THE TONTO DRIVE-IN THEATER

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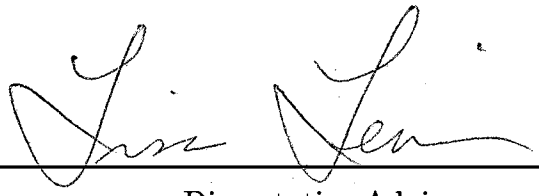

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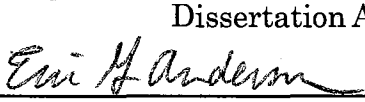

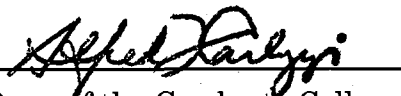

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Preface

I ought to have taken a cue from Irving Howe, who closed his brief introduction to the anthology, *Short Shorts: An Anthology of the Shortest Stories*, with the observation, "what could be more absurd than a long long introduction to a book of short shorts" (xv). While it seems smart to avoid excessive pronouncement and the absurdity of a long long introduction to a short short dissertation, there are, nevertheless, a few matters of the genre of very brief fiction, that I think need to be addressed. So, in the next few pages I will undertake an exploration of the genre of brief works of fiction as well as the nature of brevity itself. I will then discuss the history of the conscious development of the genre. I will then undertake a discussion of my major theme—the ways in which men have had a hand in bringing ruin upon themselves and others—touching briefly on the issues of place and religion which are also part of this work.

In seeking to write *about* brief works of fiction, I have discovered that little has been published on the subject. One must rely primarily on the introductions to anthologies and the contents of special issues of literary journals. Robert Coover's "Minute Fictions" issue of *TriQuarterly*, which came out in the spring of 1976, was the first well-known contemporary collection of very short pieces I could find. *The Stone Wall Book of Short Fictions* (edited by Coover and Kent H. Dixon) predates it but is in large part an early draft of the *TriQuarterly* issue. The *TriQuarterly* issue is important, but it offers no theoretical statements, nothing by way of preface, forward, or introduction, just the pieces themselves. The *Stone Wall* anthology has a mysterious parable as an introduction, which is only partially enlightening (it is included later in its entirety). So there has been

little written by way of criticism that explores the short short story. I will have brief comments on the one or two pieces of scholarship in this area, but I will mainly forge on through this *terra aliena* anecdotally because this preface is less a study of the genre itself and more a discussion of how my work fits into a tradition without much history of its own.

The business of brief fiction is chaotic, protean on a good day. No one is exactly sure what constitutes a work of brief fiction other than that it is (a) brief and (b) fiction, and even these standards are fluid ones. Some take the latter notion to be suspect, suggesting that perhaps these short pieces of fiction are less like stories and more like lyric poems, or like what Tess Gallagher calls lyric-narratives, which have:

> both an interior (emotional progression) and an exterior (plot) narrative structure, along with the close proximity of the speaking voice to the identity of the [writer] himself—the poet is the hero, or rather, the poet's imagination is the hero. (74)

This idea of the poetic imagination is similar to Bakhtin's argument in *The Problems of Dostoyevski's Poetics* that the hero has been overtaken by the *writer qua hero*, particularly in something like *Notes from Underground.* Gallagher makes an important point: some pieces of brief fiction do seem less inclined toward narrative and more inclined toward lyricism, which is something that seems to come through in a more self-conscious or ornate language, something less like the rigid symbolic order of Lacan and more like the fluid dynamics of a French feminist theory of language. Perhaps too, as Gallagher argues, there is more of a sense of a speaker (hero-in-language) and less of a sense of a protagonist (hero-in-action).

In any case, the best contemporary works of brief fiction stretch the idea of

what a story is. They slide it along the spectrum toward the lyric and that mooncalf, the prose poem. In many instances, prose poems and works of brief fiction, like twins separated at birth, are often mistaken for one another in the busy streets of the anthology business. Carolyn Forché's piece, "The Colonel," has been alternately anthologized as a prose poem, short short, and essay (the latter in a host of freshman composition readers). Similar things have happened to Russell Edson's work, and I will have more to say about this later.

Nevertheless, the standard of fictionality is upset by works of brief fiction; so too is the standard of brevity, which is less sure now than it ever was. The standards are arbitrarily drawn and seem to be points of competition between editors more than helpful critical or aesthetic measures. Coover didn't set any kind of definitive standard as far as I can tell. Irving Howe, in the introduction of his anthology, suggested a standard at around 2500 words (x). The editors of the *Sudden Fiction* anthologies deliberated this point extensively and hung their jury at 1000 or 2000 words. So they decided to split the difference with 1500 (Shapard xiv). *Flash Fiction* set its bar at 750, and *Sundog's* World's Best Short-Short Story Contest—and the *Microfiction* anthologies, which have come in part from the contest winners—asks for the barest sliver of 250 words or less. *Glimmer Train's* Very Short Fiction Contest, on the other hand, asks for 2000 words or under. So, even after nearly thirty years of conscious development, there is still disagreement, and it doesn't seem to bother anyone. The answer is not that no one *has* an answer, it is that no one seems willing to *comply* with anyone else's standard.

So rather than having settled on a length standard, it seems like the possibilities have "tribbled".[1] There are now sudden fictions, flash fictions, minute fictions, four minute fictions, microfictions, snap fictions, *ficciones*, *las minificcions* or *los microrelatos* in the Spanish, *die short short story* in the German, then the plain old short short story (as in SHORT short story, meaning a

short story that is not very long) and then the most current and commonly-used term: short-short story (as in SHORT-SHORT story, meaning the nature of the shortness is qualified). A host of even less-common terms have fallen by the wayside.

Some might argue that there is a kind of postmodern moxie in giving a literary genre a name that simultaneously invokes a depilatory and *The Dukes of Hazzard*, but I am not so sure, finally, that the term "short-short," aside from its kitschiness, has any real value in distinguishing the genre from its cousin/neighbor/colleague the short story. To me, calling brief works of fiction short-shorts is as confusing as calling novellas short-longs, and says just as much (or little as the case may be). Still, the primary problem I have with the term short-short is the erroneous notion that it focuses one's attention too much on the fact that works in this genre are really just abbreviated short stories, which they are not for the most part, or at least they are not for many of those writing in the genre today. This kind of thinking results in a belief that works of brief fiction are only a sub- or bastard-genre, or even worse, a non-genre. The confusing proliferation of names doesn't help either. So, rather than wading through all the terminology and trying to choose the most correct (or least inaccurate), I am going to take the advantage of setting the standards myself. As such, I do hereby declare writings employing no line breaks that are less than 2500 words in length to be called fictionettes. You know, like towelettes or kitchenettes.

Interlude 1

There are always problems of terminology. Robert Shapard, in his introduction to *Sudden Fiction* (1986), arguably the seminal collection of contemporary fictionettes, discusses the chagrins of classifying the brief fiction he and his co-editor, James Thomas, were seeking to anthologize. Shapard points out that the

work they attempted to collect was generally so new and so different from the standard conception of the modern notion of story that there had been almost nothing said about them by literary critics (this is still very much the case).

Shapard and Thomas sent working copies of the anthology to various editors and writers with a brief explanation of the project and a working title: *Blasters.* It should go without saying that almost everyone contacted (except the "feckless" Mr. Gordon Lish) thought the name blasters stunk. Some were quite vocal about their disapproval.[2] Shapard concedes that the name "blasters" was a bad idea, pointing out, with his tail firmly between his legs, that François Camoin thought the name had something to do with laxatives and that Alice Turner, *Playboy Magazine's* fiction editor, said the name sounded like "children's bubble gum in red and purple flavors" (qtd. in Shapard xv).

Nevertheless, only one of the editors and writers they contacted had any problems with the collection of tiny little fictions Shapard and Thomas were sending around. In fact, they were effusive in their praise of the endeavor and indicated that they were excited by the fact that someone had finally thought to take up the cause. While there was a great deal of positive response, Shapard also describes a great sense of confusion communicated by his respondents. They loved the little fictions, but they were at a loss as to what they really were—not stories, not vignettes, not poems. Again, people were struck with the problem of labels. Shapard points out that

> among those writers who see the contemporary short-short as an emerging, entirely new form are those who insist that the form can only be established, can only be born, when its proper name has been chosen. (xv)

Similarly, the problem of a name was a big one for me—not one that kept me from working, but one that, until solved, left me a little disoriented. What was I

writing? Stories? Poems? Something else? Ficciones like Borges's little wonders? Were they études, like Chopin's wonderful little compositions—studies that became something more than academic exercises? Actually they were, in almost all cases, experiments for me, attempts to work through some sort of formal challenge (i.e. the use of conditional tense, the second person, or shifting focalization). Or they were an attempt, like tourists at Four Corners in the American Southwest, to stand (or crouch) in a multitude of places at once—to write lyric-narrative-fiction-poems. But a name did come, late one night as the first draft of this collection of pieces began to coalesce and clump together.

So fictionette it is—just like kitchenette: a small, compact cooking area often found in motels or efficiency apartments. I think the name actually suits the type of thing that writers are trying when they consciously attempt brief prose pieces as opposed to when they simply write stories that aren't very long. When one thinks of a kitchenette, one does not imagine some weakened form of a full-sized kitchen. Rather, one thinks of an amelioration of certain semi-squalid surroundings, something that might help some Route 66 motor-dive become a kind of home-away-from-home. It is not a "lack" to rent a motel room with a kitchenette. Doing so means that one will be able to linger, even in the stripped-down spaces of lower middle class lodging. This is how it should be with the fictionette, I think. The form should not be slave to some Napoleonic master who happens to be—what, a few hundred words longer, perhaps a tad more Freytagean, than a standard-length short story? And do not confuse it with a novella, which is, of course, not to be confused with a novel.

The fictionette should try to do what longer, more elaborate fiction can't do because it is too long and elaborate. The use of the diminutive "ette" allows one to imply shortness and brevity without stealing its power or energy. For example, when one thinks of a cigarette, the idea of a cigar but smaller doesn't really come

to mind. The fictionette, like the cigarette, marks out its own territory, a kind of inter-generic space, while allowing one, upon reflection, to think back toward the original—the cigar in this case, the longer work of fiction in another. Some might argue that the term fictionette might invoke the feminine. In fact, in 1999 an "old school" faculty member at Brigham Young University made that very same comment following a reading I gave while on a teaching fellowship. He suggested that the term fictionette might make the pieces sound like women's fiction. If one ignores the misogyny of such a comment, there might be some merit in what this fellow said, but not in the way he intended. The term fictionette might, in fact, be more than a little inflected toward the feminine, but inflected in a way that would, I think, make Hélène Cixous proud. By seeking to be a space of transaction between genres rather than something trying to fill up the space of a genre the fictionette becomes anti-phallic.

Interlude 2

Shortness. It is not a virtue in this culture. According to the song by Randy Newman, "short people got no reason to live." If you are short with someone it is a fault needing a corrective. "I'm sorry," one might say, "I'm a little short this week, can I borrow some cash?" or "Bill, send someone over from the warehouse, we're short-handed in here." Smallness. The power of a singularity: the focus of the entire mass of a star condensed down to a mathematical point. Power in limited context. A revelation. The truth of phallogocentrism? The story of the genie who was defeated by compressing his body and stuffing it *back into the bottle.* Condensing. Compression. Focus. Little neighborhood juvenile delinquents burning the red, stumbling bodies of ants with the old man's magnifying glass. It is the focus of the fictionette, not what is taken out, that matters. The narrative excesses of the 18th and 19th century brought us booster chair novels

like *Clarissa, Bleak House,* and *Middlemarch. Moby Dick* anchors bookshelves and could probably do the same for a schooner.

What interests me most about short forms is the fact that the concept is so central; plot and character, while present, are not really what carry the fictionette along. They work more like paintings than writings. They can be taken in in almost in a single glance or gulp—they are the literary equivalent of an oyster. They are firecrackers. Whipcracks. Spare, like shaker glove boxes. Or they are orchestrated like Joseph Cornell's memory boxes. They are not long or plentiful enough to truly bother a reader, so they can be reasonable sites for experimentation. They can be dismissed, without too much trouble, because they don't demand so much of us initially. But because they are so dart-like, they can puncture our cynical rinds the way a Dianne Arbus photograph of retarded people in Halloween costumes can peel away ironic grimacing like straight lye on the skin.

