists it is a wall.

After the *Watchtower* Study ends with hymn # 152, he introduces me. Brother, Sister, this is Matthew.
Are you his son? If you’re writing about us, you’ll have to come back to see if we’ve been brainwashed or if we really know the Truth. Matthew! Matthew! It’s complicated: I was Catholic until I turned nineteen. The day I was supposed to meet with my pastor—I was searching for the Truth then, probably like you are today—to discuss my feelings, two witnesses came to the door. It had been raining all week. When I opened the door I saw they had brought the sun. I believe in omens. I already hated Christmas, so that was easy. It has roots in paganism, you know. I was working in a mall, and I saw people transformed into animals. Matthew! Matthew! I met my husband, a Brother, in the Phillipines. We’re really very accepting here. Are you at the U? What do you think computers have done to the English language? Can you explain what you teach, I don’t understand. I can never keep fiction and nonfiction straight. Which one is real? Matthew! Matthew! Did you know that all the Halls are built by volunteers? I worked in the gardens outside and helped with the concrete. I do hardwood floors. I do tile. I used to teach psychology to grad students. I’m an architectural engineer. You grew up in Maine, have you ever had lobster? I like seafood. My sister-in-law is always cooking shellfish. We’ve seen the Atlantic. No whale is exactly the same.

I’m a category five Hurricane, one elderly gentleman says to me. I’ve got six kids and the oldest is 51. I’ve got fourteen grandkids. I’m 79 and my wife’s 82. Your name’s Matthew? You’ve got a whole book dedicated to you. He hefts his beaten leather Bible to my chest. Read this, he instructs. It’s John 17:3.

Three women spectate from the row in front of me. Another Brother drapes his arms across the shoulders of his two children. I keep thinking about what he said to me weeks ago in the coffee shop, about finding something he loves and wanting to share it with others. He said something else too. He said it is the gift of Truth that converts, not him, not the Witness. Remember that book you read years ago? Remember how confusing it was then, until, without warning, everything made sense? The Truth in the text silently converts, surreptitiously saves, invisibly passes into you. It makes a host of you. You carry the Truth now. You love the Truth. You see nothing but Truth.

He looks grimly over my shoulder as the verse speaks: *This means everlasting life, their taking knowledge of you, the only true God, and of the one whom you sent forth, Jesus Christ.*

You know the opposite’s true too, don’t you Matthew? If you don’t put faith in Jehovah—
—he chops his neck with his hand.
The day after Christmas, I am in my parents’ house in Maine and a shiny black SUV comes sliding down the isolated driveway. It’s the Witnesses. My mom says she hasn’t seen them in years. Refusing to believe that this house call is mere serendipity, I try to rationalize. He could have called them from Iowa City and told them to look me up. Our house might just have come up next in this territory’s rotation.

I don’t open the door all the way, but I open it. Snow melts from the roof in drips that darken the front step. They brought the sun, I think, creepy. There are four of them. Two men wait in the idling vehicle. One woman does most of the talking. She introduces herself and her partner. She asks me my name. She asks if I have a Bible. While she assures me that there is a creator who cares, her partner looks past, into the kitchen, as if she recognizes the warmth inside. I take a *Watchtower* and we chat about the weather and hometowns. I tell her I’m glad to be back with my family, listening to old audio cassette-tapes of birthdays past and eating stocking chocolates. That sounds nice, she says, but what about my post grad-school plans.

Questions like this one, that come from out of the blue and engage me and my future, are never easy. I avoid them by tricking myself into thinking I know who I am, what I want, who I will become. Though I Know How I Ought To Answer—with An Effort To Reach the Heart—today, I have none.

She senses my discomfort. Moving her lips to anticipate the first syllable, she asks me my name again.

I tell her, and, still struggling to answer her first question, I mumble vague optimisms.
a bluebird left its broken wing
under my window—light bones
and feathers make for short letters—good
read though—blew right through me—
told of an old man in the park
whittling a hull frame over a chessboard—
ribs for a ship—unless not
ribcage but birdcage—wings unfold
into good letters—one thing a wing most
means is bluebluewater—cold—hey
just the other day I saw a finch
splashing in the gutter—bathing, for a bird,
makes wings wooden
for you too—you and I we
need the sky to keep us clean
A. J. COLLINS

Demolition of the Sky

We'll never run out of boxes for this bunch of
From the west comes the ring of an egg
snapped on the edge of a porcelain bowl.
Fissures craze above the Pacific, but the waves
tongue along, up from the ocean’s invisible floor
we mapped with our echoes. We read the almanac
and harvest early, worrying about the questions
our children don’t ask. There’s no such thing
as a shy god. We tear down the night’s bestiary
to keep our lovers from being eaten. When we wake
to find their side of the bed huge and ghostly,
smelling of them—tomato stems and gin—
we roll onto it, pressing from the absolute cotton
the wide specks of each desertion, the wilderness
another person’s silence demands we expand.
TERITA HEATH-WLAZ

Pond Things in Drought

Watch the agony break apart like an ice cap
in the having of a sandwich.
It will come back to drown you later,
Floridians, Brooklymites. Keep this in mind,
that cresting waves may illuminate a northbound cue of fish.

When we embrace, breasts move aside like iron gates opening.
Our hearts peek at each other like child emperors.
The sadness of immortal things blossoms,
a fragrance which draws international crowds,
and makes wounded birds of Maui hotels.
I deliver a little speech from behind my handkerchief,
since I hear that speeches are on the up and up.

I admire your beautiful South American hair.
But one day you and I both will
know the panic of pond things in drought.
Francis Varsho took leave from opening his birthday presents to calm himself in private. Almost all gifts people gave him these days insulted Francis deeply, as though, through the act of generosity, they were trying to undermine his sense of self. The latest offender—on this, his twelfth birthday—was his grandmother, whom he’d not seen in over a year and who hadn’t bothered to show up for his birthday dinner of square pizza and two kinds of root beer. The gifts, a pair of pajamas covered with spaceships and a lame Star Hunter action figure which Francis already had plans to behead, came to him through the mail from her home in Lansing. He remembered his grandmother as a woman with orange hair and tinted eyeglasses, too virile-looking to play a convincing grandparent. He knew very little about her life otherwise, except that she’d recently lost her cat, Barnaby, to an electrocution.

“My blood isn’t coagulating right,” Francis said.

His mother was already eating one of the store-bought cupcakes. A crown of vanilla frosting sprouted like a white thorn from her upper lip.

He wondered if he’d used ‘coagulate’ properly. It was a word Dr. Gillson said often, and he figured his mother recognized that much. When frustrated, Francis believed he could feel the blood thinning, like a slackening around his heart, a faint buoyancy under the skin of his hands. “I’ll just need a moment to myself,” he added.

At the bathroom mirror, Francis took deep breaths and massaged his scalp the way he’d seen the yoga lady do it on public access channel nineteen. He was moving his fingertips in swirls rearward from his temples, through the mess of thick brown hair, when he came across a dime-sized lump on the back of his head. It felt gummy and coarse at the same time, warm to the touch, like a dog’s nose when dry.

He returned to the living room, still fingering the unknown bump beneath his hair. “What have you been telling grandmother about me?”
On the television, women in bathing suits ate cockroaches.
"I told her you were into sci-fi," his mother said.
"It’s not really that simple," said Francis.
"I think that stuff is really cool." She emphasized the last word in a way that convinced Francis she was too old to be using it.
"You can’t just say ‘sci-fi,’” said Francis. “People don’t get it. They send me action figures.”

His mother turned from the television. “At least she sent you something.”
This, Francis understood, was a direct cut at his father, whose gift had apparently been delayed by the post office. There were rumors of a billboard along the highway somewhere with his father’s face on it. He sold real estate in a place south of Detroit, near Lake Erie, and if he was doing as well as Francis had heard, this year’s gift would be better than ever before.

When his mother went outside for a cigarette, Francis snuck a short knife from the forbidden drawer in the kitchen, taking an older, duller blade, figuring she wouldn’t notice it missing. He hauled the presents upstairs, climbed onto his bed, and folded his legs into lotus position. He’d been training to be an ancient guild ninja in a new-school sort of way, without the guild, or the mentor, or any formal training whatsoever. He’d taught himself difficult things before—how to record on the VCR, how to tie a hangman’s noose—and lately he believed that, with enough intense concentration, he could will himself into martial arts expertise.

Francis liked science-fiction because of the promises it made about the way things might turn out. He read and watched every bit he could find, from the Cold War classics to the newest, most experimental stuff at the margins of the cable TV universe. He loved it all, as long as it didn’t show up on lunch boxes or become some fad all the kids at school were into. Two Christmases ago, his father had given him a subscription to Other Worlds, a science-fiction monthly so obscure and fledgling that it failed to go to press some months. Dear Subscriber, We regret to inform you that due to budget shortfalls, OTHER WORLDS will not be publishing an April issue. Francis carried the little postcard with him everywhere, like a secret badge of honor.

After a while, he unfolded his legs, rolled off the bed, and demonstrated several advanced attacks, calling them out as he performed them—roundhouse! eye gouge! side kick! neck chop!—envisioning, as he flailed, his grandmother. The tinted glasses, the crumbs of make-up in her wrinkles, her blue-veined hands like faded roadmaps. He could see her wandering the aisles of K-Mart, the dead cat Barnaby under her arm, asking where the “sci-fi toys” are located.
When he’d sufficiently exhausted his repertoire of maneuvers, he calmed his blood with more meditation. He then took out the knife and muscled the dull blade through the neck of the action figure.

“Francis?” His mother appeared in the doorway, a creamy white mustache of bleach on her upper lip, and her hair wound into hot-pink curlers that made clicking sounds as they cooled. “Do you know why my hand mirror smells?”

He tucked the knife into the fold of belly fat beneath his shirt.

“I’m going out with Mr. Pope tonight so I need to use that mirror, and it smells funny. Do you have any idea why?” She paused for him to offer up a confession.

Francis waited with her, the cool blade warming against his stomach.

“Do you want me to buy you your own mirror?” she asked.

He did not want this. He wanted to go on using hers, in secret. For months, he’d been looking for a barcode somewhere on his body, exploring all corners of himself, places he figured most people never dared to survey—the calloused skin between his toes, the sour basins of his armpits, and the cagey, unknowable netherzone beneath his butt crack. His mother would buy him a crappy little plastic mirror that would forever remind him of how weird he knew she knew he was.

“I didn’t use your mirror,” he insisted.

She accepted his denial with a long unconvinced glare, and bumped herself upright with a push of her hip off the doorjamb. “Whatever,” she said. “I guess I’ll go wash my mirror now.”

Francis’s face felt hot. His chest sloshed with loose blood. He extracted the knife from the fold of fatty skin and checked that there were no cuts. His heart pumped too fast now, and because his blood didn’t clot properly, he knew he could no longer risk even a small wound.

Though he’d thought about doing it for a long time, the discovery of the mole-like lump at the back of his scalp finalized Francis’s decision to shave his head. His mother loved the heavy dark locks on his head, and made constant reference to the fact that girls would eventually be so lucky to date his hair. Mr. Pope, their landlord, had nice hair too, she had said, though his was darker and combed straight back in long oily quills as though he constantly jetted forward. Mitch, the guy she dated before Mr. Pope, had had nice hair as well, and when Francis thought about the two men as a series, it struck him that his mother might have let his father leave them on the grounds of hair quality alone.
He'd studied his father's bald spot since it was the size of a quarter. The last time he'd seen him, a little over two-and-a-half years ago, the baldness had spread over the whole top of his head. Hair loss seemed to destroy some men, but his father hadn't cared at all. "Who needs hair anymore, right Frank?" he'd say, glancing his fingers over the shiny scalp. "It's the wave of the future."

After watching his mother skip down the front steps into Mr. Pope's giant black car, Francis went to her bathroom, taped a blue towel over the window, pulled the nightlight out of the socket, and lit his mother's vanilla candles on the sink. He fished the beard trimmer—the one she'd bought but never gave to his father—out of the shoebox in her closet. Still in mint condition, the device looked pitiful in the way outmoded things always do. It clicked on and hummed an eerie tickle through the bones in his arm.

"Wave of the future," he said, and ran the trimmer through the part in his hair.

In the morning, his mother slept in, so Francis got to school late on his piece-of-crap ten-speed. His nemesis, Foster Brown, sat behind him in first period math poking at the gummy mass on the back of his head, whisper-chanting, "Ham-burger, Ham-burger." Except for its size, the mole-lump did look like a hamburger patty—a circular flat brown glob with a chewy surface to it. Even the charitable kids, in whose merciful logic Francis could occasionally take refuge, solemnly agreed.

By recess, everyone was calling him 'Hamburger.'

"Turn around, so I can smell it," Foster Brown demanded. Foster had a turned-up nose and a scar-gap in his eyebrow from where he'd once taken a hockey puck to the face. He laid his hand on Francis's newly-shaved dome and tried to turn him as if unscrewing a jar. As Francis spun away, Foster sniffed him and announced to the gathering recess crowd, "It smells like a Big Mac!"

Atop the monkey bars, at the far end of the recess world, Francis could escape. The row of steel piping reminded him of something he'd read in Other Worlds. In the story there'd been a catwalk suspended above a laboratory where people were put into pods and implanted with special skills like jujitsu and nuclear core repair. It had been a great story, serialized, coming to him in three out of five installments. The subscription ran out before he received parts four and five, and his father, who, by then, had gone to live near Lake Erie, wasn't around to renew it. Francis had been surprised when his mother noticed that he was not getting "that magazine" anymore. She winked at him
when she remarked at this, as if she were going to take care of it, but when Christmas came around, he got a commemorative *Star Wars* placemat and a red cable-knit sweater.

He rubbed his bare head, feeling the cat-tongue coarseness of the fresh-cut stubble, then the little lump in back. It was, he decided, the type of birthmark which signified the sort of rare destiny bestowed only upon certain young tortured heroes-in-waiting. A new kind of barcode, something more advanced than simple lines and numbers, something the current human technology wouldn't yet understand.

"Hey Hamburger!" Foster Brown's voice approached from behind. "I saw your dad last weekend."

Francis swiveled atop the monkey bars to find the brute staring up at him. In the distance, Foster's henchmen threw asphalt chunks at the fat girls.

"He's on a billboard," Foster said. "Looks like you, only not as ugly." He grabbed his crotch, yanking a wad of his jeans into a mound.

Francis let his lids fall closed. No one ever fought him on account of his disorder, but he figured if he could dismount the monkey bars fast enough and sweep-kick Foster Brown's nuts off the front of his body, the question of retaliation would become irrelevant. He opened his eyes, winked, then leapt down onto his nemesis.

Foster braced himself, deflecting the attack with a hard shoulder.

Francis landed in the woodchips. He knew the duel had already ended, and that upon failing with his initial attack, Foster wouldn't be baited further. He checked his hands and elbows for cuts. As he looked up, Foster pounced on him, a sweaty palm clutching at Francis's throat and then a dull weight smashing his nose. The whole front of his face burst open. His head recoiled from the blow and floated backwards until woodchips poked into his naked skull.

Foster hovered for a moment. His hulkish figure jutted sideways into the sky, then vanished.

As Francis sat up, blood painted two red fangs down the front of his shirt. In the distance, kids played on, oblivious. He ran behind the equipment shed at the edge of the playground, the shriek and laughter of games going on everywhere like taunting voices in his head. He exhaled through his nose and sprayed a red mist over his knees. He tried to stuff the collar of his shirt up his nostrils. The end-of-recess bell rang. A final burst of noise rippled across the playground, and then the din began to move off toward the building. He felt himself growing heavy against the wall of the
shed, shrinking into the unmowed grass. The sky spun on a strange axis. Drowsiness gnawed at the edges of his thoughts.

Francis awoke on a hospital gurney. A woman wore a pink smock. A tall man with little mole eyes appeared from behind a curtain.

“If you’re looking for the barcode,” said Francis, “it’s on my head.”

They wheeled him into a different room of the hospital. A woman’s voice sounding like his mother’s talked into a phone on the other side of the door. Tubes ran up his nose and into the vein-purple crook in his arm. Machines clicked and whirred all around, marking the moments like clocks counting a new strain of time. A bag of clear syrup and a bag of blood hung from nearby dollies.

He wondered how much time had passed.

The voice in the hallway grew louder and he could see though the crack in the door that his mother looked ancient. Her eyes were crow-footed. Loose jowls shivered in her neck. Had he been frozen? The body aches suggested he’d been operated on extensively, perhaps made into some kind of cyborg. He brought his hand to his ear, opened and closed the fist, listening for the toil of gears beneath the skin.

The door swung open. The old woman stepped in, said, “Yes, uh huh, okay, bye,” into her cell phone, then clicked it off. “Francis, you’re awake,” she said. “Do you remember me?”

“What year is it?” He’d always wanted to say this, and it felt only slightly less exciting than he’d hoped.

The old woman laughed, and a tiny bone-colored hand curled over her mouth, and Francis realized his mother wasn’t there at all. A doctor in a wavy lab coat breezed into the room. “The monster awakes!” The doctor smelled of Italian food and he tasted the corners of his mouth as he read a chart. “Looks like we finally stopped you up,” he said.

The old woman pulled a pair of tinted eyeglasses from her purse and leaned over the doctor’s shoulder.

“What have you turned me into?” The dryness of his throat made Francis’s voice sound grave. He opened and closed his fist again, sure now that he could hear the gears. Francis swallowed hard to show that it wasn’t easy to wake up as a machine, but his eyes bore straight ahead to advertise a manly resolve to harness the gifts that his new condition would surely bring.

The doctor turned away. “So, you’re the boy’s...”

“Grandmother,” the old woman said. “His mother couldn’t make it, so I came to get him.”
Francis caught bits of the doctor’s report: some bruising around the nose and eyes, significant blood loss, IVs, platelets, blood coagulants, not so big a deal if it had been someone else.

On the way home, the dream began to break apart. The future slipped away. None of the cars on the highway looked ultramodern. A rusted-out beater dragged its sparking muffler ahead of them. Jumbo jets blinked drowsily in the night sky. Francis called his grandmother “future mom,” until she told him that people don’t go crazy unless they fall on their head.

At home, everything was exactly as he’d remembered—the same fruit in the basket next to the toaster, the same soggy pizza crusts in the sink’s drain catch. His mother reclined on the couch watching *Wheel of Fortune*.

“Where’s your hair?” she exclaimed, rolling herself off the couch.

“How come you weren’t at the hospital?” he asked.

“Oh honey, you know I can’t stand hospitals.” This was true. She hadn’t visited Francis’s father when he’d had hernia surgery years ago. Francis remembered him citing this fact while yelling at her in the kitchen a few weeks before he left and didn’t come back.

“Besides.” She stopped a few paces short to get a look at Francis. “Your Grammy was there to watch over you.”

Francis received a cued smile from the old woman who looked nothing like a “Grammy.” He resolved to find out her real name and call her by it.

“But I was bleeding,” he said.

His mother finally moved close enough to hug him. “Francis, where did all your hair go?” She gripped his shoulders, pushing him to arm’s length. “Did they shave it off at the hospital?”

He ran his hand over the top of his head. “I like it.”

“That’s why I hate hospitals.” She pivoted her gaze momentarily to the television and then back to Francis. “Oh, honey, you had such beautiful hair!”

“It’s the wave of the future,” he said.

His grandmother huffed. “Oh yes. Get this. He’s been calling me ‘future mom,’ all the way home.”

“He reads too much sci-fi.” His mother pulled him into her arms again. “Oh Frank, your poor hair!”

When his mother had company over—and his grandmother felt like company—Francis snuck up into the attic, a cramped little storage space with thousands of nails coming through the slanted walls and the floor
awash with the half-discarded junk of the last five tenants. Their own boxes of photo albums, baby clothes, and holiday decorations had been tossed up so haphazardly by his mother’s old boyfriend Mitch that much of the contents had spilled out and mixed with the things left behind by previous renters. The resulting jumble reminded Francis of a post-apocalyptic setting. He felt a strange joy at trudging through the swamp of trash and memories, pausing here and there to examine a picture of a family he didn’t know or a plastic baby’s rattle which might have been his way back before the great disaster. He felt like a survivor, a man turned archaeologist, sifting through the ruins of a leveled civilization.

Under a broken stroller, Francis kept a pile of his old school papers and a book of poems his second-grade teacher had bound into a collection. On page sixteen was his own poem about a trip his parents had taken him on to Mackinac Island. There’d been a boardwalk full of seafood restaurants and carnival booths and a fortune teller who told Francis she saw visions of him as an astronaut. Beside the poem, he’d drawn three smiling people labeled “Me,” “Mom,” and “Dad.” Looking at it now, though, the picture seemed ridiculous and deceitful. He could already see the lousy future: the kid who lived there next would wander up into the attic, see that drawing, and think Francis’s father still had all that hair.

His nose began to throb, a pulsing warmth at the center of his face, like the blood trying to get out again. He took a magic marker from the floor and wrote onto the margin of page sixteen: If anyone finds this poem, it was written by Francis T. Varsho, a boy the asswipes at school called Hamburger. Don’t believe any of the happy drawings or the cute little baby clothes. I became bald as an eagle with blood so thin I was barely ever alive.

Though he felt well enough on Friday morning, Francis lobbied against returning to school until after the weekend. His mother consented on the condition that he stay at the house with Grammy for a few days while she drove up to Windsor to gamble with Mr. Pope. Francis hated these negotiations. He wanted to tell her that he hated them, but instead he avoided her all morning, hoping she’d sense his displeasure and withdraw her request. At lunch, his mother suggested there was still time to drop him off at school for the second half of his classes.

“What’s Grammy’s name?” he asked, wrapping two leaves of bologna around a wand of string cheese.

“Edna,” his mother said.
"Edna what?"
"Edna Traylor," she said. "Don't you know what my maiden name was?"
"Her name is Edna Traylor?"
"Yes," his mother said. "Why do you need to know?"
"Okay," said Francis. "You can go to Windsor."
Mr. Pope's black Cadillac appeared in the driveway an hour later. Francis's grandmother folded a twenty dollar bill and stuffed it into his mother's blouse. "Put twenty on black for me." The old woman looked out the window at Mr. Pope's car gleaming in the afternoon sun. "Now go get lucky."

Dinner was spinach lasagna from one of the cookbooks his mother never used. His grandmother chewed slowly with closed eyes as if her teeth were crumbling. He wondered if she was thinking about her electrocuted cat, Barnaby. Francis wanted to ask her about it. He wanted also to address the old woman with her real name to see if it bothered her, but the lasagna tasted good and he instead concentrated on appreciating it.

"This is really good." He scooped an extra-large bite into his mouth and chewed it with a smile to show his sincerity.

His grandmother winced. "You look like your father," she said. "It must make your mom miserable to see his face all the time."
"Do you think he knows I was in the hospital?" Francis asked.
She rose from the table to cover the remaining lasagna with foil. "You were only there for half a day."
"Maybe we should go visit him. Mom said it's only a three-hour drive."
His grandmother wiped down the counters, the stovetop, the tile behind the sink. "Really," she said, "it must make her miserable."

Francis finished and excused himself. In his mother's bathroom he found the vanilla candles, a canister of shaving cream, and one of the plastic blue razors left behind by somebody. He ran the sink full of hot water and dipped his head in as deep as he could. The hot wet beads tingled as they ran lines down his face and neck. The collar of his T-shirt darkened. Once he'd molded a thick coif of shaving cream over his whole scalp, he drew the razor slowly through the bristled fuzz.

A knock came at the door, and in the mirror he could see the brass knob jiggle against the lock. "Francis, are you in there?" his grandmother asked. "I smell burning. Is something on fire?"
"No, Edna," he said. "Nothing's on fire."

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The doorknob quit jiggling, but he could still hear the old woman’s breath on the other side of the door. “Excuse me?”
“I’m fine,” he said.
“Did you call me Edna?”
He dragged another strip of foam off his head and slung the dollop into the sink.
“What did you say, Francis?”
“I said, ‘it’s the wave of the future!’” he yelled.
Edna’s footsteps creaked slowly away.
When Francis finished shaving, he rinsed off the excess foam and rubbed lotion into his head. The shine was glorious. In the TV room, he sat down across the couch from Edna, who stared at him but said nothing about the clean shave. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her head pivot every few seconds. She huffed, opened her mouth, but then didn’t speak. He began to enjoy how completely distracted she’d become.
“You’re bleeding,” she finally said.
He turned to her, thinking he hadn’t heard correctly.
“That mole thing on your head is bleeding down the back of your neck.” She dabbed her forefinger against his head and showed him the red smudge.
In the bathroom he washed the cut, jammed it with Kleenex fibers. He returned to the couch, announcing that he was fine, but the cut continued to bleed, and he could feel the cool channel trickling down the back of his neck. He applied pressure to staunch it, but his arm grew tired and his thumb ached, and soon, Francis had to lie in Edna’s lap while she kept pressure on the wound for him. She changed tissues during the commercial breaks, remarking each time that he was “quite a leaker.” Her constant thumb against his skull gave Francis a headache and he began to grow dizzy. As the chills ran through his torso and a fierce agitation swelled behind his eyes, he began, in spite of his most vehement resistance, to cry.
He couldn’t bear passing out again only to wake up in the same lousy era where science was still just fiction, where schools were overrun with foster browns, and snail-paced cars took three hours to get anywhere important.

His grandmother came into his bedroom the next morning. She lifted the bandage off the back of his head and said, “Looks better. Can you travel?”
He nodded and soon they were hauling through the morning light in Edna’s maroon Buick. She let him control the radio, and he respected the privilege by keeping away from the hard rock stations, eventually locating a relaxing new-
age channel toward the end of the FM dial. It had overlapping synthesized tones, heartbeat bass lines, and a woman's voice crooning a soothing, wordless lament.

By late morning they approached Lansing. "I need to stop at my house," Edna announced, and soon they pulled off the highway into a cruddy part of town where all the houses looked small brick forts. Edna stopped at one with a rusted awning and a white porcelain cat in the window. The inside was exactly the kind of place in which he imagined old people lived out their days. The television had a turn-knob.

"Is this black and white?" He took a swipe of dust off the screen.

"Sometimes." She picked up a green porcelain lamp, drew its electric cord slowly through her closed palm, wincing as a melted segment of the wire stopped inside her fist. "Bring that shade."

Francis found the lampshade in the corner beside a scratching post and followed her out the back door into the alley where she dropped the lamp into a garbage can. He handed her the shade and she jammed it down on top, the porcelain breaking up beneath her hands.

"I've been meaning to do that," she said, giving the lampshade a final shove.

Lansing drifted off behind them. A thin haze filled the world as they crossed an open land of unplanted fields on one side and an empty limestone quarry on the other.

"Are we going to see my Dad?" Francis asked.

Edna stared down the highway. Finally, she nodded, and then said she'd heard of a good restaurant from a friend. It would be a bit of a drive, she added, but Francis didn't complain because he was getting what he wanted.

They lost their way trying to get to the restaurant and had to ask for directions, but when they found the place it was about as good as promised. They got refills of their cokes and let themselves digest for awhile before getting back on the road.

Toward Detroit, the new-age signal finally gave itself up to static. Empty factories drew in along the sides of the highway, tree limbs reaching out through the broken windows. Boxcars sat rusting on deserted rails. Derelict machinery hunched everywhere like massive insect husks. Choking plots of grassland bloomed with roadside garbage.

Edna cleared her throat. "Why don't you tell me about one of the stories your mother says you're always reading."