In his book *The American Prose Poem*, Delville argues, like Tess Gallagher, that there is a kind of lyrical narrative and that the short-short story on one hand, and the prose poem on the other, represent the most common manifestations of it.[3] Brevity, Delville argues, relying theoretically on the work of Eileen Baldeshwiler and Charles May, inhibits a writer's ability to write realistically (i.e. fictionally) because the shortness of the actual work precludes the inclusion of the amount of detail commonly associated with "realistic" or naturalistic prose (101-104). Consequently, the prose poem, and by association, the fictionette, must then be cast in a lyric (or inward) as opposed to a more narrative (or outward) mode (101). I think this is not really the case, especially if one looks at the fictionettes of Ben Marcus or Thomas Bernhard, which resemble lyric poems as much as breakfast cereal resembles a Japanese bullet train.

In Marcus's case, the work becomes a kind of exposition and language play. Take, for example, his piece, "A Novel of the Father," which was published in the

Short-Short Story Special Issue of the *Cimarron Review*.

> The major problem for Father is to keep his people separate while maintaining the correct pace, neither too abrupt nor too leisurely. He established this pace by narrating his own movements, the style and structure of the rooms or outdoor spaces he occupies, and the gestures and clothing of the other characters he must come up against. To further maintain the deliberate beauty and striking, swift pace he takes in this world, he also uses various interrupting elements, including hurried jabs with his hands, strangled barks of lamentation, and frequent motions to his own eyes while certain characters move into newer positions to wait for his approach. And then when a character's term in this world ends, Father is pleased. He regards them as they are lowered into the hole. (12)

This kind of experimentation marks what really separates the current notion of the fictionette from standard narrative or lyric modes. Marcus is clearly writing a metafictional piece, but that is not the primary thrust of the work. The narrator is truly foregrounded but not in some inwardly-directed sense, not the way that lyric speakers tend to be. Here the narrator is formulating his narration around a third person, the Father. In narratological parlance, it is a *heterodiegetic narrative*. Lyrical works are *homodiegetic*; they fold the speaker back into the language and events of the poem or narrative and involve or implicate the speaker in the diegesis in a direct and unambiguous way.

It is this degree of authorial distance that, in many cases, marks a separation of the prose poem from the fictionette, though a writer like Russell Edson

immediately befuddles my distinctions. A piece like "Metals Metals," from Russell Edson's *The Childhood of an Equestrian*, is amazingly lyric in its language and approach to the subject matter; he is penning a kind of ode to the presence and influence of metals in our lives. "Out of the golden West," he writes, "out of the leaden East, into the iron South, and to the silver North...Oh metals metals everywhere, forks and knives, belt buckles and hooks...When you are beaten you sing" (108). At no point in this entire piece is there a narrative moment, no plot or story or characters, no development or climax, just words in praise and in awe of the metals that influence and effect our lives. On the other hand, "Ape" is all narrative, as are most of the other pieces in *Performance at Hog Theater*. In this piece, a husband and wife argue about the quality of their meal of an ape, how it is getting boring to be always eating ape, and how the husband is certain that there is something prurient going on between the wife and the genitals of said ape. Even with a wide variation in the nature of his work, Edson is still considered a prose poet in general, though he is consistently included in fictionette anthologies. This must be because he doesn't have line breaks like regular poets do.

Unlike Edson's, Thomas Bernhard's fictionettes are without much formal variety. His collection of one hundred and four fictionettes, *The Voice Imitator,* operates under the same kind of narrative principle as the Marcus piece. The narrator is situated at a strange remove, both a first hand witness and "objective" recorder. It is brief but certainly not "lyrical" in any traditional sense.

> The voice imitator, who had been invited as the guest
> of the surgical society last evening, had declared
> himself—after being introduced in the Palais
> Pallavinci—willing to come with us to the
> Kahlenberg, where our house was always open to any
> artist whatsoever who wished to demonstrate his art

> there—not of course without a fee. We had asked the voice imitator, who hailed from Oxford in England but who had attended school in Landschut and had originally been a gunsmith in Berchtesgaden, not to repeat himself on the Kahlenberg but to present us something entirely different from what he had done for the surgical society; that is, to imitate quite different people from those he had imitated in the Palais Pallavinci, and he had promised to do this for us, for we had been enchanted with the program that he had presented in the Palais Pallavinci. In fact, the voice imitator did imitate voices of quite different people—all more or less well known—from those he had imitated before the surgical society. We were allowed to express our own wishes, which the voice imitator fulfilled most readily. When, however, at the very end, we suggested that he imitate his own voice, he said that he could not do that. (2)

Once more, against the assertions of Michel Delville, brevity need not always lead to lyricism (or away from realism). In fact, the opposite seems to be the case in some (but clearly not all) works of brief fiction, as I have tried to show. I am more of a mind to say that fictionettes might not have either realism or lyricism in mind, but some third thing, perhaps mood or tone central to their identity. This is not to say that mood or tone are not present in regular fiction or in poetry, but here I mean use mood and tone as literary equivalents of texture. Furthermore, rather than trying to insert a new genre in the place of the old ones, I see the fictionette, through its use of mood or tone, as a kind of common area between the genres, a shared space or the central shaded space of a fiction/poetry/

drama/essay venn diagram.

I think of the varieties of short forms: the story or the anecdote, the "a funny thing happened to me on the way to the forum," the speech, the encomium, the oration, the fable, the proverb, the psalm, or the prayer. There is something enduring in the short form. The chat versus the discursus. Myths and folktales are short and pointed. Short tales are often told during a break or respite. Folk tales and their kin often involve a measure of surprise or absurdity or fantastic occurrence.

Charles Baxter believes, as I do not, that the fictionette is founded upon situational familiarity and short hand. In the first *Sudden Fiction* anthology Baxter argues that fictionettes employ familiar characters, non-exotic locations, and the like, saying that in

> the abruptly short-short story, familiar material takes the place of detail. Oh, yes, the reader says: a couple quarreling in a sidewalk restaurant, a nine-year-old boy stealing a Scripto in Woolworth's, a woman crying in the bathtub. We've seen that before. We know where we are. Don't give us details; we don't need them. (229)

My primary problem is that for this to be true, fictionettes could only be enjoyed by the few readers who have the direct background experience connected to a given set of details. What of the literary works we read because we are looking to focus our attention outside of our own parochial concerns? This kind of thinking is what had killed most writing program writing, and thus a certain amount of contemporary writing in general; it has been smothered in the quotidian, something I have tried to avoid in this collection.

I think fictionettes best operate in a fashion contrary to Baxter's suggestion. It is the making strange of something with a few short strokes, like the horns

and mustache scribbled on the gym teacher's yearbook photograph that best exemplifies the work of the fictionette. There is some short hand involved, but it is a short hand written in Arabic, running right to left. At every turn, the generic aspects of the fictionette is like a baby with a baboon heart—normal, but not really. There is correspondence without similitude, the ever-present risk of rejection, so that every good fictionette becomes a cheat on the genre, a kind of Martin Guerre settling back in with the village after the war.

So, if fictionettes are not, as I am arguing, kinds of short story or varieties of prose poem, what is their lineage? In order to discuss the history of this form, I am going to draw a distinction that I hope clarifies matters *before* they begin to become cloudy. When I discuss the history of the development of the fictionette, I mean to describe the conscious development of a genre, which, like the development of the novel, is as much a creative act as the writing of the individual works themselves; however, the development of the fictionette is different, from the development of almost all other literary genres by virtue of the fact that the duration of the development has been so compressed and that the developers have been primarily editors or writers acting in an editorial capacity, and that it has been so fully and quickly institutionalized as we can see by the proliferation of anthologies and contests. As such, I do not intend, in this introduction, to expound upon the history of brief works in general. Such a move would cause me to range into the classics, to the bible and other sacred texts, and into folklore. I would also have to explicate the nature and development of the sketch, the vignette, the anecdote, the column, television sketch comedy, Bugs Bunny cartoons, vaudeville, and the tall tale. This would make a fascinating study, no doubt, one I am, in fact, interested in undertaking, but it nevertheless falls well outside the purview of a preface to a creative work. What I *am* planning to outline briefly is the history of the arrival of certain anthologies and special issues

of literary magazines which have had the cumulative effect of establishing the contemporary presence of the genre of the brief fictional work.

A few anthologies exist prior to those I mentioned earlier, but they are mainly from the 30s-and 40s school of "Gift of the Magi"/"The Necklace" twist endings.[4] The *Stone Wall* anthology I mentioned earlier contains an interesting preface, written by Robert Coover. I will include it in full.

> This book is a tree, growing in a shifting light: its branches reach one way, then another. Other trees have died for its sake, not many—feel the pages.
>
> It is already several years old, it seeded itself, more or less (thus, like all of us, it is a gift to the world, wanted or unwanted), grew without gardeners or grand aspirations, and if it has a certain beauty, it is the beauty of the odd nut tree in a grove of cypresses.
>
> It no doubt has deep roots, but they cannot be examined without destroying the tree. We all understand this. Though it flowers briefly, its nuts are sweet, with hard translucent shells.
>
> It might have been a bigger tree, for we all have friends and our friends have friends, but perhaps instead it will seed others, nobler than itself. Grown in a better light perhaps. With more care.
>
> It will probably not weather a severe storm, and perhaps it is too late to hope for good weather, even to wish for it—who are we to flower and drop nuts in an apocalypse? Yet perhaps it will survive through its own weaknesses: what storm worthy of the name

would rage at a nut-tree?

This is clearly a coded message (also a little trite for the author of *A Public Burning*) which indicates that (a) the project has been in the editors' minds for a while, (b) it took shape as a kind of event, though it was clearly an organic one, (c) they hoped that the anthology might spawn some interest in the genre (if it is safe to use that term) and cause others to develop anthologies of their own, and (d) they were unsure of the "genre's" permanence but carried on anyway.

Clearly the anthology did spawn further interest. Three years later, Robert Coover himself was asked to guest-edit an issue of the *TriQuarterly*, creating a volume of "minute fictions." The result was issue thirty-five, volume one (volume two of the same issue was an all-poetry endeavor). The Minute Fictions issue of *TriQuarterly* contains eighty-seven pieces of around five hundred to a thousand words. The table of contents of this volume, like the *Stone Wall* anthology—because it is fifty percent carry over from that project—reads like a who's-who of contemporary literature for the seventies and eighties: W. S. Merwin, J. G. Ballard, Francis Ponge, John Hawkes, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Robert Creely, Russell Edson, Paul West, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar, Andrei Codrescu, T. Coraghessan Boyle, Richard Brautigan, and Annie Dillard. Beyond the debutant(e) list, what is immediately interesting is Coover's inclusion of poets (Merwin, Ponge, Creeley, and Edson) in a fiction anthology, especially a fiction anthology that mirrors an all-poetry issue.

Coover has also excerpted quite a bit from longer works. Tuten, Hawkes, and others had selections of their novels fashioned into fictionettes by Coover. Such a move shows that from the beginning of the development of this "genre" there has been, not only a conflation of genres in the attempt to create a new form, but an attempt to manufacture something that did not really exist under its own power as well as a deconstruction of certain notions of authorship. To Coover's credit, there are quite a few pieces in the *TriQuarterly* which are clearly experiments

with brevity and compression as their primary intent and direction; however, the fact that this kind of editorial manipulation was at play says a great deal about the drive to grow the "genre." This is, in my estimation, a "rain follows the plow" kind of thinking, which did, to a certain extent, seem to work. Other anthologies did follow; though they are not all good.

Irving Howe and his wife Ilana Wiener Howe followed in Coover's furrow with the next brief fiction anthology to appear on the scene, *Short Shorts* (the first hint of that particular name coming round again): *An Anthology of the Shortest Stories*. The book took seven years to germinate, but instead of making short stories *very* short by manipulating them directly as Coover and Dixon had done, the Howes dug through the oeuvres of nineteenth and twentieth century short story writers and came up with stories that were pretty short, 2500 words or less. They were not necessarily stories consciously made short in an attempt to play with notions of genre, they just happened to not be long. This isn't so much of a problem for the argument that brief works have always been around and that they have just been under-appreciated or under-utilized; however, it does suggest that there was once again a really profound attempt to engineer a genre. Few if any of the pieces included are experimental or avant-garde in any useful sense of the term, and the table of contents really does seem like the membership roll at a gentleman's club of nineteenth and twentieth century masculine writing—lots of stuff in there on soldiering and so forth. Granted, the Howes make some overtures toward diversity (mainly European diversity) but there are only six women represented out of thirty-eight pieces in the collection.

Their list of authors is a sober one: Crane, Hemingway, Tolstoy, Kafka, Maupassant, Anderson, and Lawrence. It is a good collection to have available, but it is merely a compendium of brevity whose primary argument (unwittingly made) concerning the nature of brief works of fiction is that there is not really a history of the short short, that when and if it did happen in the past, it was the

result, not of conscious artistic effort, but of editorial fiat.