Francis looked out over the landscape and described for her one that
he'd lately been revisiting from an early issue of *Other Worlds* called "After the Apocalypse." In the story there'd been a nuclear war, and afterward, the survivors were left with a world which looked, he thought, a lot like that tract of bruised earth through which they drove.

"Some visions of the future promise less than others," Edna agreed.

A sign announced where highways divided—one into Detroit, the other south toward Toledo. Francis asked again if they were really going to see his father.

His grandmother shook her head. "Do you want to?" Her eyes read the distance through her tinted glasses, her wrinkled yellow hands shuffling on the steering wheel like chicken feet.

"Did you call to tell him that we're coming?" Francis asked.

Edna's foot pulled off the accelerator, and the car whinnied as it crossed the rumble strip and plowed to a stop on the shoulder. Cars blew past carrying little storms of wind that shivered the Buick. "I heard about this thing," she said.

Francis turned his gaze ahead to a bright billboard rising from the salt-stained grass at the side of the road. A picture of a family—husband, wife, and baby—advertising something. Red block lettering exclaimed, *LET VARSHO REALTY PUT YOU IN THE HOME OF YOUR DREAMS.*

The husband on the billboard looked a little like his father, except that he had a full head of hair, a thick brown wave of it like a stain of youth on the otherwise middle-aged man. This man on the billboard—it did sort of look like his father—had an arm wrapped around the wife, who was much younger than the husband, with soft dark eyes and pouty, dangerous lips. A swaddled blue-eyed child stared out from her arms. Francis looked for a while longer, concentrating mostly on the unexplained surge of hair which clung to the once-proud scalp of the father who, he was willing to admit, did look a good deal like his own father.

When Francis's eyes had had enough of the billboard, Edna put the Buick in gear. She waited for a pair of cars to whip past, then gunned the motor, flopping back onto the interstate. They continued south for a while, but then she pulled off the highway again onto a lonely road full of forsaken strip malls and connected housing. Edna stopped the Buick in front of a complex of homes all with the same kind of windows in the same places and only the front doors painted different.

"I thought we were going to my Dad's," said Francis.

Edna left him in the car. She knocked on the nearest house's door and
a gray-haired man opened up. A dirty smock hung from his neck and he wore a circular doctor’s mirror on his forehead. Edna followed him inside. After a time, she reappeared, looking concerned with the chill in the air. She lowered herself carefully back into the driver’s seat and drew open her cardigan. A gray kitten the size of a gerbil slumped like a damp hand towel over her forearm.

“He’s mine.” Edna handed him the kitten. “But you can hold him while I drive.”

“Are we still going to see my Dad?”

“It’s too late now,” she said.

“But we’re close.” He wasn’t sure of this, but once he’d rifled through the glove compartment in search of a map and found none, he realized she already had them going toward home again.

“What should we name him?” Edna drew her hand back from petting the kitten, put it on the wheel, and revved up the highway ramp.

As they gained speed, Francis turned to get a look at a billboard advertising to the opposite side of the highway. It wasn’t the one. Another billboard approached, but it was for a casino, and then another for a Holiday Inn. As he waited for the next, he wondered if he’d somehow missed the one he’d been looking for, or if perhaps it lay much farther ahead than he remembered. Francis settled into his seat, unsure if he even really wanted to get another look at it.

He turned the static on low volume in anticipation of the new-age music returning, and thought about the story he’d been describing earlier—the leveled cities, the evaporated populations, the diseased and wounded survivors left to ponder whether their luck had been especially good or uniquely terrible. It wasn’t the kind of science-fiction he usually read. He preferred the stories where the future had more clearly lifted off from the present. But as he eyed the world which passed by his window, the salt-strangled grasses growing up through the bits of collision debris and fast food trash, this was the story that came to mind.
We were thinking of starting a band, all lined up like ducks in a shooting gallery.

This one would be gem, that one metamorphic, the rest pebbles and some laboratory-grown semi-precious stones. The trees were in it for the long-run, they swayed or stood stoic, sheltered what they could. We made the cast as an idle grouping, we played the trump, the idiot, the glue. We backdropped with hearts hardly beating, our eyes set straight in our heads: the bombed out schoolkids, the oilfields scrubbed in turns. We chewed the fat amongst ourselves. You said, this place should be more festive: a lightning bolt, a snail, a fraud. I set a crumb aside for the local roof rat; you tallied the droppings, the amputees, the gold. I blew my top when you lost "Dominion." You said, what can be done?—it's gone, it's gone. Wind started in through the rift-way, buzzed over our slate-blue bones. All the leaves have aged with kindness, all our pretend looped and windowed raggedness went largely unseen. We were on stage the whole performance, held our breath for the final moments with cheeks rent
and red. No neck was slit on our backs, no distraught lover jumped from our cliff’s edge. There was a stirring backstage we could sense it: a temptress, some anger, some sin. Weeds came thick around us. The act had been bungled sorely. We withheld our opinions, sat in wait. We were good for a throwing.
Finale

There was a plan for exit, it was called:
“Swan Song of the Rock in the Sling.”
“Adieu,” said the girl from her riverbed;
“So long,” chimed the duo of clowns.

Somewhere the clink of a leaking faucet, outside
a Niagara of thick summer air. The show unraveled
as a series of head-scratches, capped with a punch
that soured in age. I was geared for applause
and promotion; you took to the boot,
the toad, and the fawn. Modesty’s its own
advertisement, the free-for-all a false doubling
with us locked at the knee. I decked the lawn
with a gauze of finery; you set springs
to catch woodcocks. I gave a jab, you a snip,
I a dig, you a fib. We stood cheek to cheek
amidst the foliage of our misdeeds. On the plains
a cracking open, on the homefront the newly blasted
territories divvied up for greed. From then on,
the gold wore teethmarks; from then on, the coal
smoked the trees. We felt the demotion
as rubble; we backfill, we sediment. An avalanche,
the final curtain. We look to learn, we went forward as one.
Bennett Ramsey woke up in his cot, bunkered behind cardboard boxes and mismatched draperies in the corner of the store’s balcony loft. He wiped drool crust from his moustache, and tried to identify what had changed in the air: A smell or a noise. Some new gradient of light. He couldn’t tell. It was ten days before the bank would take over, hours before daylight, and Bennett felt the seeping return of anger and his certainty that no one would ever again be so closely tuned to this place—this building, this square of earth, this merchandise. He tried to make himself feel philosophical: It was only his portion of the general wane and sunset of the world. But he dreaded the appearance of another day.

“Get up,” he finally said. He washed at the deep metal sink in the corner of the loft, watching himself in the water-stained mirror as he trimmed his moustache and drew a steady comb through his white hair. His face seemed thinner between temple and jaw, peanut-shaped, and there was a softness along his jaw line that seemed to be where his former face had settled. He walked to the balcony edge and looked over the silent shapes below, and then went down.

He paced the aisles. The change was in the merchandise. Some Doppler twang that no one else could sense or even believe in. He fingered fabric, checked every shoe for its match, listened to the floors groan. He became briefly convinced that someone had untaped all the corners of the window signs—Levis, $8.99!!; All Winter Stock Half Off!!—and retaped them exactly where they had been. Then he thought the sweaters had been restacked, the expensive wool cardigans that sat there, unsold. He was sure the navy blue cardigan had been moved underneath the lime green. As though someone had taken an ordinary color and replaced it with something brighter and more ridiculous, something to make him look brighter and more ridiculous.

He put on the lime green cardigan and looked at himself in the three-way mirror. “Good sweater,” he said.
Outside, a tiny bit of light snuck into the darkness, giving the plate glass a
veneer of silver. He walked back upstairs, still wearing the sweater, and plugged
in the coffee pot. He’d been living in the loft for four months. It was starting to
reek of damp cardboard and potted meat.

Bennett woke up before dawn and walked a pattern through the store, along
the plump, neat stacks of menswear on the shelves, back through circular racks
of men’s shirts and women’s slacks, and then down the opposite wall, past the
fabrics and the sewing section and the last of the women’s wear.

“What is it?” he said.

Something missing. Not merchandise missing—something missing from
within. Threads removed from fabric, maybe. Weft and warp adjusted. He
walked his route again. Light bled into the day, and Bennett moved to different
spots where he could stand and listen.

Maybe it was the girl. She came in every day at three, swishing the floors with
her ridiculous blue jeans. Bell bottoms. Bennett had hated them at first, and he
hated them even more now that all the kids wore them. He felt all young people
were arrayed against him. He’d used his father’s term for ladies underwear once
around the girl—asking her to go check on something in the unmentionables.

“The what?” she had said. “Man.”

Walking upstairs, she said the words to herself again, sotto voce, enunciating
with unmistakable scorn: “The unmentionables.” He remembered that now,
and become sure that the girl was behind the strangeness in the goods. He
wanted to make up an excuse and fire her. She’d be out of a job pretty soon
anyway. He hadn’t told her anything about the foreclosure. He hadn’t decided
whether he even would. He could just make something up. He’d done it enough
times before. The clerks never worked out—they dressed dully or talked to the
customers too boldly or chewed gum or smelled wrong. When his wife, Dilby,
was alive, he would complain to her every night.

“These people and all you do for them,” she would say, standing behind his
chair and smoothing his hair like she was frosting a cake.

Even though he knew she was right, he would say, “Oh, no, Dil, I don’t do
so much.”

Sometimes he thought he could hear Dil at the calculator late at night, when
he was tucked into bed behind the wall of cardboard boxes. Sometimes he
forgot that was impossible—forgot not that she was dead, but that she was never
coming back. Other times he thought he could hear his daughter, Renata,
calling from the midst of the circular clothes racks, where she used to hide as a child.

A truck rumbled past outside, and Bennett came out of his thoughts. He decided he’d call Renata later in the day and finally tell her what was happening. Maybe she’d take him in. There was an outside chance. He imagined himself performing at a farewell show thrown by the town. Bennett wore a top hat and tails and he did a little tap dance. Just something he’d learned for the show. The mayor read a proclamation. Somehow Senior was there in the audience, applauding.

Bennett blinked, then walked to the men’s dress shirts. He gathered every size fifteen and placed them into a bag—six shirts in all, two white, two navy blue, one tan and one pink.

“Pink!” Bennett said, and he imagined what Senior would have said.

He carried the bag out back to his Pontiac and put it in his trunk.

His first customer of the day came in at 11:15. She bought a pair of nylons, nude. He closed for lunch, and when he came back at 1:30, Deputy Al Jensen was waiting outside, shifting from one foot to the other and looking past Bennett’s shoulder into the store.

“Need to take a few measurements,” Jensen said, blushing to his hairline. “For the bank.”

“You bet,” Bennett said, feeling suddenly exposed on the street.

Bennett had sold clothes to the deputy’s father. Had sold shoes for the deputy when he was just a boy, and then when he was a teenager running track. Bennett ordered the sheriff’s department’s uniforms from the wholesaler. The merchandise had filled all these lives. He watched Jensen enter the store. The deputy stood half a foot taller than Bennett, his face red and scratchy and his upper body beginning to fill out his tan uniform shirt evenly, like sausage settling into its casing.

Bennett stood behind the counter while Jensen walked off the square footage. He thought about what his father had said when he took over the store and started carrying clothing and cutting back on the staple foods.

“Fashions,” Senior had said contemptuously.

“They’re putting in two new grocery stores in Twin Falls,” Bennett said. “They’re calling them supermarkets.”

“Uh-huh,” Senior said. “When things go shitwise and people get broke, you’ll be in great shape.”
Jensen’s boots sounded on the wooden floors. He counted under his breath.
Bennett still felt that on some fundamental level he had been right and his father wrong. But for twenty-one years he had misjudged the taste of the town at every step, ordering youth fashions after they’d gone out of style, running out of work clothes every season. Now he was sixty-seven. When his father was this age, two years from death, he was greeted like a hero everywhere in town. He’d given credit to everyone, and he’d been patient about the bills.
Bennett haunted the streets like a man from somewhere else, dressed in the clothes he couldn’t sell and the attitudes of outsiders. He sent overdue bills to a collection agency. He’d been to college and married a Californian. Dilby died ten years ago. Probably two hundred people went to the funeral, and almost no one came to the reception after. Now his daughter spoke to him only when he called, curtly answering questions and letting the line go silent until he asked her another.
Jensen came to where Bennett stood behind the register.
“Gonna need to take an inventory,” he said, scratching his shoulder.
“I can give you that,” Bennett said, wondering about the visible state of his face, alive with twitches and heat. “I’ve got it all in the books.”
“Yeah,” Jensen said. “Yeah, I know you do. But we’re supposed to take another one.”
“You bet,” Bennett said. “Everything in order. Just let me know when you can do it—any night would be fine. Shouldn’t take more than seven or eight hours.”
Jensen looked surprised, and did a slow turn, looking over the merchandise again.
“I’m sure sorry about this, Bennett.”
Bennett shook his head and held up a hand. No one would have ever doubted Senior, he thought. But then Senior would not have come to this.
After another pause, Jensen said, “We can trust your count.”
Bennett felt he outdid himself, smoothly thanking the deputy, wishing him a good day, offering him a mint from the bowl on the counter, and smiling his most impermeable, tooth-walled smile until the door stopped ringing and Jensen’s boots had stopped sounding on the pavement. And then he walked to the shoe section, selected two pairs of Florsheim wingtips—one black, one calf—and carried them to the Pontiac.

The girl came in and stood chewing gum at the register. Bennett felt an hour-long pang of absolute loneliness. He sat upstairs at his desk, and sent change
down to the girl in a metal cup rigged to a pulley, and she sent bills and receipts up to him the same way. Three customers came in all afternoon.

The girl chewed with hostile energy, leaning a hip against the counter. She wore bell bottoms that had been split at the seam and made bellier with a wedge of red calico. He thought he could detect her sour, smoky scent even upstairs. Her light brown hair was curled back in a column of ringlets, away from her face. Sometimes when he stood close to her, or glimpsed the skin along her collarbone or behind her ear, he felt a sexual rush, a distant echo of something he considered part of his former life.

She came upstairs before closing, stopped about ten feet from his desk.

"I was wondering if I could get a couple of days off next month," she asked.

She shifted uncomfortably between the folded wedges of denim swathing her feet.

"Me and some friends are going to Boise for a concert."

"Some kind of rock and roll show, I suppose."

"You wouldn't know them. Foghat."

Bennett didn’t know them. He looked at her standing there, having moved no closer. For some reason, he was struck by the fact that she was as tall as he was, and that she was, really, a woman, even though she was only seventeen—her breasts pressed her knit sweater-vest outward, and her waist was slender and smooth, and whenever he watched her walk away from him he found his eyes resting along the movement of her hips. Noticing was simply a matter of lifetime habit. He hadn’t had an erection in fourteen years.

"Let me just see," he said.

He opened his calendar to the next month, and pretended to scan the empty white squares.

"Oh," he said. "Oh no. I’m afraid I can’t let you go on those days. We have inventory."

"Oh, man," she said. "Really? Please?"

Bennett had never taken inventory in his twenty-one years at the store. But she’d have the rest of her life to run off to rock and roll parties. She wouldn’t even miss this one—by the time it rolled around, she’d be free of the store forever. By then, she’d know. Everyone would. So the hell with her. Let her ride with him a little while. Feel the vertigo up here at the top of the roller coaster. She fixed her eyes on him, and he realized she had become beautiful, had transformed completely, a flush on her face and a brightness in her eyes, breathing like a wondrous, alert beast. Bennett thought she was doing that for him, changing herself, but only to trick him, to make him stop looking
for her betrayal among the merchandise. He uttered a single, harsh note of laughter, and she spun and left.

Bennett watched her go. He imagined himself having sex with her, but she wasn’t naked, she was wearing all her clothes, her body had become her clothes, and he really let her have it, it went on and on, and then she thanked him for all he’d done for her.

6, 5, 4

Bennett decided not to open. He put up a sign on the front door—“Closed. May return.”—and drove to the ice caves in Shoshone. Sixteen miles away and he’d never been.

He drove the twelve-year-old Pontiac down the gray highway, the smell of hot vinyl and dust stubborn even in the rush of air through the windows. He turned at the sign and drove down a bumpy dirt road. A fake log cabin sat beside two enormous statues of an Indian man and woman around a fire. It was surrounded by a treeless landscape, chunky with lava rocks and sagebrush.

“I hope you brought a jacket!” shouted a rotund, smiling woman as Bennett approached the log cabin.

He looked down and realized that he was again—or still?—wearing the lime green cardigan.

“This’ll do,” he said.

She smiled like she knew better.

He paid $2 and went in with a tour group, descending wooden steps and then moving along a walkway underneath a string of lights. The cave was dark and cool. The guide explained why the ice never melted, but Bennett didn’t listen. He crouched and put his hand on the ice floor, burning cold and frictionless. At one point, the tour guide turned off all the lights, and Bennett felt he was exactly where he wanted to be. Even the other people in the cave couldn’t see him. By the time he emerged he was shivering violently, and the heat of the Pontiac felt like a bath.

He wondered why he’d never brought Renata here. He thought, It’s a human mistake. Like so many. Why not let fathers have a test run? A practice kid? Renata was his practice kid. He thought he’d done all right with her, if you looked at it a certain way. Not great. Not criminal.

Renata never called him, and she never came to visit. When she had told him she was a lesbian, way back when she first came back from college, he had refused to believe it.

“You are not,” he said. “That’s ridiculous.”
She'd left him alone then, completely, for seven years. At Dil's funeral they had a chilly reunion, and she began taking his calls again. He'd called her six months before, when he finally decided he had to sell the house and move to the store—the move that he thought would save him. He was afraid she'd be mad.

"You know, I'm selling the house," he told her.

"Finally," she said.

Two days in a row, Bennett returned to the ice caves, all for that moment when the lights went off. He wished the tour guide would stop talking and leave it dark even longer. Sometimes kids squealed or laughed, spoiling it. Even a cave, he thought, a simple hole in the ground, can't be right.

The girl had left him a note after the third day he closed the store, handwritten in a loopy blue script and folded into an envelope:

"Dear Mr. Ramsey, I hope everything is alright. Do I still have a job here? I hope so. I need the money."

Bennett kept the note folded in his pocket, and he took it out and reread it often. He felt that he needed to read the words again and again to understand her meaning. Friend or foe. Truth or dare. He prowled the store all night, certain she'd gotten in somehow.

Bennett began his final inventory. He started by taking all the wool cardigans and piling them into the trunk of the Pontiac. Then he carried out two sewing machines, and three bolts of the most expensive fabric. He loaded his arms with toys. He might still run across a child he needed to charm. His trunk was full. The merchandise spilled across the back seat.

Waiting to open, Bennett smelled something rotten. He walked the store, sniffing, peering under things, opening the stockroom door and walking through. There was no backroom stock anymore. He went upstairs and found the smell—it was coming from his corner of the loft. The garbage, filled with empty potted-meat cans, swarmed with flies. The bed smelled stale, sour and unfamiliar. He saw with a start that his fingernails had gotten long and dirty, black half-moons under each nail. He couldn't believe it—he was never this messy. He went to the water-stained mirror above the sink and looked at himself. His hair was disrupted on one side, and he was unshaven. He was wearing the lime-green cardigan.

Bennett gathered up newspapers and food packages and jammed them into a trash bag. He pushed the bed sheets and his laundry into another
two trash bags, and then he hauled it all down to the Laundromat. He shoved
the garbage into the metal can outside the Laundromat and started four loads
inside.

He walked across the street to the town's one motel and rented a room.
Inside, he left off the lights, turned on the shower and undressed. He looked at
his body in the full-length mirror. His shoulders and knees looked knobby and
frail, and his skin had taken on fine, papery wrinkles. His stomach pooched,
giving his chest a sunken look. The gray head of his penis sat in a nest of black
and white hair, like the bud of a dried flower. He remembered when he could
get an erection just by wanting one. He didn’t think he’d get one now if Sophia
Loren put it in her mouth.

He stayed in the shower a long time, emerging pink and wrinkled. He
lathered his face and shaved, and then shaved again. He dusted his body with
talc and dressed in brand-new clothes. He left the room key on the dresser and
went back to the Laundromat and got his clothes.

He drove to the store, and parked in back. The girl hadn’t arrived yet. The
air inside was sweet and cool, untouched by the day. Bennett walked around
the store, examining the merchandise, reminded, almost, of how good it was,
until the girl came and he left the main floor to her and went upstairs. He sat
there and tried to let his mind drift into the middle distance. There was almost
no time left. He had no idea what he would do. He took the cash box out of
the safe—it sat in the bare middle of the metal vault—and counted out the
bills. Seven hundred and forty-seven dollars, and thirteen cents. Theoretically,
the bank was supposed to get that too.

His sister lived in Arizona, with her husband and their adult son who had
Down syndrome. He supposed he would drive there and arrive unannounced,
check things out before he asked for anything. Or he would drive to Eureka and
see Renata. He knew she was sticking with the lesbian story now. He supposed
he could handle that, as long as he didn’t have to walk the streets of Gooding with
them. He examined a map and imagined a meandering trip south. Arizona or
California. He’d decide on the way. Alone on the road, unknown to everyone
he saw.

Bennett woke to the sound of the calculator running, the sound of Dil doing the
books, a constant subtraction. Even as he sat up and rubbed his face, he heard the
sound, the clicking of keys and the mechanical flourish of the sum. He looked
out onto his desk, where the calculator sat unmoving in the morning dimness.
He cleaned up and walked the store. Now he knew the merchandise was changed—he’d changed it, taken it—and so he had a harder time feeling what might be wrong out there. Was she simply taunting him? Was she stealing? He wondered why the girl hated him, given all that he’d done for her, and he decided when she came in that afternoon he would fire her without explanation. Change the locks. Set everything on fire.

The clacking of the calculator ran quietly under the surface of the day. He began to feel as if Dil were just upstairs waiting for him, waiting to give him the bad news the way she always had, with a healthy dose of comfort. He stood at the counter for hours, growing calmer and calmer. Frank Getchem, the editor of the weekly newspaper, came in, found the two cheapest shirts in the store and bought them. Then a mother and toddler daughter came in who Bennett didn’t know.

When the woman came to the counter with a blouse from the sale rack, Bennett said, “Ma’am, that particular blouse has just been marked all the way down.”

He folded it neatly, wrapped it in a sheet of paper, and tucked it into a paper shopping bag marked Ramsey Mercantile.

“Today,” he said, handing the bag to her, “this particular blouse is free.”

The woman seemed more confused than happy. Bennett plucked a mint from the bowl and leaned over toward the little girl.

“Please,” the woman said, “let me pay you.”

He held up one hand, closed his eyes in a slim smile, and shook his head slightly. He wanted her to remember this.

When the girl came in, she looked nothing like herself. She had become radiant, peach fuzz and cashmere. She smiled at Bennett. She appeared not to hear the calculations. He forgot that he was going to fire her. He wanted to thank her for all she’d done for him.

“I have something I need to tell you,” he announced, once she had settled behind the cash register. “I’ve been diagnosed with something.”

“Diagnosed?” she asked.

“I’m dying,” he said, and the look of concern that flowed onto her face shocked him, made him feel a little happy. “Any day now.”

“Oh no,” she said. “Oh no.”

“But here’s what I wanted to tell you. I’m leaving the store to you.”

She looked confused, like he’d spoken Spanish.

“I’m leaving the store to you,” he repeated.

“The store?”

“And the merchandise.”
He walked toward her and opened his arms. Uncertainly, she let him wrap her in an embrace. He closed his eyes and pictured her clearly—she looked like Lana Turner and then Tippi Hedron and then Dil and then Sophia Loren. She placed her palms lightly on his back and gave the barest squeeze. Bennett smelled crushed flowers and berries. Talcum powder. She let go and began to step away, but Bennett held her. The spring in her flesh vibrated against his skin. Bennett felt a stirring where he hadn’t felt any stirring in a long time. He was highly aware of her breasts, of their soft, exact location against his ribs. Then he noticed that the girl was pressing against him with her forearms. Maybe had been for a few seconds.

“Mister Ramsey,” she said in a harsh whisper.

He thought she would certainly turn ugly again when he stepped back. But he saw that she was more spectacular than ever, with the unblemished skin of a child and the flaring nostrils of a predator and the walled eyes of an enemy and some overall quality he couldn’t describe, like the way water finds a simple path downhill or like the soft modulation in the color of the sky when you tracked it from the horizon straight up to the point above your head. She was trembling. She hadn’t moved.

“You don’t have to thank me now,” he said. “I know you’ll take good care of it.”

Bennett slept late, until 8:30. He dreamed deeply and woke up feeling that he’d been through something to which he hadn’t quite measured up. For the first time in weeks, everything in the store felt fine. Nothing amiss. He cleaned himself up, shaved, dressed in new clothes: white polyester slacks, a blue shirt with a field of white polka dots open two buttons down on his chest, and a pair of brown loafers. He looked at himself in the mirror, and through the scummy haze he felt satisfied, at last, with the image he presented.

He looked around. He’d have to open in a few minutes. Everything felt comfortable, somehow, in its right place. He walked through menswear and selected a few more items, and took them out to his car. He would have to adjust the inventory, he knew that, but he didn’t feel too bad. Broke is broke, he thought. His only remaining fear was what people would find out. His shame would now be his father’s shame as well—his father, who had come West from Illinois and opened a store on thrift and competence. His shame was his dead wife’s shame, too, and his sister’s and daughter’s and that of all the people who had never known what a failure he was. He felt all this with a calm acceptance.
He opened the store right at nine, and after no one came in for an hour, he locked up and walked to the coffee shop. When he entered, he felt the eyes of everyone shift and go hooded, he felt the energy of everyone turn toward him and try to hide itself. No one spoke. Bern McCutcheon, standing at the cashier, lifted a hand in greeting. A table of farmers, all known to Bennett, glanced up together and nodded. Bennett took a seat at the counter and the waitress poured him a cup of coffee.

“How’s the world treating ya, Bennett?” she asked.

“Jim dandy,” he said.

He looked over the menu. He knew it by heart—knew the hash browns would come undercrisped and oily, the eggs would have crunchy edges, the toast would be soaked through with something yellow like butter. He ordered eggs, sausage, hash browns and toast. While he waited, Deputy Jensen walked in and saw him sitting there alone. Jensen came over and placed a ruddy hand on the counter beside him.

“Who’s minding the store?” Jensen asked.

“It’s minding itself,” Bennett said.

Jensen nodded, embarrassed. Bennett wondered how many people he’d told. He wondered how many people working in the sheriff’s department and the bank had told their wives or drinking buddies. If seven people knew about the foreclosure in an official capacity, maybe they’d each told three people. It would take about a week for every soul in the goddamned town to know his business. It made him dizzy. What if he’d spent the entire last month worrying about what people would think, when they were already thinking it, even as he walked among them?

Bennett said, “You need anything else?” and Jensen looked shocked. He said no, and started to leave. Bennett called him back, beckoning with his finger until Jensen lowered his large head close enough that Bennett could speak directly into his hairy ear.

“You just keep your goddamned mouth shut. That’s all. Just keep it shut.” Bennett could not control the shaking of his voice. He turned it into a hiss.

“I remember you when you wore shitty diapers and cried all day long. Don’t you forget that.”

Jensen turned and walked out, the skin on the back of his neck bright red. The waitress put an oval plate before Bennett, glistening and steamy, and he had to wait a full five minutes before the smell of it stopped making him sick and he could eat. He felt every eye in the restaurant trained on his back.

He finished his breakfast and walked out stiffly.