Now, I grant that I might indeed be skewing my assessment of this volume a little because I come from a perspective in which the "genre" has already been "invented" and "institutionalized" by way of almost thirty years of anthologies and contests. Nevertheless, the Howes are saying, through this anthology, that there had not been enough of these little stories written a hundred years ago to constitute a true genre, that it took two editors in the early 1980s to package them up for us and have them mean something. They ultimately indicate that the writers were not, for all intents and purposes, consciously trying to write against the genre of the short story the way that Baudelaire was, for example, trying to write against the genres of the novel and the lyric poem when he undertook *Paris Spleen.*

Baudelaire was, by his own admission, trying to apply "to the description of our more abstract modern life the same method he [Aloysius Bertrand, author of *Gaspard de la Nuit*] used in depicting the old days, so strangely picturesque" (ix). How that description might be achieved would come, Baudelaire says, from "the miracle of a poetic prose, musical, without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience" (ix-x).

It is this lack of conscious and articulated direction from the writers themselves that is missing from the intents of editors like Coover, Dixon and Howe. The *Sudden Fiction* anthology kahuna, James Thomas, has spearheaded the editing and publication of *Sudden Fiction*, *Sudden Fiction International*, *Sudden Fiction (Continued)*, and *Flash Fiction.* Thomas seems to have done a different work than the aforementioned pioneers. Rather than trying to invent the fictionette, he has marketed it. His popular anthologies, as John Capecci points out in his dissertation on the short-short, represent "the most recent and direct moves toward critical consideration of the short-short"—or fictionette (25). They are

also the way that most people come to the fictionette these days; the books are used extensively in creative writing courses of the community and junior college ilk. In this forum, not much can really be said on that other than to remark upon the rate at which the anthologies have proliferated from the point of the appearance of *Sudden Fiction*. A new one has been generated every few years or so: *Sudden Fiction* (1986), *Sudden Fiction International* (1989), *Flash Fiction* (1992), and *Sudden Fiction (Continued)* (1996). Others are sure to follow. It looks, now, like Coover got his wish of seeding other "trees." Whatever you want to call it, the fictionette is here to stay. Perhaps it has been squatting here for longer than we have known.

Interlude 3

How does one ever view the entire picture? How does one know how to crop the edges so that what is shown is accentuated not diminished? Novels are huge, hulking taproots, no matter what Bahktin and others say. The best of them are still a narrowing of the possible spectrum of experience. They have to be. Any attempt to write about everything become a *Cantos*-like mess of tangled fragments requiring indexes and concordances or a Borgesian library of Babel full of infinite possibility. What one needs, it seems, as a preliminary look at a new idea is a kind of survey or montage of the issues at stake, a kind of low-resolution scan of the terrain.

When I was thinking about how to start looking at the world thematically (i.e. write a book), I saw the fictionette as the best method of reconnaissance. The brevity of the pieces allows for a kind of cursory stab at things, as well as a way of practicing a truly "copious" approach to a theme. Robert Grudin, a professor of mine, in a book on dialogics and free thought, once wrote that copious thinking is marked by the idea that abundance and plenty in "detail, variation and figures

of speech" are essential aspects of the best literature (34). He writes:

> The vitality of a work of art or system of thought lies in the dialogic interrelationship of its components: in the harmony, discordance and raw friction of its internal elements. These interactions are spiritual, untranslatable, often felt rather than thought out. Their intimate theater is the mind of the beholder. Living thought is beyond words, or rather in the spaces between words and between ideas. (55)

This is the hope, at least, that I have for this collection of fictionettes, to free the themes by letting them travel unfettered among a loose collection of pieces.

Another hope I have for this collection is to get at themes I have been batting around in my head the last few years, themes that have come to me through my theoretical reading and from looking inward at my own past and history. I've also become more and more interested in how to write Western American stories that are not all horse opera, how to get at issues of religion without sounding like a missionary, and how to address issues in the feminist debate honestly, as a male, without sounding like part of a "men's movement." When I settled on fictionettes, I immediately saw their usefulness. The architecture of a book of fictionettes would be more like a poetry collection than anything else, variety being its chief identifying feature. When I started, I had the structure of a mosaic in mind, the fictionettes creating an overall image that would hopefully be synergistic.

In this last section of the preface, I will briefly discuss two of my secondary themes—the American West and religion—and then give a somewhat fuller account of how feminism has influenced the writing of this collection. I give more attention to feminism because it deals most directly with other aspects of my graduate studies.

I grew up in the American West, but it was a West that had already lost much of its wildness and mythical quality. By the time I came to it, the frontier was more than "closed," it was out of business. When I was a kid, I would read about a certain kind of West in the works of John Steinbeck or Jack London, not understanding until much later that even for these two the rendering of Salinas and Alaska was an act of the imagination, no matter how closely they paid attention to the particulars. But I read on, slowly coming to the conclusion that the regionality of my region had been drained out of it before I was going to get the chance to: (a) live a life of high adventure, (b) tramp around in boxcars like Woody Guthrie, or (c) be raised on a ranch in Wyoming.

What made matters worse was coming to the understanding that I was not going to get the chance to write about the West from first-hand experience. This epiphany came, or rather descended, upon me while I was reading Norman Maclean's *A River Runs Through It* in the same year Redford's film was released. I was near the end where the narrator is talking about being haunted by waters, and I recalled two conversations I had had earlier that year about the film, one of which was with my friend, Gretchen, the other was with my grandfather.

Gretchen was living in Bozeman when Redford was shooting his adaptation, and by virtue of her job in the only ritzy hair salon in the county she was hooked up with the production crew and some of the extras on the shoot, a stream of Hollywood working-class folks who drifted into town from their location on the Gallatin River. As she was telling me her stories of Hollywood decadence, something clicked in my brain.

"Gallatin?" I said, "What are they doing on the Gallatin? Maclean set the novella on the Big Blackfoot. That's two hundred miles off course."

"I know," she said, "but they can't use the Blackfoot. It's been ruined."

Ruined? I thought. That fast? As she went on with her stories, I began to

notice a kind of anger rattling around inside of me. It astounded me that something like a river could be ruined in as little as fifty years. I felt like a photographer in fading light. After talking with Gretchen, I called my grandfather and asked him if he'd seen the movie yet. He had rented it on video, so I asked him if he noticed anything strange. He said, "It was all right as far as the pictures go, but they sure as hell weren't fishing the Big Blackfoot. People haven't been able to fish that stretch since the 60s."

Ruined—that's what came to mind. The West had been ruined before I had a crack at it. The West of Western fiction had, for the most part, been done away with. I felt like mourning, maudlin as that may sound. But this epiphany also caused me to start thinking of my own life in the ruined West, one lived in the heart of a major metropolitan area in Portland, Oregon. I understood traffic and yards, public transportation and outdoor jazz concerts and Greek delicatessens—not really the stuff of Western writing, I supposed. I also thought about frontier mythology, cowboys stories, and Charlie Russell paintings and how they made for some a kind of history of things out West, a history that didn't really show how much damage we had done in a century and a half. Writing about that kind of damage was starting to happen with people like Edward Abbey, Charles Bowden, and Terry Tempest Williams, but reading their work reminded me that I had been beaten yet a second time (always a groomsman, never the groom). So, in the midst of all that intellectual tumult, I found myself struck simultaneously by three academic afflictions: anxiety of influence, belatedness, and exhaustion.

The anxiety was pretty normal, I suppose, for a young writer—at least according to Harold Bloom. Like plenty of other people, I was faced with the question of what to write, after writers like Cormac McCarthy, William Kittredge, Wallace Stegner, and everyone else. I did not stop to think that these were all men in their 60s who, like my grandfather, were products of a different age, men who had lived through the changes of a different world. I was pissed

off, because I wanted to write about the things those fellas were writing about. I felt defeated, faced with the possibility that there was nothing in the West that hadn't been done to death. I lamented that I was born too late to know the West when it was full of adventure.

Bellyaching like that seems hilarious to me now. I wasn't the first person to face the problem of exhaustion, and I won't be the last. I am fully aware that the West I venerated as a greenhorn never really existed as it is represented in the novels I loved as a greenhorn. What's more, I don't really value that West any longer; I see it as narrow-minded and as full of unenlightened "centrisms" as a highway sign is full of bullet holes. Still, there was that sense of belatedness knocking at my door like Pat Garrett with a Bob Dylan soundtrack.

I tried to get around those feelings with "The Facts about Caleb," a story that took me five years of simmering to get right. When it finally set, I felt like I had punched through the cowboy myth and had found the right outlet for my Western concerns in the fictionette, a form that would let me take my world and, as Uncle Ez from Hailey, Idaho once said, "make it new." What I gained from the experience of writing that fictionette was learning to face up to my immediate reality and stare at it until something flickered. And something did. After "The Facts About Caleb" came, I began to see more clearly the West of crazy priests and of atomic power and Wal-Marts and motorcycle thieves and cougars slinking around in people's back yards and illegal aliens and technical editors going down in airplanes and naked people diving into swimming pools in the suburbs. It seems like what I needed was to get comfortable with the fact that my West wasn't full of pale riders or true grit. But I also couldn't pretend that those things had never existed. When I allowed my vision to shift, I started to see that I could get to this West on the back roads by bringing up the myths of the cowboy, outlaw, and small town, and then tanking them.

In addition to issues of the new West, in writing this collection, I wanted to

get at something that is often lost in the crossfire of multiculturalism: Christianity. It comes up from time to time in Western contexts, particularly in something like *Paint Your Wagon* or *Riders of the Purple Sage*, but rarely in interesting or challenging ways. (A few stories by Erdrich and Silko, oddly enough, are interesting to me, but not much else). I could try to examine other people's religions, but that promised to draw me away from any interpretation of my West, so Mormonism was an obvious first avenue of investigation for me in this project, as Mormonism is my faith and the Christianity of the frontier. A person can't travel in Idaho, Utah, Nevada, or Arizona without coming across Mormons in one way or another. If one is going to deal with the West, one must deal with Mormons or one leaves a pretty blank spot behind.

It took me a while to come to that last conclusion because I knew that dealing with religion, particularly Christianity, and even more particularly Mormonism, is a kind of dangerous topic in most contemporary settings. Between Nietzsche and Marx and the foolishness of well-meaning but naive evangelical undergraduates, any discussion of religion in or around a university results in lots of invective but little debate, which is why people shy away from writing about it. There are, of course, a few contemporary writers one might go to for guidance: Flannery O'Connor (of course), Andre Dubus, Grahame Greene, and Maclean, but not many others. I suppose one can also go in the back door through Joyce, and there are ethical codes at work in Hemingway and McCarthy, but there is not much out there that deals with a formalized pattern of faith.

While reading Silko, Momaday, or Erdrich, I discovered that Native American writers are able to write about their spirituality and religious beliefs without attracting the hems and haws of most liberal thinkers, something they accomplished by using matter-of-factness. They seemed to be saying, "Here's the world we see. Take it or leave it." Silko's fictional worlds, in *Storyteller* in particular, make use of a kind of spiritual realism. Noticing that aspect of her work was

instructional to me, so with the idea of spiritual realism in mind, I decided to write a few stories that dealt with some of the religious aspects of living in the West. In these stories, people ask honest religious questions during moments of crisis and sometimes feel a certain agony at trying to live up to the standards of the churches they attend. I also tried to show that the best among us are still hypocrites a lot of the time, and that grace can and does appear in the world, even if we don't recognize it. In some cases, these religious stories of mine deal with the fallen or the confused, people like Jens Thorsen, who thinks that God is out to get him, or the narratee of "Camouflage" who, at a moment of loss and crisis, thinks it reasonable to go back to church, though she is certain her shrink won't share her opinions.

I also focus on agnostic characters who interact with religious characters. For example, in the story "Where it Comes From" the narrator struggles to make sense of the enigmatic guitar-genius Mormon who leads his jazz trio. Rather than being caught between the physical world and the world of faith himself, the narrator is in the position to watch the struggle. I think the introduction of this narrative distance helps me avoid over-romanticizing the religious characters. Any respect afforded religious characters in literature can't rely on people's affinities for the faith. Rather, it must be gained through a neutral response that isn't invested in the doctrine. Through this, one can avoid the common tendency of religious writing to seek converts rather than to describe a certain way of looking at the world. Using intermediary characters is a good way of achieving these results.

While my work with interpreting the contemporary West and religion was important to the development of the collection, I was most interested in exploring the male side of feminist discourse, because one of the primary things I have learned from my study of contemporary movements in feminism and gender studies is that gender is not an essential quality in humans. Like Beauvoir said,

one is not born a *man*. In understanding gender roles and the sexism that proceeds from them, it is important to recognize that gender roles, as Judith Butler has argued, are performative ones, enacted in response to a shifting set of regulatory practices which are handed down and enforced by systems of power, namely the patriarchy. Feminists have used this line of reasoning concerning performativity and regulatory practices in order to uncover the fundamental operations of the patriarchal structures in our culture. They have done this to good effect, allowing voices to challenge certain sacred cows (bulls? steers?) in order to better the lot of women. While feminists have turned their lenses on the patriarchy itself, they have not completely turned those lenses on the patriarchs themselves. But perhaps they should not have *had to*—women have had to look after both themselves and men for far too long in my opinion. In any case, in this vacuum of attention, men like Sam Keen (*Fire in the Belly*) and Robert Bly (*Iron John* [and I don't see why people haven't made the prostitution joke more often]) have tried to reclaim masculinity and retrain it to be less violent but still powerful, less oppressive but still self-determinate. All this they have done with miserable results in my opinion. Any self-respecting male (feminist or not) would run from Bly's communal phallus-encounters like Japanese soldiers in a Godzilla movie. These attempts to buoy up the collective new age man with drum circles and war paint has made a mockery of the legitimate attempts women have made over the last century to have themselves recognized in the most basic legal and humanitarian terms. Still, something needs to be done to illuminate the way sexism affects lives of the patriarchs (the fallen ones included), just as feminists have shown us that the lives of the matriarchs needed illumination, and it might well be up to male writers to begin that process by changing the nature of the representations of manhood and masculinity in a way that shows some understanding of the avenues feminists have cleared.

It is with this in mind that I began to assemble these fictionettes, most of

which deal with male loss of one kind or another. The men in these pieces suffer the loss of their myth structures (primarily the myths of the Wild West but also of religion), their relationships with women and with themselves, but also with the larger (hegemonic) structures that have formed them by regulating their gender roles and ideals. In her book *Stiffed*, Susan Faludi reveals the troubles of a male subjectivity coming to light during the latter part of the twentieth century. In the introduction she writes:

> If men are the masters of their fate what do they do about the unspoken sense that they are being mastered in the marketplace and at home, by forces that seem to be sweeping away the soil beneath their feet? If men are mythologized as the ones who *make things happen*, then how can they begin to analyze what is *happening to them*? (13)

I am really cautious around such a collection of questions and the assumptions that lie behind them. It is easy, I think, to slip from the position of offering men a measure of subjectivity under the patriarchal regime to the position of granting them the sanctuary of victimhood and absolution of past sins, a Twinkie defense for sexism. Still, I want to say something important about men and their performative roles' disintegration in the wake of political feminism.

Men with diabolically bad behavior are not new to literature. In fact, Faludi herself mentions Frank Norris's nineteenth century American novel, *McTeague* as an example of a full-scale rendition of the "new ideal of Darwinian manhood . . . that . . . led to a sterile and self-destructive violence, that the 'survival of the fittest' when applied to modern man might mean the survival of no one." (12). As Faludi also points out, men are not generally aware that the power of the system is above and beyond their own personal power and bestowed upon them by that larger power. Men would rather "demonize feminism," she argues,

than face up to the fact that their power is an illusion (14). I knew that trying to show men facing up to this illusion was going to mean that I had to show more than one man coming to terms with these things.

To have a lone central character become enlightened over the course of a novel would still be one man coming to terms, not *men*, and I needed it to be a more collective enterprise, because then it couldn't be written off as an anomaly. I wanted show—borrowing from the title of William James' famous religious treatise—"varieties" of this new masculine experience. In particular, I wanted to write about the variety of ways in which men have either: (a) screwed things up, (b) had a hand in screwing things up, (c) are unaware that they have screwed things up, because they think that the condition of having screwed things up is normal or natural and ought not to be trifled with, and/or (d) they are unaware of the fact that things have been screwed up.

For example, "This is Still America" is probably the most clear indicator of what I'm trying to accomplish. The two outpost cowboys, Dean and E.J., clearly represent a holdout of American manhood as realized in the myth of the cowboy. I have tried to strip that myth down with a description of the surroundings in all their unromantic and Spartan glory in order to indicate, not only the emptiness of the physical space, but of the emotional space as well. I am trying to define this masculinity as inhabited by the Abernathy brothers as a place of stasis. Change comes from without by an agent of the law who is representing the interests of Dean's wife. She is suing him for divorce, which is a significant change from the laws of earlier times in which a woman was man's property like the children and the china hutch. E.J., who is not getting divorced, is outraged and blames women, in particular, lesbian feminist women athletes who have encroached upon the male realm and plundered it, leaving good, honest working stiffs like the two of them without any of their God-given and naturally-occurring rights. Dean, resigned as only cowboys can be, accepts his lot and makes a

corrective threat to his brother to stop disparaging women. Yet even in the face of his defense against crudeness toward women, Dean demonstrates an indifference that is probably what drove his wife away in the first place, that and the fact that she would have had no part, as the stories often go, with living out there in that travel trailer on the range.

This is a position I see lots of men finding themselves in these days. They have come to recognize that the system under which the world operates is pretty bad on lots of levels, even that it is bad to women, but they are not willing to accept that things need to change. In fact, in a lot of cases, they have no idea how to change the system since it means that they will have to change themselves first. Usually they want to escape the situation. In "A Certain Kind of Shelter" I take up this male impulse to head out into the wilderness when faced with stress, particularly when a male is trying to get away from domestic situations (Huckleberry Finn is a prime example). In this story there is a baseline narrative of the mountain journey. So often narratives of wilderness concern man against nature; the man is a hard, steely-eyed fellow out climbing mountains and taming them, fighting for his life against the odds, and that sort of thing. Nature—as eco-feminist critics have pointed out—in these kinds of narratives is seen as a feminine force that men seek to control in the same way that they seek to control women. In my experience nature might be feminine but it certainly can not be controlled; any control that men might think they have is illusory and washes out cleanly with the next storm or avalanche or earthquake. In any case, what interested me, given my themes, was to send a couple of men out on a backpacking trip in the wake of one of the men's divorce. I wanted to foreground the domestic chores of camping as a way of showing that even the dream of returning to a pristine "womanless" place is a notion men can hope for but can never find. I also wanted to set up a situation in which the two men address the damage one of them has done to his marriage and to his wife by playing into the

stereotype of a neo-mountain man. He is honest and as dutiful as a dog, cautious with his emotions and indifferent in public. This is surely how he behaves with his wife, one would think, but when it becomes apparent to the narratee that the man has been violent to his wife, it can not be immediately believed, statistics on domestic abuse aside.

Abuse has often been represented in works of fiction (e.g. Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and Roddy Doyle's *The Woman Who Walked into Doors*), but it is different, I think, to have men in the role of the perceiver of the abuse and interpreter of it. It happens from time to time, but it could stand to happen more often. The moment for me where I am most trying to unmask masculinity, or at least put it into question, is when the narratee is asked where his friend's menace goes when they are together, mano a mano. During the course of this piece, the narratee slowly turns away from his friend, but he won't break with him entirely, nor will he become an advocate for the wife. Instead he uses his and his friend's presence in the wilderness as an excuse to disappear, maybe even to absolve themselves from responsibility for the past. The narrator says, "You want to say something about it, but that will be taking sides, and there is no place for taking sides out here" (32-33). Furthermore, by the end of the piece, the friend has, by applying insect spray to himself, become literally repellent. His normal pattern of male emotional silence becomes something to dodge, a dodge that comes by way of a final, sweeping statement about seeking refuge in the wilderness. Ironically, as I have mentioned, this is a refuge that is commonly represented as female. More than anything, it is this irony I hope to uncover with my use of men in nature, that maybe there is no patriarchal refuge at all, that even escape into pristine nature is a flight into the feminine.

In "Elegy For My Brother-in-Law, the Danish Warrior King" I tried to fashion a similar situation, one in which a man is privy to domestic violence, and also one in which a symbol of masculinity is reversed. In this case the abuse is re-

versed or rather doubled. In this story a brother is in communication with his sister about the boat that his brother-in-law has been keeping in the driveway for years. It is a symbol of potency and male freedom, so in some ways is a kind of phallus. I reverse this symbol by making the phallus an enclosure, furthermore, I represent Russell, the brother-in-law, as being inside it. The boat doesn't run; it is in pieces; it is all potential and no actuality. One day, Russell claims, his boat will make him a legend of the fishing shows, but that day is far off.

Russell is abusive, but the violence implied in the narrative belongs to the wife and is aimed at the yanic "phallus" in driveway. Her desire, much to Freud's dismay, is not to envy the phallus, but to destroy it with her husband inside. One can assume by the presence of the word "elegy" in the title that she succeeded. We are then left with a male narrator trying to make sense of—or maybe even trying to approve of—an act of murder, and even more pointedly a murder enacted upon another man, which creates a break in the lineage of the old boys club. This is the kind of confrontation with destructive masculinity that causes men to see the limits of their gender roles, and perhaps also causes them to see the limits of the status quo.

Merely representing "sensitive" men, on the other hand, or no men at all, does not constitute a truly political artistic act in my opinion. The development of a sound sense of masculinity is going to first involve a facing up to the problems of patriarchy. It is really going to require a "second wave" of consciousness-raising. In the middle phases of the women's movement, consciousness-raising was central to education on, and movement toward, the elimination of sexism. Men have, in large part, existed outside that discussion and are, consequently, unable to see (a) what our gender has done and (b) what it *is* that we have done.

Moreover, one of the biggest questions for me in writing these pieces and collecting them together has been, how do I guarantee that a reader will, in fact, see that I am representing a reality I know to be flawed, one I want to change.

The answer for me has come in a few ways. (1) I have tried to set up some structural reflexivity by having men watching other men's destructive impulses in action. (2) I have sought to use the structure of a collection of fictionettes to create a matrix of representations of masculinity rather than a monolithic portrait of a single man. Doing this is a way of emasculating the representation. There is still a whole here, as I have mentioned, just a whole made up of fragments arranged in a relatively coherent pattern. I want a reader to feel a certain sense of weight under the sheer numbers of representations of the destructive male impulse, and I want he or she to see that this destructive aspect in men and in their coming to grips with it is no mere random occurrence, but that it might (or ought to) be happening across the culture. Finally, (3) I want to show men who have emasculated themselves because of their choices to live the dream of the patriarchy. Russell, for example, didn't lose his penis but his knees, and not to a crazed feminist, but to a bad tackle in a football game.

So loss seen in this way is something men have brought upon themselves. Even freedom has a new set of expectations once the status quo starts to shake, and men seeking freedom have often found themselves confounded by the gaining of it. A man feeling weighed down by his familial responsibilities or fearing for the loss of his ability to pursue a variety of sexual partners has become a cultural cliché of the first order. One need only think of films such as *The Seven Year Itch* or *American Beauty* to see the way this has been working. Some of the fictionettes in this collection deal with the theme of men creating the sense of loss they find themselves having to endure, and in some cases they have no idea that they are enduring a loss.

In the fictionette "Sunset" I strove to depict a man who is trying to justify to himself the act of kicking his partner out of the house. He has taken all of her things, boxed them up, and has placed them in the driveway, then stripped down to his underwear and taken up a post in the front yard with a cooler of beer,

awaiting her return. Though he is the one instigating the break up, he places the blame on her, saying that they no longer have "shared circumstances," just "*her* circumstances." (72, my emphasis). He might be justified in kicking her out, there is some indication that she might be having an affair of some kind, but the narrator is by no means reliable. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this piece, it is enough that she is working outside the home (or indeed even just "working out") to prompt the narrator's outrage and feelings of betrayal. In fact, it might even be more interesting if she is simply on a program of self betterment that does not involve her sexual life.

Though he is kicking this woman out, the narrator's vigor in declaring himself, and the definitiveness of his declared intentions seems more like a cover up, a kind of self-directed pep talk intended to help him put on a game face for his ultimate confrontation with this woman. But rather than deliver the woman, the narrative delivers a migratory sea bird who doesn't see the narrator at all. Instead of the woman disappearing, the narrator has become part of the actual landscape. As the woman is represented by her possessions in the driveway, the narrator has become his own front yard and has suddenly become a public representation of his own pathetic nature. He twists this slightly, however, by claiming to have become a tiki, which is, to native Polynesians, a representation of the first man. So our narrator imagines, by implication, that he is Adam perhaps kicking Eve—or better yet, Lilith—out of paradise. Once again, I was trying to home in on the nature of loss that constitutes the primary level of existence of most modern males. But rather than paint them as victims, I strove for a representation that makes it clear that men are at the helm when their ships run aground.