He returned to the store, went around back and got into the Pontiac.
Driving down Main Street, he noticed all the places that had added up to his life for so long: the state school for the blind, the elementary school, the blocks of small, clean houses, the glassy new Safeway. He counted them up like an inventory. He drove out the end of Main Street and onto the highway to Wendell, where he filled up a two-gallon gas can at King Brothers Fuel, turned around and drove back home.

Inside the store, he sat at the back of the store with the gas can at his feet. The girl didn’t show up. Two customers tried the door and left. He waited until darkness, and then until midnight, and then until 2 a.m., waiting until the bar lights went off across the street at the Mirage, and then waiting another twenty minutes, and finally splashing a pathway of gasoline through the aisles of the store, creating a route for the flames to sneak between the merchandise and climb up into it, up the shelves and the wooden columns to the high, tin-stamped ceiling, up the stairs to his office and to his cot in the corner. Yes, he thought. Burn with the rest of it. When he and the merchandise had gone, the void of them would be eternal. He struck a long wooden match and watched as a yellow flame unfurled, and he placed it on the ground, where it caught and hovered, a ghostly light-blue that trickled uncertainly down the aisle toward the center of the store and began to spread among the merchandise, never touching the floor, not even when smoke began to rise from the clear, wavering spaces underneath the ghostflame, and the merchandise would not light, it did not move as the fire surrounded it, inhaled the air, consumed the shelves and rained ash and spark, the merchandise unburned, the goods intact, and Bennett wondering whether to run or stay, whether to test himself among the merchandise or return to town and assume his human form.

Bennett Ramsey died. He died from burns suffered in the fire. He died of a rare strain of Bulgarian influenza. He died when he was struck by a Ford Fiesta while jaywalking.

He nearly died of food poisoning suffered at a retailers conference in Boise. He injured himself stepping on a rusty nail behind the Merc. He burned himself when he lifted his arm to protect his head from a falling timber in the store. He cut himself shaving. He fled in his Pontiac for Arizona. He stayed and signed the papers, shaking everyone’s hand like the gentleman he always
strived to be. He went to the Shoshone Ice Caves and pressed his naked body against the walls. He accepted the Presidential Medal of Honor in a ceremony at the White House. He became a law of physics unto himself: Everything is possible. He took to the sky and flew in long, gradual spirals over the town, gliding through the hay-scented air.

He woke up to the sound of a banging on the back door. He was sleeping in a chair at the back of the store, gas can at his feet. It was Deputy Jensen at the door. Bud Fitz from the bank. When Bennett let them in, he realized that they'd walked right past his car, loaded with the merchandise. Neither said anything. Jensen gave the gas can an appraising look. Bennett blinked once, picked up the can, walked outside and poured it into the Pontiac's tank while the deputy and banker waited. Some of it splashed on his hand and the ground. The sun was beginning to shine and Bennett tasted something awful in his mouth. They signed the papers. Bennett handed over the keys. Bud asked Bennett what he planned to do. "Whatever I want," Bennett said. "I'm free as a bird." Bennett went back upstairs to gather the last of his things, and he took $300 from the safe and tucked it into his wallet, while they waited downstairs. He would drive to Eureka. He would knock on Renata's door, unannounced. He would tell her how wrong he had been. How small his shame had become, smaller and smaller with every passing mile.

He woke up to a loud banging on the door, and was surprised to find the store unburned. His fingers smelled like gasoline. At the door was a man dressed in a tuxedo with tails and a cravat. He rested one hand on the silver knob of a walking stick and spoke words Bennett couldn't understand, in a voice like music. Then Bennett was back in the store and it was alight with new merchandise of the most amazing colors, a ravishing garden, and beside him was the girl, who was beautiful and who was his wife, and they had a daughter, a six-year-old who played the piano and designed her own clothes. The week after her seventh birthday, Bennett was elected mayor.
Of a Monstrous Shipwreck and its Abridgement in a Glass of Water

What were you thinking on your orphaned city bed, so stubbed, so stranded? Was it, Crack the western window? Incorrectly lamenting, "A bridge, a bridge, and all our striding upon it; never, never enough guardrail." How we are such a chrysalis braving frost. Let the skeleton fluoresce and layer itself daily anew; it is reckless to swallow the swarm whole, to not let it unpin you; more reckless not to gasp at all, to go down curled and larval with the treasure chest. So, voyage depends on voyager's ability to cleave his wrack when sinking. Lie back and think of your wreck while making eyes at the harpoon. A broken straw is not really broken, only light-lanced and tricky. Allow a sip to wander in. The most impossible umbrage loses weight more quickly this way. You are newly impaled and ready for the beam's crux. Your cracked soliloquies multiply and subtract; you must swindle a foothold, your mouth ever gaping at surface.
On the Nature of the Unknown

An army of toy soldiers stalks, puce & silent at my bedroom door—

they have reason to hold their breath like a deep sea séance among eels.

They may need me & then they may not. Mostly a little of both.

Reason bent a spoon above the clairvoyant’s head & we convince
ourselves to crave blue cheese & telephone static because

maybe Monday had ugly babies with Sunday & Friday

will never get over it, will never stop playing scales

at the cocktail hour on Peach Tree Street, with the smoke stained

fingers and moldy hula skirts hanging over a photo

of peeling Waikiki. In the field of decapitated daffodils
someone is happy at last; someone has folded hands & a firm grasp of red skies at night.
Maybe it will grow back again.

Under the window the neighbors paint their dwarfed apple trees white below the waist & leave their tiki-torches out, angled impossibly above the unlit snow.
FRANCES McCUE

The Patient Saint

I know I have a body.
In this bone tangle, heart
wring from the dropped
hearth of ribs, caught in
fireworn wrangles of ash
brought back. No Eve
am I, just flesh sent
a long way, intact.

From inside, my body caves
to wrapped marrow—
joint and splint. What
place of rich winds,
spin and flinch
of blood-culled gutterways
brings this desert—
skull, mites like
lichened fossils? A mote’s
slow drop into a river
bile and brine,
twined to rib and bone?

Cold outside, my cage
fires within though
I’m slow to fist,
quick in blood gone thin.
I’m counting: white, red, white.
Fringe dust and spores,
washed edges of a ravine
dropping nonetheless
into the sea. Silt, slough
the residue of salts
or some other. Wither.
The Tourist and the City

"Clutch the rail," we said.
Sprickelty-splat, the flim-flam
slip of spittle shot back.
"That's rain."
Always forecast, still flipping
doped-up droplets, ripe.

See the terrarium, cloud box,
planet's urban eye—
buildings sharpen and shine
our shacks into upright
slivers. The city's glass gowns
settle over gristle.

Someone coming in
would see a scrim.
Someone coming in
would hear a foundling.
Maybe fog, maybe tin—
"Never mind that wind."
Cellophane wrappers from two packages of shoelaces.

I’m twenty-seven years old, eight-feet-six-inches tall, might be the world’s third or fourth or fifth tallest woman but I don’t care to know. My shoes are so big that a single lace won’t do, so I have to tie two together. The laces always break because I pull too hard, so sometimes Mom ties them for me. I toss the wrappers in the trash on top of Mom’s banana peel. She eats a banana every day at breakfast (a total of seven a week). I take out the garbage on Mondays just as the peels are beginning to stink.

After breakfast but before I go to work at the stationary store, I finish writing my will. There isn’t much to it since I don’t have much stuff—books and clothes and records because I fell in love with vinyl at a young age. Mom is worried anyway.

“I don’t want you to think about things like that.” She uses her stern voice, practicing for the day ahead like she often does at eight in the morning. Mom teaches elementary art, spends her time plying children with crayons and markers and tempera paint.

I say, “I want to make sure everything is secure. I want to make sure it all goes to you.”

“You don’t need to,” says my mother, “you’ll be around a long time. At least if you stop thinking like this.”

I keep writing. Giants usually go early, in their thirties or forties, from heart disease. I have the same circulation problems my father did, my hands and feet always feel cold, and I’m only five years younger than he was when he died. I have a physical twice every year and the doctor says I’m fine, but I never quite trust him.

I walk to the stationary store because it’s only three blocks away and it’s hard for me to fit in cars. Mom has a minivan, one with the front passenger seat removed so I can sit on the bench in the middle and fit my legs where the front seat would have been. It’s still a bit awkward, and she has to help me out so I don’t stumble. At the store I’m on my knees most of the day and direct customers from the register. Clerking on my knees hurts after a while, even
with the foam pad I keep behind the counter, but I don't like standing up in
the store. Some people still come in just to see me. Most try to be discrete, but
teenagers snicker and ask why I don't play basketball. I am always very polite,
very kind, even to rude people. I've won the Employee of the Month award
eight times in the past year and a half, which is a record even though there are
just four employees.

Around noon the guy who works at the rent-to-own place three doors down
comes in for paperclips. He does this every day, says he needs them for the
store, but they can't use that many. The rent-to-own guy is six feet tall. Around
my age. He gives me a tiny smile when I hand him his change. Some days I
think he's sweet. Some days I think he's creepy.

"Hi," I say, "how are you?"

"Fine," he says.

I make small talk so he has an opportunity to ask me out to lunch, but he
never does. It's amusing to see his cheeks flush and his pupils widen. I think
he's attracted to me more than curious, but it's hard to tell. No one has ever
asked me on a date, though I am terribly kind.

Bakery bag, slightly damp with used coffee grounds, containing two-day-old French
bread crumbs.

After work I stop at the bakery. Mothers stare. Kids point. I smile down at
them and say hello, ask if they are having a nice day. The girl I have a crush on
waits on me. I like the bakery, but come here often because of her. She's petite
and in her early thirties. I ask for a baguette, watch her hands as she chooses
one from the rack and slides it into a long paper sack. Her hands are small and
I know she has good muscles from working with trays of cookies and cakes and
rolls and bread. I want her to knead my shoulders.

"Thanks," I say when she gives me the bread. It's what I always say. Dumb.
I'm too tired to converse. One problem with being a giant is bouts of weakness.
It's hard for a large body to be strong all the time. Some nights Mom helps me
take off my socks.

Empty bottle of acetaminophen (my mother believes in buying generic drugs).

I take painkillers every evening because my knees ache. The number of
bottles in the trashcan is embarrassing, but I have to take four pills to have
any effect. Mom says Dad was the same way. He was almost nine feet high.
My mother is five foot three. They met when he modeled for her college life
drawing class. The instructor felt that having a larger-than-life model would
somehow help his students see details.
For a while my parents didn’t think my father could conceive. It was a glandular issue. As my mom says, my father’s member was not to scale with the rest of his body. But, if it had been properly sized, it wouldn’t have been possible for the right parts to fit in the right places.

My father died when I was two, before my size was clear. In all his pictures he looks a little sad. Dad was the world’s fourth or fifth or sixth tallest man—not good enough for record books, but good enough for ads. He did promotions for sports equipment and pants and breakfast cereals, squirreled away money in stocks and bonds and savings accounts. Sometimes people drove by the house to take pictures of him doing normal things—weeding the garden or washing the car. Once he stood by the trashcan for half an hour posing for passes-by, a freakish and dutiful husband. The photographers paid ten dollars a shot. If anyone did that to me, I’d hit them. But Dad wanted to provide for my mother and me, knew his time was limited.

Empty chicken noodle soup can.

Mom and I have soup and bread for dinner (I hate cooking and she’s too tired). Afterwards we work on my latest outfit, a lavender pantsuit. We make all of my clothes. Mom pins the fabric and I cut it as she worries about my social life.

“You should have a relationship,” she says, but I know she doesn’t want to marry again.

“Nobody would date an eight-and-a-half-foot tall woman,” I say.

Wouldn’t be worth it if I might die in five years. Besides, Mom is all the company I need. I haven’t told her about the bakery girl I like or the rent-to-own guy who might like me. She’d just pester more.

Mom peers at me over the rims of her glasses. Though she is shorter than me it feels like she is bigger, takes up more space when we sit at the table or on the couch. I don’t understand if it’s a cruel trick of the mind or the eye that makes her shrink when I look at her.

I trim all the fabric to fit the pattern, plan to start sewing the following evening.

At four o’clock in the afternoon, my mother calls the store. Her voice wavers. My grandmother, her mother, had a stroke. She lives in a condo in Arizona. My mother will fly there tomorrow morning. I do not know my grandmother well, have seen her eight or nine times since I was ten. She sends me two hand-sewn blouses every Christmas.

I tell my boss what happened and she hugs me with frail arms. She’s just over five feet tall, shorter than me even when I’m on my knees. No one can ever hug all of me.
Ten damp crumpled tissues.

My mother and I sit side by side on the couch. Her pupils are the size of saucers. In sorrow she is huge. Mom daubs her eyes and asks if I want someone to come and stay with me at the house. I shake my head. I’m an adult. Should be able to care for the house on my own. But I don’t know if I can. I used to unload the dishwasher but broke too many plates, so now I’m responsible for taking out the trash. Mom is more confident about my abilities.

“You’ll be fine.” She nods. “Mr. Wilson is always home if you need help.”

Mr. Wilson is seventy-something, has lived across the street from us since before I was born. He keeps to himself—knits, drinks black coffee, smokes outside because that’s what his wife made him do when she was alive.

“How long will you be gone?” I say. Mom shakes her head. I don’t want her to leave. Selfish, but it’s early May and she could be in Arizona all summer. I’ve never seriously thought about moving out of the house, finding a place of my own, that my mother might not be around to care for me. I worry no one else will love me enough to do all of the small constant things she does. Everyone understands little people need shorter counters and stepstools and special pedals in cars, but they don’t think about tall people, how sometimes I need help washing and dressing when I’m feeling a bit weak. My father lived with his parents until he married my mother. I assumed I’d be like him, one of those ancient children.

Three empty paper packets of instant oatmeal.