To me the fictionette was necessary to get these themes of male loss and destruction as well as those dealing with the disintegration of the American West

and the church of the American West (Mormonism) into a matrix that might allow them to play against and simplify one another. In a large sense I hoped to work at a formal level with a genre to see what it really could and couldn't do, and I have discovered that what I gain in polyvocality and variety, I lose in depth and richness. These fictionettes are not about development, they are about taking stock, taking an initial survey. In future projects I imagine that I will take up these themes again, but in the form of longer stories, a novel perhaps. I would very much like to see what happens to the men who come to these understandings of themselves and the debris their gender has left behind. I'd like to work through what happens to a man who finds he can no longer value the regulations of his gender and how he can take steps to enact change in his life.

Notes

[1] Anyone partially conscious during the past thirty-five years will recall Star Trek, episode #42, "The Trouble With Tribbles," in which a peddler by the name of Cyrano Jones sells Lieutenant Uhura a creature called a tribble. Tribbles are small, hairy but otherwise featureless tufts of fur that trill in the presence of humans, hate Klingons, eat voraciously, and give birth with alarming frequency. They are bi-sexual, born pregnant, and have fifty percent of their metabolism geared toward reproduction. By the end of episode #42, the entire Enterprise is filled with the things. For a full summary of this episode, see <www.fortunecity.com/lavender/hoskins/85/ep-42.htm>.

[2] Lish was vocal about his love of the term, spinning out a panegyric for "blasters," appropriating it for himself like a boxer's moniker, calling himself Gordon "The Blaster" Lish. But Lish, in my experience, is crazy, and is not to be trusted. I point this out only to say that Lish was the only one of those asked who thought the name "blasters" had any real merit and he saw that merit primarily because of his ability to play with the term. The fact that it is so expressly given to playfulness and tomfoolery signifies to me that (a) the name ultimately chosen for this genre will require some measure of dignity and (b) the people choosing the names have some difficulty seeing that fact. (see Shapard, page 255 for the full account of Lish's conceit).

[3] Delville relies quite a bit on Eileen Baldeschwiler's theories of lyric narrative construction taken from her essay "The Lyric Short Story: The Sketch of a History" *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. Charles E. May (Athens: Ohio U P, 1994). In this essay Baldeschwiler argues that short stories contain both "epical" or external, action-based aspects and "lyrical" or internal, reflection-based ones. This distinction is important for her because it allows for some discussion of aspects of a narrative that are not part of the physical events of the work but are part of some level of internal reflection on the part of the narrator or focalizing

character. She tries to maintain the assumption that poetry, in general, is lyrical and fiction is narrative, which helps her make her argument, but seems to ignore the fact fiction has always had some measure of the lyrical, even in the most realistic of descriptive passages (e.g. Dickens and Flaubert). Even more importantly, she seems to ignore the fact that the epics, from which she borrows her corollary term to the lyric, were, in fact, poetry, and as such, she is only re-referencing two supposed binaries to the same baseline, namely poetry. Not that there is any problem with that.

[4] The only full-length treatment of the fictionette is John H. Cepecci's doctoral dissertation, *The Contemporary Short-Short Story: Text and Context.* Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, 1990, and quite frankly, it is not all that sturdy a piece of scholarship. He did manage to provide some history of the form through the 20th century, and he did explore some of the formal and cultural aspects of the fictionette and how it operates in a performance or theatrical context (it was a dissertation out of the theater department). One of his primary "epiphanies" in this study is that fictionettes (my term not his) have shortness as their fundamentally important critical marker and that this point has somehow been overlooked. His legwork into the history of the form, particularly in the area of the short short fiction of the pulp magazines of the 30s and 40s is interesting and would, of course, be a good place to begin even further research for a full-length treatment, but suffice it say, I have made a conscious choice to stay out of the first half of the century as far as fictionettes go, because the formulaic and traditional nature of that era in the genre does not really inform the work of contemporary writers who are working with the fictionette.

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1. Ride to the Ridge Where the West Commences

The Facts About Caleb

If this were the old West, a man would ride down from the sage-covered hills on a roan gelding with his hat tipped low on his brow and the reins loose in one hand, his boots in the stirrups up to the heel as the horse picked its way to the valley floor. His name would be Caleb. He would have been an Indian hunter and—once upon a time, a gunslinger—but he'd have given it up years ago. Lost the taste for bloodshed, people would say. But children would still tell the story of how he once shot his name into an outhouse door.

Even if this were only *like* the old West, a man like Caleb would be needed because the law around here has gone corrupt and can't be trusted. Tycoons and malcontents have robbed the territory and left it barren. Everyone but the stubborn and the foolhardy have fled for the cities and abandoned the main streets to a fleet of scorpions and the man from Arkansas. Walton, they call him. And what he doesn't own he doesn't want. He's marshal of the void, and it's gotten so people don't believe they can get along without him.

Caleb would have known Walton from the days when they rode together, when the frontier was an unbroken line from Ungavu Bay to Oaxaca. They would meet again after all these years at high noon in front of Walton's general store, and Caleb would call for him from the back of his horse.

"Walton," he'd shout with the townspeople pressing up to the windows.

"Caleb," the man from Arkansas would say, drawing out the *a* like a true desperado.

Then, stepping through the swinging half-doors onto a plank porch, chewing the stub of a cigarillo with a smile, Walton would say, "I heard you done gone yaller." Showing both courage and indifference, Caleb would stare at Walton

until Walton laughed uncomfortably, looking around for confirmation, which he would not find. But with his thumbs in his suspenders, Walton would tell Caleb that he owned this town, perhaps not wholly convinced of the claim.

Caleb would say, "It's not how I hear it."

Peeved, Walton would growl, "So *they* sent you," nodding generally toward the main street where a tumble weed was bumping crosswise behind a line of horses.

Caleb would shake his head and say that he sent himself.

The wind would whip up suddenly and Caleb's horse would rear unsettling the man from Arkansas. In the commotion, a derringer would drop into his palm, and as he took aim, a woman would scream, "He's got a gun!"

From the saddle, Caleb would whirl, his nickel-plated Colt shimmering in his hand. He would fan the hammer, six shots barking, plugging Sam Walton in the belly as he dropped the derringer and fell to his knees. With blood filling his throat, he would try to speak, managing but a thick gurgle for his last words.

If this were indeed the old West as we all remember it, the man from Arkansas, having fallen dead in the dust of his own making, would lie in silence as Caleb calmed his horse. The townspeople, corralling him in gingham and homespun, would silently follow Caleb when he turned southward. As he disappeared into the mountains, they would hear Spanish guitars and an Indian flute floating on the air. A boy might follow, calling after him. The future would be his alone to destroy.

Paradise Valley

In the rough-hewn boards there are three dark windows. Each long and narrow, then a sullen sky. Also a fence—patched and re-patched—framing a dozen blades of uncut grass, grass braided into the slack barbed wire. Deep bands of wheat stubble violate the three aspen poles meant once for a stock gate. They now lie in the foreground, weathered by snow and white sun. In the distant pause of the scene, it seems like ranch people should be shimmering beneath eaves of the ranch house. The dry handpump frozen with rust and the barn's unconditional surrender are incomplete phrases in an unfinished story of conquest, one that begins with four words: *rain follows the plow.*

All these shades of brown, all this washed-out yellow and orange, spell out abandonment. They are the seedless fruits of ambition. Wishing any kind of resurrection upon this landscape is heresy. The too-clear sky hammers everything into a flat sheet of regret—because to have it right, there should be something else out here, perhaps a line of indignant train tracks lying bone cold on a hump of gravel, or maybe the stiff bristles of the wind might stir up the horse dust, wind that might also slap a frayed rope against a naked flagpole. These days it would take something Redfordesque like that to make people pay attention.

Instead, the Californians have come with their interior decorators.

Socorro, NM

You are driving north from the borderlands in a yellow Dodge with dented Chihuahua plates. It is high noon on your fourth day of driving. The road slithers ahead of you. It is a strange surprise to see the mountains floating impossibly in the distance like giant barges—a surprise, though it shouldn't be. In the open, where there are no people, no buildings, it is hard sometimes to tell that it is no longer Mexico. Perhaps in some way you are now in the United States simply because of Rio Bravo or because of the history no one seems eager to recall.

In the same way, perhaps, Mexico is not really Mexico. Perhaps something exists beyond the scope of the maps. For you the language of New Mexican road signs is at least half yours. But the radio is full of hard-vowelled gringo music. The cars are in better repair—something has changed. You hear the booming of military jets out over the white sands. This is the landscape's future.

Later in Las Cruces, you buy gas with hand gestures and some of the pale, crumpled dollars you have brought along. Everyone in the gas station is tight-lipped. Their eyes dart away from you and back again like the eyes of dogs. You make sure they spot the scar on your cheek, the folding knife on your belt. They can draw their own conclusions. Out here hatred flows in two directions: against and across the river. But if you go back far enough, no one can claim the high ground.

You drive another two hours. The air is on fire. It almost does not matter that you have the windows down; the roar of the wind through the car sounds like a blast furnace.

A bus appears out of the blazing heat with yellow wheat stalks on the license

plates. You recognize the words "church" and "Christ," which are painted on the side in blue. As the bus passes, the rumble of its engine explodes then becomes silent again, the bus growing small in your mirrors. Bundles of white plastic pipe have been tied to the top of the vehicle. There are probably tools and work gloves inside, small video games. It is another batch of missionaries from the North who want to buy devotion with clean water. They hate the fact that Mexico is already full of Catholics, and they don't know which is worse, you or the Indians.

You reach into your shirt and draw out the medallion of Saint Christopher that belonged to your grandfather. You stroke your thumb across the raised image of the infant Jesus on the old man's shoulders. Just then, a cluster of small, white crosses zooms past. On one, a wreath hangs crookedly.

You drive for another few minutes and see a large dual-axeled pickup truck pulling an even-larger boat. As it draws closer, you ease over toward the shoulder to give the trailer more room. The turbulence pushes your car around like a grocery sack. You correct your swerve and drive on. The lack of police around here makes you progressively more and more nervous.

In the distance, you see a car torn by the heat into ribbons of wet color, which coalesce as you draw closer. The hood is up and a man is lying underneath. You slow and engage your turning signal. The man's feet twitch like mule ears. You pull off the road in front of him, where a puddle of half-dried coolant has spread across the pavement. You are three steps away before he notices you.

"¿Qué es el problema?" you say. The man doesn't understand, so you point to the pool of coolant and say, "¿Necesitas agua?"

He nods and says something in English, but you do not understand. His face and knuckles are covered in grease. He smiles and motions for you to follow him. You lean across the radiator together; he holds up a ruptured hose. The split is as long as your thumb.

"Necesitas más ayuda que yo te puedo dar," you say, shrugging your shoulders.

He shrugs as well. You motion for him to come with you to your car. He follows.

"No tengo aire acondicionado," you say. "Lo siento."

The man says, "Gracias," and gets into your car.

As you pull back onto the road, it occurs to you that the missionaries and the man with the boat have passed this man up. Your father used to say that in the desert it is an unwritten rule to always help someone who is stranded. Seeing this man here by himself along the interstate infuriates you. You start hoping that the missionaries themselves will break down in the middle of nowhere, that they will become haloed in a coil of vultures, and that their children will start crying at the sight of the gangly birds. It would serve those people right for vacationing among the poor.

You look over at the man. He is dressed worse than you are. His sandals were fine ones once, his pants too, but they have been cut off above the knees. He is unshaven, his hair as long as a woman's, and it snaps around in the wind. He is smiling. After a few minutes he looks over at you.

"Hablo español un poquito," he says. "Aprendí en la escuela."

"Bueno," you say.

"Donde está tu casa?"

"En un pueblecito en Chihuahua." You begin to tell him about your village and the poverty there, about the drought and the crops dying.

"No entiendo," he says, "pero habla más, es como música."

It feels strange at first to speak this way with an American, but you grow accustomed to it. You tell him about forging the work visa, about how much it cost, then about how you heard of the coyotes and how people are caught by the border patrol in the middle of the night and sent back with less money than they had before. Sometimes they are killed. Sometimes they just die. It happened to your uncle, Guillermo, who drowned trying to cross from Tijuana into California.

These are stories you didn't know you had in you. Telling them calms you

down. The man just smiles, his head bobbing slightly as you drive. You tell him about the girls in your village leaving for Mexico City and the cruise-ship ports of the West Coast, how no one stays at home, how the old ones die and how there are no babies to replace them. As you talk, you confess your fears of being caught and sent home, of dying broke and childless in a small, desert village. You tell him about the work to be found in the Yakima valley picking apples. You feel better just saying the words, even if the American can not really understand them.

When you pause, he looks over. He is happy and unashamed of it. Strange for a gringo. You tell him as much, but he just nods. When you pull into the gas station outside of Socorro, the man gets out, reappearing suddenly in the open window. There is money in his hand and he thrusts it at you, smiling. "Támalo," he says, "Washington es lejos. Lo vas a necesitar para el viaje."

You refuse the offer, ignoring the flood of his bad Spanish. It is funny that the man has said nothing about the fact that socorro means *aid*, la ayuda. You laugh a little, and even though the man looks hurt, he struts around the front of your car, reaches into the window, and shakes your hand. He has palmed the money and tries to slip it to you as if you were a Nogales policeman.

"Gracias," he says.

You leave the bill in his hand, and he is alarmed. "This is for—you know," he gestures to the gas station, "for getting me here," he says. When you shake your head and refuse the money, he lifts your wiper blade from the dusty glass. "Send it home if you want to, but don't worry about it. It's a gift, el regalo." When the blade snaps back down, the twenty dollar bill is pinned underneath. The man turns quickly and walks away so you will have no time to protest.

You honk once but he ignores you.

You honk again but he is inside.

The wind flaps the bill against the windshield. You make the sign of the cross and reach outside for the money. This is good fortune. In fact, it does not occur to

you to think of this as a parable or as a problem of language. You are now in the North and on the lam. You must accept providence, whatever form it takes.

It Didn't Stop Butch Cassidy

Me and Marty had been driving five hours through the throat of Texas by then. The sun dove down about hundred miles back, and the stars looked like someone pistoled them into a bar mirror. I could tell by the clarity of the sky that nothing ever recovers itself. Back in Nevada, Marty told me that his old lady used to kick hell out of the dog when he was gone on drill weekends. I asked him how he knew it. He just shook his head and told me it was a damn shame to have your devotion split between a dog and a wife.

He had a Glock stuffed down the front of his pants and had been asleep on-and-off since we left Tucumcari. I kept telling him to lose the German weapons and buy American, but he liked the engineering, said those Jerries know how to weight a pistol.

"Besides, they're Austrian," he said.

"It's a cop gun," I said, but he just smiled, showing me those rotten little teeth of his.

Once we got out of Dallas I told him to wake up, but he rolled over and turned toward the window instead. "Hey Marty, what are you gonna do when that Kraut gun shoots a hole in your nuts?" I asked him.

He gave me the finger. His hands were so white it made me sick. It was like he buried them in the ground and left them there to rot. He was always paring the nails down with a Buck knife and buffing them out on his jeans. It was putrid.

"I'm hungry," he finally said, still pretending to be kind of asleep. I could see his breath fanning out onto the window so I knew he wasn't a zombie.

"Look around, bud, we ain't exactly anywhere convenient," I told him.

"Nothing's ever convenient," he said. "When we get somewhere, pull over. I gotta drain."

"No time like the present," I said then swung the car over onto the shoulder and flicked out the lights.

"Dammit, Foley," he said.

I told him that a piss was all he was gonna get right then, so he might want to hop to it.

"You gonna leave the car running?" he asked.

I told him that it's tough on the engine to turn it off and on like that, especially when you've been driving it hard. He nodded like he already knew it, then he tugged the Glock out of his pants and set it on the dash.

While he was climbing down for his piss, I checked the radio and couldn't pull in anything but some revival preacher squawking about the Pentecost, so I switched it off and grabbed the Glock. He was right. They do balance out pretty good in your hand. I got out of my side with the gun, stood up, and cracked my back. It felt good to stretch. We'd been four days on the road altogether, and I was sick of it. The air had the smell of feedlot to it, and the Milky Way was spilled out overhead thick as paint. Marty was smoking. The orange tip of his cigarette rose and fell in the darkness when he turned his head.

"Mormons ain't supposed to smoke, are they?" I asked, razzing him.

"Ain't supposed to steal cars or take up with whores neither," he said then shook himself off. I agreed and told him it didn't stop Butch Cassidy, so why the hell not him too. Then I released the clip, checked it, and slipped it back into position. Marty spun around when he heard the slide snap.

"Quit dicking around with my piece," he said.

The gun kicked before I knew I'd even fired it. His silhouette burned into the powder flash as his body hit and slid down the gravel berm. I got in the car without looking back and pulled onto the road, even though my ears were still ringing and my eyes couldn't focus. He'dve turned on me. I know it. Religion don't leave a man once it's took hold.

Dreamland

LEA MC GOWN, Owner and Manager, DREAMLAND MOTEL . . . recalled seeing TIM MCVEIGH . . . after he had checked into room 25 at the DREAMLAND MOTEL on April 14, 1995, but she does not recall seeing what kind of luggage he had.

FD-302 (Rev. 3-10-82)
FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
Date of transcription 5/10/95

One edge of a coarsely woven curtain fills with the Kansas wind and hovers in the dimness of the motel room. There is no sound to accompany it, nothing beyond the distant rumble of trucks downshifting on the flat plain of the interstate. In those still and silent moments, a faint blue light pulses across the corner of their bed before it slides back up the wall, staining only the window sill and some of the carpet.

"You awake?" he asks.

"I've been awake for a while," she says, thinking how boring the whole thing has become, the cheap motel, the banality of the affair. It had begun with electricity, an arc followed by a pulse, a locking of the joints, then numbness. At least she hasn't had to borrow money. She's free of that indignity.

"I wish I knew what to think about all this sneaking around," he says.

"That would make it easier."

"I mean, I wish I knew what to say, Francie. I thought maybe by now I'd have some kind of bead on things, but I don't."

"Men don't have to always have something to say, Nick."

He sniffs and slides his skinny legs along the length of hers. The jump from

him to men confused him, made things feel dramatic somehow. "If it helps any," he says, clearing his throat, "I love you. I mean I *do* love you."

"Okay," she says "just stop right there."

He waits for more agitation from her. She was like a house on fire when he met her, an old friend's wife—danger on top of danger. In the beginning it gave him courage, but now, in the silence, he feels weak. When her next command doesn't come, Nick slides his foot under the sheet, trying to kick up the edge of the covers.

"What are you doing?" she asks. She waiting for him to settle.

"Does Benny know about us?" he says, letting the sheet drape back over his legs.

"I haven't told him, have you?"

"No,"

"Well—"

"You tell anyone who might have clued him in?"

"I haven't told anyone. You're not listening."

"Not your mother?"

"I haven't told *any*one."

"I thought you told your mother everything."

"I do, but don't be stupid."

"So you don't mean *everything*."

She licks her lips, then laughs softly with her mouth open. She knows they will not be together in a year. She knows that he has no idea she has already decided this. When her laughter subsides, she says, "I bet that ice has melted by now."

"I told Beth," he says, hanging on. "But before you go crazy, she pretty much had it figured out." He waits for her response, his fingers locked together, his hands cradling his head. When she doesn't answer, he says, "She asked me straight out."

"And you had to say yes."

"It was a straight question, I wasn't going to lie right in her face."

"You're not lying if you just shut your trap."

"She would have known. She always knows about crap like this," he says.

"Sister or not, you shouldn't talk."

"She asked me. I can't stop her from knowing if she knows."

"I've got more on the line with this than you do," she says.

A truck shudders past. They both hear it and pause. The trucks come all the time, so it is strange that they would both latch on to the same one. This connection softens them both a little. In the next room someone rises, goes to the toilet, then returns to bed.

"So Benny doesn't know?" he asks.

"No, he thinks I'm in Amarillo at Marcie's."

"What do you think he'll do when you don't show up on Monday?"

"The hell with what he thinks."

"The hell with what he thinks until he comes after you."

"Benny won't come after me. He doesn't have the energy."

She rolls over onto her side and pulls her knees up to her chest, holding them there. He kicks at the blankets again, pulling them out from under the mattress.

She is motionless.

"You gonna try for custody?" he asks.

"I can't think about that right now. I'm too busy sorting this all out. That'll have to wait."

"Maybe you want it to wait, but Benny won't sit around on his heels waiting for you to move. When it turns up you skipped town, he's gonna lock his girls in the garage and come looking."

"They're my kids. He just donated the sperm," she says.

"Judge won't see it that way, not once Benny tells him you just disappeared

with me."

"How are they going to know it's you?"

"I show up with my tail between my legs asking Benny for work, and he's not going to say anything about it?"

"He said, no."

"What's he going to think when his wife and ex-partner disappear on the same day—and this close to Easter."

"Benny can go to hell."

"That doesn't answer anything."

"You drove out of town. I flew. That answers everything I'm worried about telling."

"Still—"

"It doesn't have to answer anything," she says letting her voice rise.

"Fine, but you're gonna have to choose between him and the girls."

"I'm here aren't I? That's my choice isn't it? I'd have killed myself if I had to stay there, or gone crazy. I couldn't let those kids watch me go down like that."

"You could have brought them along."

He is badgering her, though it gives him almost no pleasure to do it. Still, the fact that Francie would leave her children behind bothered him. He didn't want them along, but their absence made him ask hard questions about the future.

"He would have known," she said. "We wouldn't have made it ten miles with those kids."

Those kids, he thought, not *mine.*

I felt like I was drowning," she said. "It was me, not him." She unhooks her fingers and lets her legs loose, slides her legs between the sheets, then rolls back toward him.

"Okay, maybe so, but you can still turn back. Far as Benny knows, you're just in Texas. Maybe you can fly back home like nothing happened."

"I can't do that."

"What's the problem? He's gonna to meet you at the airport, ain't he?"

"I drove myself."

"Benny's car?"

"Benny doesn't let me drive *his* car."

"You left your car at the airport?"

"The keys are on the seat. He can sell the damn thing if he wants to, I don't care."

"You leave a note or something?"

"No."

"You think he's going to know what to do?"

"I don't care what he does."

"Fine."

"I don't have to steal."

"I never said nothing about stealing," he says, ashamed of his tone. It's one he doesn't recognize.

Francie lies motionless with the sheet tucked around her body, considering the topography of the ceiling. It's something to look at that doesn't make her think about anything.

Abruptly, a set of headlights lights cut across the window, throwing shadows across the ceiling. Nick slides out from under the covers, angry at the intrusion. He drags his fingers through his hair like the tines of a chisel plow and crosses to the window. He jerks the curtain back, and his face is doused in headlight glare. When his eyes adjust, he sees a yellow moving truck backing into the motel lot. Above the truck, the neon Dreamland Motel sign buzzes red, and a flood light next to it is haloed in a swarming orb of insects. A man gets out of his car and goes up to the truck. He stands there talking and then points the truck to a parking place.

"He should turn his danged lights off and check his timing," the man says.

"He's got everyone in here wide awake."

"They should be off already. I shouldn't have to stand here screaming about it, should I?"

"I didn't know you were screaming," she says. Having him stand at the window makes her feel like Faye Dunaway in *Bonnie and Clyde.*

A man comes out of the motel office and says something to the first man in the truck. Slowly, the truck crawls across the lot and parks by the office. The lights switch off and the truck doors slam. In a few seconds, Nick hears the back door on the truck slide up. He lets the curtain fall back into place and he returns to bed.

"I don't know what he needs in there at this time of night," Nick says.

"How long can we stay?" Francie asks, ignoring him.

"I don't know, a week maybe. I got money till then."

"That's good."

"I can go back to work at the plant anytime I need to. All I have to do is show up and ask Dave."

"I won't go back there."

"Why not?"

"I just can't. I've got to get somewhere that no one knows me or you or Benny or any of this."

"Maybe we should leave tomorrow, drive west till we hit some place you like."

"I like the way that sounds," she says, reaching over and sliding her hand up the inside of his thigh.

"You know you won't be able to see the girls at all then."

"I'll come back if I need to."

Nick just rolled over and looked at her. He didn't even try to hide his disgust, he just looked at her, hoping he would never have to explain himself. He would dodge it if she asked him.

"What the hell do you know, anyway?" she hissed.

He kept staring.

"You're worse than he is."

"All I'm saying is, once people get talking, Benny and Benny's parents. Once they get going, your kids are going to hear everything people say about us."

"They're just kids. They won't know what it means."

"All the same, people are gonna to say it."

"What are you getting at?"

"I ain't so sure I want to be part of something you can't undo, that's all."

"A lot of good that does now. There's been plenty between us I couldn't undo since a long time before tonight," she says.

"What Benny doesn't know won't hurt him or your girls."

"Leave those kids out of this."

"It's just that I—"

"Don't say anything, I'm serious."

He starts to speak, but she stops him. "Don't. Don't say a word."

"Whatever you want," he says. "You're the queen." Nick holds his watch up towards the window and turns it, trying to read the numbers in the darkness. After a while, he gives up and looks over at the woman. She pinches her lips together with her forefinger and thumb like she's thinking. "Hold me," she says suddenly.

"What?"

"I'm shivering, hold me."

"It's not cold."

"I've got a chill."

He crawls back into bed, slips his arms around her, and pulls her toward him. He wiggles his hand down into his under shorts.