Mom leaves at six in the morning. I wait to cry until she is gone. I make oatmeal for breakfast, though I’m not hungry. Mom doesn’t like oatmeal, eats raisin bran, but she always throws away my empty oatmeal packets before I can. I almost forget to pitch the packets, leave them by the coffee maker expecting her hands to whisk them away. I dump most of my oatmeal down the garbage disposal.

I have problems with the buttons on my blouse—my grandmother should have sewn on larger ones. Because Mom isn’t here to fasten them I wear a rayon shirt, one I can pull over my head. I walk to work and hope being around people will make me happier, at least take my mind off my mother. It works for a while. I smile. I direct customers to envelopes and erasers. I am excruciatingly polite, trying for a ninth employee of the month award, another chance to have my name engraved on that little plaque in the break room. An obscure kind of immortality. The rent-to-own guy needs ballpoint pens. I decide he looks more cute than creepy, has possibilities.

“When are you going to ask me out for pizza?” I say. He stares at me. I smile. Sadness makes me say things I wouldn’t normally, and I’m anticipating lonely dinners.
“Um,” he says, “I didn’t know you liked pizza.”
“I do,” I say. “Don’t most people?”
His cheeks flush pink, then almost purple. “My boss needs the pens,” he says.

It will be interesting to see if he comes back tomorrow.

At work I occupy myself with customer service, but afterwards I break down in the bakery. The bakery girl’s fingers remind me of my mother’s hands and how I am too dependent. I cry. Mothers gawk. Children stare. Three of my tears could fill a Dixie cup. The bakery girl comes out from behind the counter to pat my back. I want to tell the bakery girl I love her because her fingers are so delicate. Instead I say my grandmother had a stroke and my mother has gone to be with her. I tell her I am worried, let her assume it’s out of concern for my grandmother and not my own self.

She tells me she’s sorry.

I apologize for crying.

“It’s okay,” the bakery girl says. I want to ask her to go out, get coffee, but I don’t.

I walk home and can’t stay inside, pace around the block to tire my legs. I’m on my sixth lap when Mr. Wilson yells at me from his front porch.

“You doing some sort of marathon or what?” he says.

I walk to Mr. Wilson’s porch, tell him about my grandmother and how Mom has gone to be with her. Mr. Wilson lights a cigarette, says I should call him if I have any problems. He gives me two pairs of hand-knitted socks every Christmas. His wife died eight years ago. She was around seventy, a sad but more expected age for dying than thirty-two.

Broken glass shards wrapped in three paper towels.

The glass is filled with water when I bump it off the kitchen counter and onto the floor. I should only use plastic cups and paper plates until Mom returns. My body is hard to control. This is not necessarily because of my size. I’m probably just a clumsy person. Mom says my father was quite graceful.

I bake a frozen pizza for dinner, eat in the living room because Mom insists we eat in the kitchen. I want to break habits. I turn the TV on for the company of voices. Every room in our home echoes. My parents bought the house because it was old and had high ceilings and doorways so my dad could be comfortable. I wonder what he would have said if he’d known I would become a giant. Maybe he would have felt bad about it, passing on the pains, but the one reason I like my size is because this is what I have of him.
Doodles of squares and triangles made while talking on the phone with my mother.

Mom calls every night and asks how I am doing.
I say I miss her company. I miss her sympathetic glances. I miss the way she’d rub my shoulders without asking.
“When will you be home?” I don’t think I’m whining, just being honest and lonely.
Mom isn’t sure how much my grandmother will recover—she can’t speak or move her left hand, but she can feed herself. Mom says she might need to stay in Arizona for a while. She does not explain how long “a while” would be.
“I’m sorry,” she says.
I want to cry, but I am an adult so I say I broke another pair of shoelaces this morning. We laugh. She says my father broke shoelaces all the time.
I think about my father when I’m alone, but I’m usually not alone much. I picture him, a nine-foot-tall ghost sitting in the plush recliner, watching me as I talk with my mother, nodding at our conversation. He’s in the house like a lamp or a potted plant, so much a fixture that I don’t think about it, would only notice if he were gone. The air would smell a little differently.
At work I start to think the rent-to-own guy is scared of me. He doesn’t come in to the stationary store for three days. I feel bad because I was honestly hoping he was interested, thought I was kind, wanted to ask me out for pizza. People say it’s who you are on the inside that counts, but when you don’t look like everyone else, most folks have a hell of a time getting past the outside. I’ve only ever gotten attention from creepy guys, ones who want to have eight-foot-tall kids.
In the evening I sit at the bakery near the front of the store, a space where they have small round tables clustered together with a scattering of chairs. Fitting on a chair is difficult, but I swing my legs to the side and pretend I’m five-foot-five. I eat day-old cookies and read the newspaper and glance over at the bakery girl. My mother’s absence makes me avoid home because I’m worried something will happen and no one will be there to help. Better to be alone in public, to wait for the bakery girl to look over at me and smile.
Sometimes I don’t answer the phone in the evening, don’t want to speak to my mother because I know I’ll start crying. When we talk, half the time the only thing I can say is “When are you coming home?”

Tuft of hair cleaned from brush.
I toss it in the little trashcan beside the sink while I draw water for my bath. I’ve been losing more hair since Mom’s been gone. Maybe it’s anxiety. Maybe it’s age. My hair plugs the drain of the claw-foot ceramic tub. It’s the one
my dad used, but I can barely fit all of me. I’m sure I’m not getting all the shampoo out of my hair. Mom usually helps with that, dumps cups of water over my head until the suds are gone. When I get out I lose my balance, always fear this even though we have a plastic mat on the bottom of the tub. As I fall I imagine bashing my head against the back of the tub, cracking my skull, blood running rivulets into the water, but I land squarely on my tailbone, let out a yelp because there is no one to hear me. It hurts to fall from four feet up. I sit in the tub for seven minutes while the water runs out. Sore, sore, so sore. When I get out I keep to a crouch, no higher than I have to be. My backside pains. I think about calling the hospital, hope I didn’t fracture anything, but I don’t want an ambulance to come because I fell on my rear. I grit my teeth and decide to wait until morning, assess the size of the bruise. I dry carefully, use my dad’s thirty-year-old towels. They are threadbare. Mom sewed two towels together to make one large enough to dry all of him.

My father, filmy and sympathetic, sits on the easy chair in the living room. I ask how many times he fell like this. He shrugs because there were too many to count. When my mother calls, I almost tell her about my fall but stop just before I mention it. She couldn’t do anything but feel guilty half a country away, and I’ve already told my dad. I wonder how big my father thought my mother was, if she ever swelled to seven or eight feet while he was still alive, or if she stayed five-foot-three. I wonder if my father’s parents were like Mom, prone to growth, outsizing their normal bodies even if no one else could see it.

Mom collected my Dad’s advertisements, glued them in scrapbooks. He’s always with little kids to accentuate his height. Some of kids look at him with wonder and others with slight fear, like he’s a fairy tale giant. I hate fairy tales because giants are evil and stupid and eat people. I sympathize more with the giant than with Jack, go to sleep recalling his tumble off the beanstalk. It must have hurt.

I almost stay home from work the next morning—probably would if my mom were here—but I grit my teeth and walk. After a half block, it isn’t bad. Just before lunch, the rent-to-own guy comes to buy tape.

“Hello,” he says, making eye contact for three seconds before peering down at the tape.

“Are you going to wait until I invite you out for pizza?” I say.

He looks up and gives me a small smile when I hand him his change. It’s progress. Maybe a six-foot-tall guy won’t be as cowed by me as a shorter one. We’re the same height when I’m on my knees, which makes things almost normal. It’s a decent kissing height. I blush after he leaves, usually don’t think about kissing people other than cheek-kissing my mother before work.
Bakery bag with two-day-old peanut butter chocolate chip cookie crumbs.

I gain weight because I'm in love with the bakery girl. At least I think I'm in love with the bakery girl. She says hello when I walk to the counter and her eyes do not seem to widen at my size. She asks how my mother and grandmother are doing.

"They're okay," I say

"My grandmother had a stroke," she says.

"My grandmother is small," I say. "Frail." I worry she thinks my whole family is like me—gangly and huge.

"So was mine," she says. "Give your grandmother my best. I know how you feel."

Of course she doesn't, but I'm not going to correct her.

It's easy to love people who are kind to me, but I'm never sure how to interpret kindness. Maybe the bakery girl is just a nice person. Maybe I don't love her but her niceness, though I've always been in love with her delicacy. At the bakery I sit and eat a lot of bread so I can be around people. They have free jam and napkins on a small table in the corner. The jam comes in tiny rectangular tubs, plops on my bread in that perfect four-sided shape.

Crumpled grocery receipt for three frozen pizzas, two frozen chicken fingers meals, two teriyaki chicken meals, four cans of tomato soup, two chocolate bars with caramel.

I go to the store without a list. Mom always did the shopping. My trip is liberating and unhealthy. At home I bake a frozen pizza, sit on the couch, eat the whole thing though I had a lot of bread at the bakery. Mom would stop me, but I'm too hungry and have a lot of body to fill. A knock on the door. Mr. Wilson on the front step. He has his knitting needles, a bagful of yarn, and smells thickly of smoke.

"Thought I might come by and sit a spell," he says. He turns on the television, finds a channel with baseball. I take out the pantsuit that Mom and I started pinning before she left. Haven't worked on it since. I sit on the couch.

"You need a gentleman caller," Mr. Wilson says. "One who's not seventy-five. Here's a picture of my nephew." He takes his wallet out of his pocket. "A handsome boy. Thirty years old and no girlfriend. He does things with computers."

"I don't know how much longer I'm going to be around," I say, glancing at the tiny photo he shows me. It's hard to judge appearances based on a picture the size of my thumbprint.

"Shit," he says, "nobody knows when they're going to go. Just look at me here. I've been smoking a pack a day for sixty years and I'm still kicking."
I explain my heart problem. Mr. Wilson shakes his head. "You can't listen to everything doctors say. I never have."

Mr. Wilson excuses himself for a cigarette. My hands and feet feel no warmer after his pronouncement, but for a moment I consider the disturbing possibility I may outlive my father. I've figured on dying at the age of thirty-two since I was eighteen, so this is slightly upsetting, but I'm certain any plans I make will trigger the heart condition I know is waiting to erupt. I have never considered my body an ally. Mr. Wilson seems to think of his as a partner in crime.

Box of stale raisin bran.

My mother has been gone for a month and I hate raisin bran. I am learning to throw away my instant oatmeal packets so they do not collect by the coffee maker.

I haven't seen the rent-to-own guy for two days, but at noon he brings in a pizza box.

"I'm asking you out for pizza," he says. "I hope you like pepperoni."

We eat in the break room. My boss is happy to allow us that small courtesy. I think she worries about me.

The rent-to-own guy says his name is Dale. He wants to get a degree in accounting. He lives in an efficiency apartment above a record store, three doors from my bakery. He likes playing hockey and watching old comedies. Marx Brothers. Laurel and Hardy. Three Stooges.

I tell him I like sewing and do not skate because I have no balance.

"I bet you'd look amazing if you tried skating," he says.

"I look amazing enough already," I say. "And I bet I couldn't find skates to fit."

"Just glide in your shoes," he says without blushing.

I tell him I'll think about it, wonder if he wants to take me skating to see my slapstick crash on the ice, to make other people stare, but no one aside from my mother has ever bought me pizza, so I decide to interpret it as a mark of his sincerity.

Band-aid wrapper and two small pieces of waxy paper peeled off of adhesive backing

I cut myself while chopping tomatoes for a salad because I'm tired of pizza and want something fresh. I'm not used to paring knives. They're tiny and slippery in my hands. The cut is small but stings like hell because of the acid from the tomatoes. Still, I am proud of my meek little salad and my independent attempt to eat vegetables.
I tell my mother about the salad when she calls. She is proud of me. My grandmother has not yet regained feeling in her left hand. She probably won’t. There is no one to care for her except my mother, because my grandmother doesn’t trust nurses. Mom will be gone for a while longer. I take a deep breath and try to still my worries.

After telling her good-night, I walk three blocks downtown for the sake of walking. The bakery is closed. I scan the second-story windows, most of them apartments, wonder where Dale lives and if he’s looking out of his window and down at me.

*Bakery bag with two-day-old lemon poppyseed and blueberry muffin crumbs.*

I take a short lunch and get off work a half-hour early, go to buy day-old muffins and find the bakery girl is on break, sitting at the tables near the front of the store. I ask if I can sit with her for a moment. She nods. Getting into the chair is particularly awkward. I feel like I stretch across half the room. The bakery girl doesn’t comment on my length, just asks about my grandmother. I watch her fingers as she tears the muffin in pieces.

“I’m a cashier at the stationary store on the next block,” I say.

“I wondered if you worked around here,” she says.

“You did?” I say, surprised she’d have thoughts of me other than the obvious why the hell is she so tall?

The bakery girl says she lives two blocks away in a duplex with her cat. She hates cooking, which is why she works in a bakery. Baked good fringe benefits.

I tell her I made a salad the other night and it was a big accomplishment. She laughs. We are having an actual conversation. The bruise on my rear hurts like hell because the chair is so hard, but I am past caring. The bakery girl returns to work at five, says it was nice to talk with me. I float home. I do not tell my mother about the bakery girl. Don’t want to get her hopes up.

*Empty box of tissues, empty package of lozenges, three empty cans of chicken noodle soup, three empty cans of chicken and rice soup, empty box of soda crackers.*

I get an awful cold, an achy head-throbbing cold, spend three days hobbling from the couch to the kitchen. On the third day, when the garbage is overflowing, I pull on a bathrobe (my father’s old terrycloth) and haul the bag to the curb.

Mr. Wilson yells from across the street. “Thought you might be dead or something.”

“Sick,” I sniffle.

Mr. Wilson nods. Half an hour later he bangs on my front door, carries three boxes of tissues, a carton of orange juice, and a box of chamomile tea bags.
"I hate chamomile tea," he says. "But the wife gave it to me and it works."