"No."

He waits, then tucks himself back inside and holds her against his chest, watching the far wall for something to move.

"I never thought I'd have the courage to leave," she says.

"Then you should have left a long time ago."

"It's easy for a man to say that."

"Not so easy as you think."

"You can't know what it's like."

"It ain't like Benny beat you up or nothing."

"You think I'd leave the girls with him if that was it?"

"I don't know."

"It's like the walls were coming down. I couldn't live like Benny wanted me to. He's going to die in that town, probably a hundred steps from where he was born. I wasn't meant to live that way."

"It worked for my old man."

She rolled her eyes and said, "If I went on that way, I'd have set something on fire just for the change."

"Now the hell you would, you're just whipping yourself up."

She looks over at him and tells him to quit talking.

"What?"

"Quit talking. I want everything to be about right now—not yesterday or last month. I want everything to just be quiet, all right?"

Outside, a car door slams, then they hear the engine grind and turn over. There are a few sharp revs before it starts backing up. The power steering squeals for a moment, then it is silent again. When the car leaves the parking lot, he notices the motel's white noise all around them. Nick slides his palm across Francie's belly and notches his hand around the base of her breast and turns her toward him. She reaches down and slides his underwear off his hips. Even though it is dark, she closes her eyes.

When he has finished, he slumps down on top of her and says, "Birds'll break up the quiet? Can't do nothing to change that, you know."

Francie sits up suddenly and turns to him. Her face is dark, and the outline of her down-turned breasts is pale. She runs her hand up her stomach and holds it there on her ribs and feels herself breathing. The core of her belly smolders almost imperceptibly. She is still wearing her wedding ring.

Something like a chill runs down her neck, then the motel room suddenly seems as hollow and empty as a church to her. The invisible spaces in the room split wide, but nothing rushes into the vacuum. She has no word for that feeling, but it washes over her and keeps washing until the terror of being exposed like that to the universe dies down to a hiss.

"Dreamland Motel," she says, reaching for her cigarettes, and then again, sounding more like she was wondering what the word meant, "dream . . . land."

"My dreams don't look anything like this dump," he says.

She lights her cigarette, and in the flash she notices her clothes draped over the television. "That's the stupidest thing you've ever said," she says.

"It's just the truth," he says, "that's all! You don't have to believe it if you don't want to."

"I don't suspect I will," she says. "You don't have to worry about that."

A Certain Kind of Shelter

After a hard push in the back country, when you've had to slog through a belt of black flies thick as gravel, and after your nose starts to bleed at ninety four hundred feet and soak into your beard, you realize you've spent the entire day hiking behind a man who isn't even a month past his divorce. You're unsure if saying anything about it will help or if it will make him burst into tears, but you're certain that a North Cascades ridge line is no place for two men to cry about the past.

Once the tent is up and the food bags pulled from your packs, you choose from one of the prepackaged dinners. This doesn't take any talking. It's the same way the site was chosen, the same way the tent came out of its red bag and erected itself from reflex.

You scrub your face with a towelette, then choose a cooking site on a rise where the trees thin out and the wind blows the mosquitoes off into the valley. You pump the fuel bottle and watch your friend take the water jugs and the filter and disappear into the woods. He is heading toward the stream you hear laughing across heavy stones somewhere in the middle distance.

One night on the Deschutes River a few years back, you and he and his wife made camp in the dead of night without a word, then rose in the morning, broke everything down, made breakfast, inflated the raft by hand, assembled the frame, moved everything to the water, loaded up, and put on three river miles before you said a word to each other. His new wife sang quietly to herself while you took turns ferrying back and forth across the river for the practice of moving the boat without thinking. The light broke in bronze ribbons across the mesas

and down into the canyon.

"Looks like a good place for a swim," you said when the river opened up and flattened out. You said it for her sake, because you saw that he was already wiggling out of his life vest. They hadn't yet been married a year. You were his best man. You stood next to him and shook everyone's hand. She kissed you lightly on the cheek and held her palm against your face just before they drove off into the future.

You connect the bottle to the stove unit and bleed the valve until the mantle soaks up the thin spray of white gas and there is a puddle of it in the flange at the bottom of the burner. With your magnesium bar and piece of old hacksaw blade, you scrape a tongue of sparks into the fuel; the wire stove bursts into flame. As you adjust the control valve, you wonder if it is true what his wife told you before their lives began to fall apart publicly. Did he hit her? She said he did. Where does that menace go when he's here? What would it take to turn you that way, to make you threatening to someone that way? You want to say something about it, but that will be taking sides, and there is no place for sides out here.

When the stove unit starts to hiss and the brass loop of tubing starts to shimmer, you ease the valve back and pour the rest of your water into the pot. When the water boils, your friend hikes back up the hill. His boots are wet and dirt has clung to the leather like iron filings. He carries the water filter and four liters of water. You both know that he is going to say that the filter is better than iodine, so he doesn't say it. You look up and see that he's been crying.

He sets the water down in front of you like a Labrador, walks down the rise, and zips himself into the tent. You shake the powdered milk into the pot and raise it from the burner, stir, set the pot down onto the rock, tear open the packets and empty them into the pot, stir, and then place the pot back onto the burner.

Even though he's in the tent, you both know that you are wishing there was a

way to make your stove simmer—there isn't. Newer stoves can do it, but this one has different virtues. It has traveled with you on your journeys since the days when you were both foolish and happy. It has been even-tempered and easy to repair.

When he climbs out of the tent, you can smell the repellent on him. It smells like poison, but it works. He sits opposite you with his field journal and the maps. You lift the lid and stir. He unfolds a map and traces tomorrow's route with his fingertip. He might say something later about the divorce, maybe tonight, maybe in the morning after the exploring that comes before breakfast. But this trip isn't about talking. It's about disappearing into the hugeness of something for a while.

Plymouth, UT

Let us say that you and I are brothers, that I am older by a few years, and that you and I are often mistaken for twins. Let us also imagine that you have become tired of this town before you could understand it. We were both born here, but you have always hated it. I admit that it is small, that there is no privacy, but it is a good town. The people here are honest. Perhaps it's the honesty that bothers you. In your last year of school, you told me you were restless, and I could see, almost as soon as you said it, that within a season you would be gone.

Then suddenly you were.

You asked our old man for your inheritance, the money left in trust, money granddad set aside for us to build homes. When the old man gave it to you, you disappeared like lightning into the darkness. He said he knew you would wait for a storm like that one to boil across the mountains so you'd have the veil of high drama to cover your escape. In a way, he sounded jealous. But that's over now. These days he just sounds defeated.

It has been years since you disappeared, but Mother acts as if you have just gone to town for the afternoon. She has kept your room, stripping the beds once a week, washing the linens, dusting your trophies and the window sills. The old man talks about you like you were dead, when he talks about you at all. We have, in our own ways, grown accustomed to your disappearance.

In the meantime, I have covered for the old man's lapses, taking charge of the books, the hiring of hands, the purchase of adjacent property, the securing of water rights and grazing allotments. Under my care, the ranch has finally tasted some success, but the old man says nothing about it. He just stares out toward

the mountains like he was looking into another world. I say nothing about it to him, and we hear nothing of your doings. So your return, after so long, is a shock to us. The old man is elated. He throws a party for you, roasts a pig, and calls in the neighbors. Later, he scolds me for my bitterness, calling it a poison.

Suddenly it's *my* turn to stare out toward the mountains as if *I* were looking into a different world, and I am—it is a world where I have grown obsolete, where the ranch dwindles back into its jerry-rigged, inefficient ways, where I am unnecessary, where the wind blows dust across everything and our cattle just lie down on the range and expire.

Now let's say that after you have settled in again, I am approached by our father and asked to forgive you for your foolishness. And let's say that I bend to him and comply, though I do it with a reluctance that means I am not really complying, which will be worse for me, the old man says, in the long run. He will look me in the eye and say I have become a proud man. I'll say that he is right, if proud means being realistic.

He will turn away then and disappear into the house.

Eventually your humility will take center stage, and I will be subjected to the wisdom you picked up on the end of a needle. The old man will grow even older, and he'll become obscenely happy. Mother will sit in the kitchen among her grandchildren, feeding them until they swell like watermelons. My rage will fade to contempt, and you will smell the poison as it pumps through me during the spring inoculations, leaching out of my skin like cyanide. Eventually I will come around, but it will be as our father lies dying in the bed in which he was born. I will climb the stairs and apologize to you and to him and to our mother, who will be a widow by nightfall.

And this is how we will practice our religion.

2. Come, Come Ye Saints

Sunday School

The woman who miscarried two weeks ago reminds these Mormons that no one ever promised them a rose garden. And the man with prostate cancer says, "Amen," then feels strange about it. To him it feels like he's attending the revival meetings from what seems like a past life. The woman who's husband no longer comes to church closes her scriptures but leaves her finger in the book, marking Peter's second epistle for later.

She thinks how nice it would be to touch the corduroy of her husband's thigh, to glance over at his razor-nicked face and see that he had finally come to know that the best things in this life will carry over into the next. For years now she has taken to praying only for the poor and the infirm who do not tear a hole in her heart the way he does. This is how it is in God's house, out here in the desert valleys.

The young man who looks like he has cerebral palsy, drops his pencil, and a girl who was raped on the night of her junior prom picks it up and hands it back to him. They are the same age but haven't spoken in years. Last week, he told the congregation that when he was ten his father beat him and his mother with a golf club and left them for dead. His mother is alive, but the young man comes to church alone now. By the time he makes it home, she has lunch on the table. He eats it alone, staring out of the kitchen window into the dirt yard.

The unmarried pediatrician with one breast asks a question about grace, and the man who's son shot a convenience store clerk in New Mexico can only shake his head and say that it's a gift. "A gift," he repeats, looking at the congregation who sit stiffly in their folding chairs. "It's bleak sometimes," he confesses, lowering his head. "There are days I want to lie down and quit. But something won't

let me do it," he says. He looks over at his wife and smiles sheepishly. Her eyes are sunken and dark. She has tried to dress them up with cheap eye shadow, but it only brings her shame into relief.

By noon she'll be directing the choir as they practice for next Sunday. And by Monday she will have slipped from their thoughts like a coin into a dish. In a week, her appearance again in the church building will surprise them, the vaccuousness of her expression reminding them that their lives aren't as rotten as they could be. She has no idea that her misery is giving them hope. They will never mention it. Utah is not a place for mentioning things like that.

Thorsen's Angle

Jens Thorsen sat at the kitchen table, sorting out fives and twenties into two piles, his head and hands trembling. When he had it all counted out, he took up the smaller pile, re-counted it, and checked the figure against one written on a small scrap of paper. After writing the amount down on a tithing slip, he stuffed the money into an envelope, licked the flap and sealed it, scooping up the larger pile, he rocked over to one side, pulled out his wallet, and slipped the cash inside.

"Mamma, come on down here," he called out into the generalness of the house. "Mamma, I got something for you." He took one twenty back out of his wallet and laid it on the table. In a few seconds, he heard his wife's feet creak on the floorboards and then clomp down the stairs. As she walked into the room, Jens looked up and smiled with his lips closed tightly over his teeth. He was tapping the twenty with his forefinger.

"What's that?" she asked.

"Dog winnings," he said. "That's your share."

She stared down at the bill then up at Jens. She blinked twice then said, "I don't want no part of that money."

"Now don't start that again, Mamma. This is good money and it's your share."

"I told you before, I don't want no part of that filthy lucre. You can't serve God and mammon both, Jens Thorsen."

"That money was raised fair and square in Juárez, you know that. Weren't no lawlessness to it," he said.

She turned stepped back to the table. "That's blood money sitting there on that table and burning its way to hell in your wallet. It's blood money from innocent dogs if that don't make it worse. I won't have no part of it, not now, not

never. You hear me?"

Jens slid his hand over the top of it the tithing envelope when he saw that she was staring at it, then he looked away and squinted through the window at the pickup truck parked out front. "The Lord don't want none of that money neither," she said.

"The hell he don't. Caesar'll get what's coming to him, and God'll earn his sure as rain, Mamma. That comes from on high don't it? The Lord delivered up that dog. I'm just sending some of my good luck back into the Kingdom."

"I won't have you buying no groceries with that money, you hear. I won't sit down to a fouled table or take fouled food."

Jens slid his chair back and stood, palming the tithing envelope. "No one's running it down your throat," he said. He walked past her, leaving the twenty lying bare on the table.

"I won't have you paying any bills with that money, or buying me nothing with it neither," she called after him.

Jens had switched on the television and took to his chair in the living room.

"You hear me?" she hollered.

Jens switched the channels.

"I'm fixing to tell the bishop to burn up that money and scatter the ashes if you don't edify yourself this instant."