Mr. Wilson offers to sit with me, but I tell him no. I am learning how to be alone and don’t want him to catch my cold. (I don’t say the smell of his cigarettes gets to me after a while.) I sit by the television and sip from the carton of orange juice, appreciate not having to worry about refilling a glass.

I’m ill for four more days, have several delirious one-sided conversations with my father. I tell him about the bakery girl and the rent-to-own guy, know he understands my uncertainty because he felt the same way when he met my mother. I know his colds were this bad since both of us have too much body to rid of the virus.

In most of the pictures I’ve seen my father is close to my age, but I can imagine twenty-some years added to his frame, imagine his hair graying and thinning, imagine us sitting side by side on the couch with heating pads on our knees after long days of commercial-making and paperclip-selling. After I’ve taken my cold medicine and am floating in that hazy space between wakefulness and sleep, I can feel his long thin fingers brush against my hands and face.

When Mr. Wilson deems I am well he brings me takeout, extra spicy Thai food. The curry is so hot I use half a box of tissues, but Mr. Wilson says the spices are cleaning out nasty things in my sinuses. I flush bright as a chili pepper, but feel better afterwards. Less clogged. My father smiles from the armchair.

_Dale says that at the ice rink they don’t care if you skate in your shoes. I buy new ones for the occasion. Mom is happy to hear I have a date. I wonder how my father courted her, what they talked about since she’d spent a semester’s art class staring at him naked._

_We arrive at the rink at seven o’clock on a Sunday morning because Dale says most people won’t come until after ten. Ice makes me even less graceful than usual. Dale has chunky hockey-playing skates, whirls around the rink for twenty minutes while I tiptoe at the edge. He grabs my hand, tugs me away from the side, says he won’t let me fall. I let go and slide toward him, peer down at my shoes. His hands hold mine, pull me gently. For about fifteen feet. I slip. Pitch forward because I don’t want to land on my rear again. Careen on top of him. He did not realize my weight, curses as we both go down. Dale’s knee twists in a painful way, although not one that requires medical attention. We hobble to his car. I am excruciatingly apologetic. So is he. This is because we both work in customer service._
I don’t see Dale in the stationary store the next day, almost walk to the rent-to-own place to find him and apologize again. He was such a bright possibility. He bought me pizza. That night I mope and use a few tissues. He doesn’t come to the store the day after that. I tell myself he was probably one of the creepy guys, repeat this idea for five days until I believe it.

“T’ll call my nephew,” Mr. Wilson says when I explain the incident with Dale. “He’s a strong boy. Lifts weights. Could pick you up and cart you around town with one hand.”

My mother gives me sympathy. “That’s too bad,” she says, “but not your fault.”

I think on the other end of the line she’s smiling. After a week I can smile, too. If Dale would hold a grudge just because I fell on him, the relationship wouldn’t have worked. Beside me on the couch, my father shrugs. I know he waited twenty-seven years to find my mother.

Mr. Wilson says his nephew will visit soon and we’ll go out for dinner.

Mom’s absence isn’t comfortable, but it’s usual. Something I can accept if I break it into small increments. She will be gone another week. That idea is manageable. Larger periods of time are still difficult, so I don’t think about them.

_Bakery bag with two-day-old sugar cookie crumbs._

The bakery girl has a break at four-thirty. If I only take a half-hour for lunch, I can leave work early and have a muffin when she does. I learn the bakery girl likes crocheting and her cat is named Cinnamon. I tell her I like sewing. She compliments my new lavender pantsuit and says the color goes well with my complexion. No one has ever said anything about my complexion before.

When I look away I know her arms and legs are growing. Her shoulders widen. Her back straightens until I am certain she is at least eight feet tall and our hands are the same size.
KIRSTEN KASCHOCK

from *The Dottery*

I had forgotten laundried—hung out. The wet clean part did not excruciate, but then the sun would go and the whipping begin. Not froth, domination. Would we be taken in, or end as the wet unclean? There were no safety-words on the line. I wanted to pinch the clothespins from my clavicles, the little homunculi, and dig their two legs into the earth. An insert. It would feel good to, for once, punish. And there were the blessings, buoys, dipping in and out of our rows, our sails before storms, braving the involuntary red of our flap-and-thrash to seek what they sensed was hidden. We were dotters, underthings, and so were unable to help them, though in plain sight.

The designation “dotter” illustrates a certain unspelunked specificity: one’s identity finds no twin in cross-stitching, scarification, tattoo, or piercing in relief. Mapped, a dotter is all limitation and railing, as is the nature of maps. What you want to realize is that several colors busted as they brought her edge about. Starboard. She is a wax precipice—in that, drawn, the dimensions drop deeply away, unbuttressing her. Leaving her susceptible to light. Dotter is a cut-out, a flay. A pair of mimes out of papier-mâché, the last Matisse. She is de rigueur, but up in her crow—actual fathoms below actual cave floor—and not to sail. Moby this. Moby that.

Another thing about the dottery is: gangplanks. Fastened to struts, they jut out, splintering the central room. For one month each year, a dozen dotters stand against the walls on top of them. They remain against, at most tiny-stepping forward on what is corroded. They piss themselves there. Rarely, a dotter will bolt the length of hers and leap. She will cackle through the humid air, shrieking lightswitch, before landing a few feet beyond the gangplank, released from. Briefly, the whiff of urine and brimstone, rabbit nose, the weighty shifting of crinoline. For the rest of that day, that dotter will round the cell in stealthy promenade. She
will not blink, that night not sleep. The next day, you may yet find her
circling, and so on through the second night, the following day, etc. Until
another dotter is compelled to rend the middle air, this dotter is in pirate
moon. And cannot, cannot cease to be the shark.

The daughter is expensive. To keep, yes. Also to rid oneself of. Like
an injured Arabian, not wanting to put herself down, finding the sight
damaging, she quelled for a few decades on the lea. Say three. Granted,
it took her that long to develop a concept of hill, and it was dune. She
realized: if the theater moves, then—caravan. The daughter traveled for
a time under separate auspices. She came to. She paid her own ticket
and refused sugar because of Candida—a country hated within all her
ducts.

Dotter dreamt she was cratered in a vacuum. That she’d lived as a dip
in the dust for aeons until erupting to adulation. The electorate doted,
called her creole-god, the gold tone. Thought she spanned something.
All this cinderelling because she was a narrativity: domestic turned at
the ankle divine and smelling of hay. In actuality, she had not climbed
chimney to glitter—had never had a mutter to be plundered by swan
or bull-split—she had simply materialized. As bottlefly from meat. But
this group, in their old age, had no word for nothing. It was a place to
stay, then.

You think it is purely a matter of dipping into the coffers. It is not.
What makes one a transparent is the process’s instability, its teetering ink.
Forms. Pages filled only to be blown across the curb into oncoming traffic
like blind acrobats. Tossed jetsam. Whole salad-flocks of forms. Cry
fowl. What you can’t stop believing is that you were one. That you ached
and spat the way a dotter was made to. Coldly nubile, a crease inside a
fold, a morsel, dropped punctuation, drumbitten, a nipped-in-the-bud.
And that you won’t have. It’s the refusal. The eternal matricycle not
turning over. The snake disgorging its rattle. Skins will shed until no
skins are left, and a dotter is all skin. The stuck will hop. Bier, bier.
You look egg shell in brown the stand there on a tree lined street as you glance toward a distant park We must stop walking together soon for the rain will come back Did you pressurise your special tree trunk as I witnessed last autumn When I had no idea who you were When I was ripe for dismissal like an anvil a top hat a horse’s shoes a monad Why did you enter my life Zebra herded out of its travel for children’s eyes to witnesseth Easter Morning come spilling previous night into memory and for all a new salvation a brand of Sunday kitchen cast light upon knives with baby’s breath handles Why did you Sidewalk dusted with the all-time most vicious and abundant pollen the malfunction of signage the closed street’s lane a solitude is an abstraction not in Paris where slow stroll is de rigeur and you weren’t with me But you talk Paris all the time and what do you think I will be able to do Why do I give in What does this sketch this scribbling on the cafe napkin symbolise What is a sign or fate or everything for its reason but stones as empty of mass of content as a library is as empty of solutions For whom do you watch at dusk when the willows frame the stars so theaterically when mist is life’s meaning I know you watch You are the kind to do so just look at your eyes’ pensee and nonscatter They fix on some irresolute past in which all you’d eat alone each evening was oats some indeterminate future You’d look good with a smoke but you don’t do so and to your credit Why do you cause me to dream up scenes like these Or like the one in which we trade lines along a bay and the sky is dregs like always and the ducks are May’s October’s ours Swimming hole up north nestled aside in a brook on Kinsman Ridge up high It took me several attempts to make it up there Once I was turned back by the top of thunder as grievous and grief-stricken as a rabbit hutch overgrown with the loss of a past in which men bred rabbits for show and for meat for pleasure and for grandsons to learn about care and tending And now look at my lump of failure in the guise of paper upon which words sprayed contemplate the slow death of morality’s tiny and of a pain and a depth we’ve all got and it’s what makes sculpture so and it’s what and it’s what makes paintings so And these scenes in which we act out a thing
so untenable and far-removed from any universe we will ever know these eat til they are full Do you know the parable of the worm the brick and the ointment Neither do I but the three actors sound terrible together like rigid tempera’s grip on untreated cardboard the egg gone sour and the pigment mixed piss-poorly Are you here to help my maudlin drip out a bit faster than usual Look a stone it skips the surface of the pond For whom do you watch at dusk from beneath the black iron awning of a building abandoned storefront emptied glass intact but business vacated For whom How you can stand for thousands of hours in silence and only with me is a home in the swallow’s unrecognized willow The bird returning to a place it’s never known but for what its instinct and its jam-like neurons tell it You have been here and here you will stay and here you will have to make some kind of subsistence view of the meadows the larks don’t have it so good The grapple and debate Wasn’t I somewhere better or don’t I belong to some other place And then the wind kicks in and the bird the bird forgets the trifles and needs to settle in Needs to Do you green like a word cut from esoteric notepad rooftop What processes have you Look at your shoes they are ocean avenue brown In the brook a churn a sand brought down from the high peak and still going to the bottom of the sea Is that how the narrative goes Indeed and you keep coming and walking in scenes toward me and I am sad for I can’t picture the sea at all The thought of the chute of brook my favorite mountain range’s sonorous but I can’t picture the sea.
Self-Portrait

This was the last poem I ever wrote. It came to me under the blue sky, under the bluest sky. Do you know blue? Have you ever seen a blue settle against the rest of the universe so starkly, or bury itself so deeply into you that it made you think of a spring cutting through the ancient gray rock of your favourite childhood hillside? Do you remember childhood? The rabbits in your grandfather’s coop, the sway of your uncle’s boat atop the cool Atlantic inlet, the long brown hair of your mother in a photo you didn’t quite fathom upon glancing it at age six, the first your father shaved off his moustache, the first taste of berry from your grandmother’s pie, the calm in your aunt’s eyes as she led you onward through a gallery of American paintings, the sadness in your brother’s young eyes as he awaited some unknown in the attic as he played with a fragile china tea set, the first time you noticed a flag flutter and realized the wind is older than all, the first time you cared to notice the sun setting over the former pastures, once fertile cow pastures and thence plots for the dull lives of condominium dwellers, the trails cut in the woods and the poison ivy and oak, the nail clean through the foot.
and the first knowledge of damage? Do you?
Do you think anything is as awful as purple
after the rains? I remember the first thunder-
storm—I was there, and I wasn’t afraid, but
I felt it was terrible, I felt punishment, I felt
chased, as on the high mountaintop in the west
of the central region of my home state when,
after summiting, the clamour and fearful crack
descended atop me. I remember words coming
in much the same way, and now after years of
plying them, I feel no better or better off than
I ever was before, and perhaps even sadder.
I remember saying je t’aime to a young girl
I’d go on to marry, and upon whom my fear
and irrationality and hate would be heaped,
I remember the first time she took me in
her mouth, I remember a smile she hasn’t had
in many years. I remember my son the second
he was born, for I was the first to hold him and
he looked at me as if he had known me forever,
that he had known me before and would always.
I was told to not write a poem about this moment
for the moment was the poem, but here, eight years
later, I feel I must write it for I see him get taller
and I see my hair thinning and every day, though
surrounded by friends, I sense what a shoal far out
in the Atlantic must sense when it is countenanced
by the evilest black that the hurricane-swept eastern
sky can offer up. I see the kindest black in the eyes
of my daughter, who frolics as if she has already
danced in some far-off France or Greece, happy
as the glint of sun in the dry hills of her ancestry.
I look at the clutter on my desk, worthless clutter,
and then to the books upon my shelves I never
thought I’d actually read, and now they are all
mostly read. I miss the mountains, I miss the ocean, and sometimes both places seem to compete for me so that I feel as if I’m being unfaithful to one or the other. I miss the sleeping on a February slope high atop Mount Flume, going to bed at 3 p.m. for the sun was already dying out, and huddling against even the snow neath my sleeping bag for comfort. Do you remember things like these? If I speak of such things, you know. You have as many moments as I—they are numerous, like the branches or cones of the northern forest. In the deep recesses of such, one will find creatures if one tries hard enough, and sometimes the looks on their faces are tragic. Do you want to make amends with them, as I do, for leveling their homes, or for writing so insipidly about them? Do you wish you’d catalogued every berry you’d picked, from the very first at age three in a rural orchard whose wind-socks flittered in a light June, or every autumn apple you’d seen fallen into decay? When the dawn is imminent, do you find yourself counting the thousands of hours you’ve got left? The dozens of hours a loved one has left? The unknowable length of time has left a marriage, one so strip-mined and soured you lose all hope in forgiveness of self? The great distance between where a shell washes upon the beach and where it might have wanted to land? And all this while, the questions keep getting posed and the slow descent makes our baskets unsteady and eyes affix upon some point of arrival that makes this last poem and its writing superfluous and trite, not nearly as permanent
Raising miss g

Careful what comes from your belly: if a horse
she'll not take me far. The dogs were always too close
& I'd have to turn back to not leer them
too far from home. We caused each other. Each achoo

I make she splashed into the light show
by her kite strings. Of which I tie
to every slender blooming. Where are
my girl's stamped feet the piston sky? Let

the dead go on & bury their dead, kicking,
scissor kicking, even when I'm not she's still
somehow afloat. This little girl with her planchette & weather
balloon—rabbit & cauliflower in my honey pot.

There must be seeds under her feet
each year she's more than dust upwards.
**Drowning miss g**

Gibraltar, I give you away so easy. shkel, for you are just a baby-girl I husband myself, still think on. Herein this grand sash around her waist, this part of the 'the:' the street kicks, my teeth grit & someone lets out a Holler more rebel than get yourself on over to my yard sale, them denim's selling quicker than a hot-fire-Sherman gone crazy on a Georgia. Herein, rampant fire, stick your tongue tip out, land bridge, my always on lookout. I know how we sold you between us for good behavior; penance for the come lovely I can feedeth you. Thus she grows naked all on her own, one ought to motherly clothe this little girl on given days where is she? In the ditch. The waterline just below my nose. For one must obey the curvature of a ragged bank into a water from which necessity seeks me the scientific: i.e. Gabon is a country; Gabon I dip my country feet in you; Gabon I seek thee & always have since the 9th grade project on buffering & oil preservation & how to get yourself a Gabon. I was brought upright & studied in school, learnt my geography, stronghold, what could cause a sea to rise, how to sew my buttons back on. This is easy armature, an ever-so important crossover necessary for common adaption, like now that I've shifted my feet northern I'll need many sweaters & a steeplechase to hedge the fences back from the ditchline fuller with the rain & with frogs which the workers will save for you in plastic buckets when the pavers come. In this winterless tis'. Formation,

if I don't think of you any longer, if you are just a baby-girl, I call you pretty pretty. Bounce you on my knee & forget to feed you & me, I just sleep all day. Gibraltar I'll shorten you to G so I can manage, pretend you are a cat, the days umber cool. This regular ratchets I'm too old for an el-o-min-o. Like today the fantastic chin-jut & tomorrow's the yea ole tassels. What two cowgirls
we have been, my girl if-of-hands, five fingers. What a lasso-er, my-my, how you can hogtie. So I dam up those that need a sand-swirling—save the precious—come to change the earth awhile—for myself & for the belly rush I once said would take me in & (to have gone with her person), & for the neighborhood kids on their bikes that need water in a hydrant release, come to get their feet wet; & of course, the sun. And for G, whom I know would be wearing a blue bathing suit out on the street pulling hair & kicking as I did, kin of biters, two little broken selves. Blue like my first mare Sissy's eye gone cancerous or blind or worsening like cataracts do or, a blue for her blindness & mine all the more. Elfin orphan child in a honey pot that learnt stir, that against her best learned stay when I said okay it's time now.
LEILA WILSON

Air Parts

I

Whenever weight shifts, a hollow rouses in its pith.

Egg’s air. Door hinge oiling for rain. Her hush as

the truck jolts.

All mass enfolds gaps. All wind

and fury when a tree litters light through her window screen.

She wants to know how she’ll go down unraveling.

II

There’s nothing hallowed in a ferry’s quake

before it slips toward sinking. Full of its last
owned move,
it will be a hole
in the bay.

It will hold air
and bleed perforations.
After bedding,
it will be pilfered
by those who want
emptiness to touch.

III

Outlined by shadow
or echo or that
which happens after,

mosquitoes trace
her with tremble.
Her hand holds

off rain, a herd
beyond the hill.
Her swallow’s

salamander grove
skids in thin wind.
How her voice scratches

from calling names,
how her neck strains
past straightening.
Because the sky

can’t fill all in,

and ceremony

comes nowhere

near, she looks

for something else

to pull her pulse.

Balconied gasp.

Bubble riding

the river’s leg.

Cracks. Lesions.

Mesh. She traps

the inside until it cores

there. She mills

the middle stillness.
We know it's wrong to judge a book by its cover. Especially a book of poetry—a genre notorious for the varied quality of its cover art. When a cover, however, is truly representative of the content and quality inside, it's hard not to read it as a corollary to the poems. Such is the case with Derick Burleson's second poetry collection, *Never Night*.

*Never Night*'s cover is a gorgeous painting of white birches and dark shadows by Kes Woodward, an artist well-known in Alaska. The image—and its prominent use of contrasts—fits the landscapes in the text, as the book illustrates a journey from a childhood in "thick red Oklahoma mud" near "the raging / river that used to be Main Street" through a Montana full of "third-growth Ponderosa forests and stands / of slim larch, steakhouses, pulp mills, glossy pamphlets" with a final destination "here where / it's never night"—the wildness of rural Alaska, informed by classical mythology and the observation of yet another childhood. Formally alert, yet uneasy with both memory and present events, Burleson's poems offer a glimpse into a personal passage, an expedition not only from south to north, but from the "why" to the "how" of a life.

Three sections, each subtitled with a line from Elizabeth Bishop's "Questions of Travel," set the stage for the book's continental scope. In the first, "American Boys," the speaker of "In Our Field" recalls, "I didn't know what to wish for." The Oklahoma in these first poems is a land of fields haunted by memory and family, caves filled with "a night / so night it feels like drowning." It's an Oklahoma full of the entrenched ghosts of memory, informed by the sure knowledge of what happens next and the realization that love and pain exist in the same places, for the same things, at the same time. Like the Montana verses that follow, these poems don't avert their gaze. They stare and stare, like Bishop, at event and setting, almost imprinting them in flesh. In Montana, there is love—love of place, of companionship, of individuality: "the fierce pleasure / of knowing that soul is the particular // song we learn to sing." But it is not unsullied; just as it contains "third-growth Ponderosa forests," it has loggers to empty those forests.
Just as it holds “anglers cradling rainbow trout,” there are “derailed tank-cars” belching chlorine.

“North,” the book’s second section, contains the same “strange juxtapositions,” concerned with the disconnect between personal comfort and environmental health, filled with a consciousness of endings and the irreversibility of the moment. At the same time, another strange juxtaposition is occurring. Despite the unease of a two-headed moose fetus and the crisis of near-death under a diesel fuel tank, there is a comfort in this new home—new memories can be made. And they are made in “Late Valentines,” the book’s aptly named third section. Here Burleson writes not only love poems—to a lover, for and from a daughter—but poems realizing that love and joy can correspond in the same way as love and pain, and at the same time. While it seems hokey to acknowledge the function of joy in a love poem, or to call any love poem “bittersweet,” Burleson’s poems escape stereotypes of overdone emotion with a consciousness of truth, a disarming honesty, and a light-handed humor. In these poems, love is always accompanied by death, to the extent that Persephone and Hades are transported into the twenty-first century, complete with “tea and cigarettes for breakfast” and accompanied by “death metal music.” “Mirabel” recalls the oppositions in life with its deep focus on the insides of animals and a child’s understanding that we kill to eat, that we will die, and that without care, she could die—that we are or are not because others are or are not. The book’s final words illustrate this inherent desperation: “the only reason I exist is / because you love me,” says the speaker, who stands on a receding glacier, knowing that vanishing can happen imperceptibly or all at once.

Alert to form, meter, and the individual line, Burleson’s poems demonstrate a deep knowledge of place and motivation, gained through the examination of longing and the component pieces of contentment. Far from being content with their own scope, however, these poems constantly reach for a new understanding of not just character, but also relations to place and event. The journey chronicled in Never Night ends, for now, in Alaska and in acceptance of a found peace, but Burleson’s project never really concludes—it continues with each reading in directions unexpected and nonetheless true.

Reviewed by Lauren Leslie
In his poem “Peter and Mother,” David Schubert—the neglected depression-era poet who John Ashbery has called “a painter of heaven- or hell-inflected urban landscapes”—writes: “A hand is writing these lines / On your eyes for journeys / You’ll never start for.”

The allure of the journey never started for—how many Lonely Planets line my bookshelf? I’ve always meant to get to Salzburg, to view from the surrounding hills its symphony of architectural styles, its Mozart festival, its fountains, dwarf gardens, and Eduscho Kaffee. I must have seriously considered at one time or another Montenegro, for the book is there, must have considered whitewater rafting down its Tara Canyon or watching a kolo wheel dance from the balcony of an Adriatic hotel. And literary Savannah? When will I bathe in Aiken’s strange moonlight or walk among O’Connor’s lovely peacocks? When will I ever use that Hebrew phrasebook with its madbukhas, ami khereshes, and dvash? Oh, when will I find time to motor up Jamaica’s Blue Mountains with a Norwegian-Thai girl, or listen to the roots of Flabba and Bingy Bunny or the hard-edged ragga of Red Rat?

In Ange Mlinko’s Starred Wire we are plunged into the cold pool of potentiality, “adrenaline surging through the veins,” to find out the place we thought we were—Lisbon, or was it Fès? no Venice, it was certainly Venice—was mere imagining. That being in or traveling to those places closer to home—Philadelphia, or Boston, or falling in love and ruining our lives—is the “true illusion,” the “casserole . . . put out on the porch to freeze.”

Here pushing against there, interior bulging into exterior, dreamscapes exploding hard facts—“everything’s carousing” in Mlinko’s poetry, “the certain ratty violets,” the “‘What, ho!’ of our leniency,” the “schoolkids jumping jellyfish fences,” enchanting us, making us ask What does it mean?, giving us at times an erethism, an abnormal irritability to her stimulation. She is the ticker screaming across the screen to give us the epilogue, to dredge up those curious days, to tell us to come to bed.
And good bedside reading it is: “I must wait for her to speak / The meanings I must negate before / I am admitted to the gayest person.” That’s David Schubert again, who Mlinko’s enlisted to introduce her. Indeed, Mlinko shares with Schubert a kind of forced manic gaiety, sprinkling her poems, as he did his, with exclamation points—a dastardly feat to be able to pull off with such regularity. “What hairstyles! What restoration comedy! Excuse me, is that a pigeon or a dove?” And here’s Schubert: “Break the pot! and let carnations — / Smell them! they’re the very first. / Break the sky and let come magic / Rain!” Poetry at its best, for Schubert, arrives to the party “innocent and gay: the music of vowel and consonant is the happy-go-lucky echo of time itself.”

And that is a trademark of Mlinko’s style. In “Contretemps” she is “lipreading through the moving leaves.” In “The Intrigues” we get the “vernacular lavendar softening the rocks,” as “the ghost devolves to dew blobs.” And in “Femme Fatale Geography” the vowels and consonants play with each other in sometimes surprising combinations: “Man-made Monet Lake’s shaped like an eye,” or “from the top he can savor milkshake stucco terraces.”

Indeed, this pollenation of categories, this constant mixing of the senses—sight and sound, smell and touch—gives to Mlinko’s poetry a freshness and well-roundedness that we expect from life but is often missing. Coming to her poetry is like arriving at the farmer’s market early, when it’s still cool and the Hmong and Russians are laying out their still-cold berries and radishes, long before the crush of people picking over the produce, combined with the heat of the sun, have left only a wilted agglomeration, an irritation at the day and people.

In an interview several years ago in Morocco, Mlinko was asked if living there had changed the way she thought about aesthetics. She answered that yes, the surfaces traced with koranic inscriptions and hypnotic designs were very amenable to her; that she preferred poetry to be like that: “semantically & rhythmically brimming over.”

But Mlinko doesn’t want poetry to be merely “language-bending;” she wants it to be imaginative in the sense that it becomes “reality-bending.” She wants, as Alice Notley’s argues in her lecture “Disembodied Poetics,” to “re-imagine reality.” So we get the “Girl with the Black Square Hair” who calls to invisible birds, leaves her solar eclipse sunglasses in the long grasses of the park, but is reassured of being able to return at night—for once she saw the gas-lamps on past noon.
Occasionally, though, Mlinko gets carried away, becoming perhaps a bit too forced in her insistence on the primacy of sounds. “Opus Opal Opulence” is perhaps the clearest example I can find with its “buffalo of philosophy,” and its “exciting to be involved in a schism.” Or the childishly forced squisito mosquito in “Three Old New Games.” But then, just when I’m worn out with the music, just when I feel I can’t listen to one more Sibelius recording, the poet too begins to question herself: “I am no longer certain what music I want to hear.”

Mlinko does know what she is about. In the Moroccan interview she said: “I can’t write a poem without justifying it from the point of view of ‘interesting design.’” She’s not a formalist; rather the design is in the shape of the poems with their studied balance; the design is in the shape of the lines, their internal rhymes, their keen awareness of letter combinations creating surprising alliterations of phonemes: “engrossed they were, groomed by a finger.” The poet, too, insists on wrapping and unwrapping carefully, like the Japanese. But just as “the secret art of wrapping a canvas can’t be repeated,” the secret art of wrapping words into a poem for Mlinko very nearly seems like a sacred, one-time event.

In a Poetry Foundation online journal entry, Mlinko says this about the philosophical underpinnings of her poetry: “[T]he Russian Formalists . . . theorized that poetry must have strangeness in it. Studying Russian as a little girl, I would read aloud from children’s books, usually fairy tales, like Goldilocks. Maybe I’ll always associate those illustrations of a kerchiefed devochka wandering in the wood with the slow decipherment of the Cyrillic alphabet. Maybe language was always the primal dream: getting lost in it, and finding my way out of it: cutting an elegant path through it.”

Reviewed by Edward McFadden
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The work of language deserves our greatest care, for the tongue's fire may devour the world, or may light the way.

--Scott Russell Sanders
from "Amos and James" (45/3)
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