"I ain't met a bishop yet who would turn any money back once someone give it to him," he called out.

Lila picked up the phone and then held the receiver to her chest. "Jens Thorsen, I'm a-calling."

Jens switched the channels again.

She raised her voice and spoke into the phone. "Bishop Bunker, please. Thank you." She looked around the door jamb. Jens switched the channels. "Bishop, this is Lila Thorsen calling. Jens here has got himself some dogfighting money he wants to turn into sacred tithing funds, and—"

"Woman!" Jens bellowed from his chair. "What in Sam Hill do you think you're up to?" He rose and hobbled a few steps toward her.

She clanked the phone down on the hook and wagged her finger at him. "You repent of this right now, or you can go on to the eternities by yourself. You hear me?" she said.

"It ain't up to you," he yelled back, leaning after his voice. "You're stuck with me. Endure it to the end. Ain't that how it goes?" he said.

"I don't have to endure it lying down," she called to Jens as he rushed past her, took his cap off the back spindle of one of the kitchen chairs, and bore out through the mud room toward the corral. When he got there, Jens turned and saw his wife at the window. He snapped his fingers and drew Enoch, his apron-faced bay, up to the fence. Absently, Jens took the back of Enoch's jaw in his hand. The horse tossed his head and nickered. Silently Lila turned her head and Jens imagined from a distance that she was watching the twenty-dollar bill sitting there motionless on the corner of the table.

"You just watch, Enoch," he said, his back to the house. "She ain't so holy that twenty extra bucks won't have an effect." The horse scratched its chin on the fence rail and swished its tail. "Just you watch," he said. "She got her eye on us?" he asked the horse, stroking the side of its face. The horse twitched its left ear. Jens turned his head back slightly and watched Lila disappear into the shadows of the kitchen. He imagined that she was backing up to the table slowly, turning suddenly to snatch the bill from the table, fold it, and stuff it down the neck of her dress. When Lila appeared suddenly in the window, Jens tilted his head upward and made like he was staring off into the sky as if to prophesy the weather. "You see there, Enoch, she ain't above her filthy lucre," he said laughing. "Let's say we get you fed," he told the horse and then followed the fence to the barn and disappeared inside.

Jens was flaking some hay from a bale in the far corner when Lila trundled into the barn with a bucket of pig slop from the kitchen. When Jens turned to

face her, she drew the bill out of the bosom of her dress, tore it slowly in half, and then dropped each half into the bucket, saying, "And render unto the hogs what belongs to the hogs." Then she left through the back gate and made her way down to the hog pen.

"Good lord, woman," he bellowed, "have you lost all sense?" He dropped the hay and took off after her. As he started to hobble down the rise toward her, she lifted the bucket and overturned it into the trough. The hogs scurried up past each other and began grunting and rooting through the scraps. When Jens took hold of the fence, one of the Hampshire/Durrock cross breeds drew one half of the bill into its mouth and chewed until it was gone. "That one's going for ten bucks more," Jens muttered.

"Hogs will be hogs, and the devil's wages can't be brought to no holiness. You just remember that," Lila said.

"I swear you'll be the goddam end of me."

"You watch how you take the Lord's name. I don't imagine you and He's on any kind of good terms today," she said.

"I ain't going to turn the rest of my wallet out into the hog slop if that's what you're hoping," he said. "I just ain't made that way."

Lila smiled. She took up the bucket by its handle and started off toward the barn. Jens watched the hogs squirm past one another, and he saw a second hog latch onto the other half of the twenty and suck it up into its mouth. Behind him, Lila stopped at the crest of the rise, in the shadow of the barn, with her hand on the gate. He stared at the hogs, and then at the cottonwoods, and then at the crows, and then at the sky and the entire Kingdom of God, which he knew was out there someplace, lurking, lying wait to catch him unaware.

Proselytizing

My cousin Hollis came home drunk last Thursday night and wouldn't shut up about how the Indians saw Jesus. My brother, Garvey, told Hollis to quit bearing witness while David Letterman was on or he'd whip his ass. Hollis was drunk enough not to remember the last time Garvey put it to him, so he told Garvey to shut the hell up, and then he stomped around the room, pure drunk like his daddy, my Uncle Phil.

Garvey told Hollis to cuss a little louder so Mamma could hear it and throw everyone out of the house for running off the Holy Ghost. Garvey had been thrown out before and Hollis knew it. Also, Garvey was big enough to not have to move if he didn't want to. But Hollis started in again on how the Indians came to America on these boats made of grass.

Garvey got real pissed off this time and pointed at him with his beer bottle. "Hollis, any halfway-ignorant son-of-a-bitch knows that the Indians didn't know squat about Jesus. If they did, you think Custer would've whipped their asses like that?" Then he told me to get him another beer.

I went into the kitchen, but stopped at the door. Hollis kept talking, and Garvey kept telling him to shut his trap. It got boring pretty quick, so I just got the beer and came back and when I handed it to Garvey, he gave me his empty and twisted the top off the new one.

"Finish that if you want to, kid," he told me.

I tried to down a swallow, but it was warm and flat. I coughed and wiped my mouth on my pajama sleeve and pretended like it was good.

"Hollis," my brother said, tossing his thumb my way, "you could take a few lessons from the kid. Twelve years old and he already knows there's no such

thing as bad beer when you're not paying for it. Right, kid?"

I nodded.

Hollis said that he wished this shit about Jesus the Indians wasn't true, but he couldn't help it. That was how he said it, I swear—Jesus and shit in the same sentence. Mamma would have scrubbed his mouth out with a wire brush and ammonia for that if she'd heard him. Still, Hollis said it just like he was telling us that someone from the bank had come to take back his truck. He looked like he wanted to cry.

Garvey glared at Hollis, then gestured to the TV but it was a commercial, so Hollis took his open chance. "Jesus came to America, Garvey. It just makes sense—"

"You don't give a shit about Jesus," Garvey interrupted, belching afterwards.

"I do now," Hollis said. "I have to. I seen things."

"You're drunk," Garvey said.

"I know it," Hollis answered. "But I had an anointing tonight, Garvey. I was in town by the Rexall and I saw this light, like a pair of headlights and then an angel sang to me about the Indians, and then these two big-eared dudes came and picked me up. They gave me a book." Hollis started feeling around for it but came up empty-handed. "I had it," he said. "I swear I had it."

"Bullshit," Garvey said. "Now pipe down. If you wake up Mamma, she'll give you an anointing—throw your ass out in the yard where it belongs. Right, kid?"

I nodded, looking over at Hollis. He looked whipped already. Garvey raised his beer to me. I raised mine back. David Letterman came back on, and Garvey pointed his finger at Hollis and told him to sit down and quit talking. Hollis kept looking around the room like he was going to make a break for it, but he just sat on the couch. His not saying anything was worse than the talking.

When Garvey finished his beer, he handed me the bottle. I took his and mine both back into the kitchen. While I was emptying Garvey's old beer into the sink, I heard a crash, then Hollis shouted, "Get off me, you fag!"

Mamma hollered down from her room, "What's going on down there?"

I went to the kitchen door and peeked back into the living room. Garvey had Hollis smashed face-down on the carpet in a double chicken wing, and he was telling him to shut the hell up about Jesus and the goddam Aztecs.

"What are you boys doing?" Mamma hollered again.

"Nothing Mamma, just horsing around," Garvey called back upstairs, still holding Hollis down without really even trying.

"Don't make me come down there," Mamma said.

"We won't."

"Is Ralphie down there with you?" she asked, and Garvey nodded for me to answer—which I did—and she told me to get myself upstairs.

As I started to climb up to my room, I heard Garvey tell Hollis to shut his hole or get the hell out of this house. There was about a minute of silence between them while some guy on Letterman was swinging his dog around by a Frisbee the dog had jammed in its mouth. Garvey pointed me upstairs, and I went. That's how we talked about religion when I was growing up.

Pretenses

Sammi and Ted got married fast, like people buying groceries with a blizzard coming. They needed to get themselves a honeymoon to maintain the pretense of their faith in traditions of the church. It was also going to be a trick to catch up for the wild oats time they were going to lose as young parents, but this wasn't new territory. Everyone in Deckerville, Idaho knew that marriage, devotion, and intercourse did not often come in order of importance. But Ted and Sammi's parents had taught them—as their parents had taught them—that the order of things was not as crucial as the fact that they were all present and accounted for on Judgment Day.

Leonard Meyer, the mayor of Deckerville, for example, was born eight months following a honeymoon, Diane Corbett too. Dr. Trombold, the dentist, and Everett Norris were fourteen months old by the time of their parent's paper anniversary. Lily Collier broke off her first engagement and married Lester Niles four months after her boy, Avery, was conceived. Avery always called Leonard daddy, and that satisfied everyone involved. People's lives in Deckerville were generally unaffected, perhaps even streamlined by the postured genealogy.

People in town always knew who the fornicators were, and they could go to them for guidance if they needed to. Sammi and Ted, on the other hand, were not interested in leadership positions. Citizenship was enough. So they returned exhausted and broke from their honeymoon, joined the community, took jobs and worked an honest day for an honest dollar, added dormers to the tiny pale brick house Sammi's dead Uncle Ephraim left to her in his will, and taught their children to maintain their faith without wearing down their liberties. To Ted anything beyond that was presumptuousness, and he swore to Sammi that he'd

have no part in that breed of high horse.

Sammi and Ted followed the birth of the first little boy, Carlton, with a fallow period of twenty-seven months, after which they welcomed Taylor, the first of three girls, into the family. Of the three, only Katherine would not keep up the Deckerville pretenses.

When she became pregnant at seventeen, she stayed single, because the father was the oldest Trombold boy. From the beginning, Katherine spoke ill of him, claiming never to have loved him and that a ring and veil would not persuade her to change her opinion of things. By Katherine's second trimester, Ted and Sammi felt it was time to arrange a meeting with one of the church leaders.

By that time, the Trombold boy had run off to "find work on the high seas," and Katherine seemed a bit underwhelmed. She said that he had frittered his time trying to woo her into submission, but she was satisfied with his disappearance. Some judged her to be elated, even supportive of his absence, though they would not presume to suggest foul play. She had kept her grades up, and would surely return to the cheerleading squad in the fall.

Sammi stayed up nights worrying where Katherine could possibly go with an attitude like that, certainly not BYU. The Trombolds had a foothold along the entire Wasatch Front, and they would surely maintain their surveillances and try to bring their flesh and blood back into the fold. Sammi worried that Katherine would have no choice but to go along with the Trombolds.

It will kill her, she thought. She will end up like Lot's wife: she will turn to salt and blow away.

Where It Comes From

Six months ago I called John Medeski and told him that I'd come across some cats in Denver and was going to stay here with them until we hit big, or busted. The guitarist was this crazy Mormon kid from Salt Lake, the bass player some unknown East Indian guy from Vancouver named Shumish. They needed a drummer. It was that simple.

Before I left Manhattan, Medeski told me that leaving New York would cripple my career. I told him I was getting pulled apart, music dragging me one way, the city another. I told him one side was going to lose, music most likely if I didn't do something pretty quick. So I blew town and drove west, smoking cigars in cheap motels, trying to "grow up with the country," et cetera.

I caught these dudes playing in this little club to a crowd of eight. Their drummer had just gone to LA. I was spellbound, and that was all she wrote. In a week I was renting an apartment. By the end of the month we were gigging together and the crowd had jumped to thirteen. I suppose setting down in Denver will keep me from being first-rate, but first-rate is meaningless if all you want is to eat the barrel of a thirty-eight.

The Mormon kid freaks me out. He goes by Ammon—just Ammon, no last name. He's tall and skinny, wears black pants and a white shirt buttoned to the neck. No tie. There's nothing in his apartment but a few pillows, a tube amp, a pristine ES-295, and a mostly-bare refrigerator. He's got maybe a half-dozen books, doesn't have a phone, doesn't talk to anyone, really. The band calls him Harpo. It pisses him off, but he plays better when he's pissed off.

The kid listens to horn players mostly. He's going so many directions it's hard to keep pace with him, but it keeps us honest. When the kid takes a solo, it's like

the notes have been stitched into his guts then ripped back out. He's so good I've seen guys in the audience hang their heads like they're going to sulk home, set their axes on fire, and take up needle point. I've asked the kid about it, and he swears he doesn't know where it comes from. You know, I've met a few Mormons here and there, and I'll tell you what—I don't know either.

Whatever it is he's doing, he didn't pick it up in Sunday school. The band thinks he's nuts. I called Medeski and told him about the kid, about everything. Medeski said the kid sounds like he's the kind of nuts that can teach you something.

So, it's like this: the other day, the kid and I were grabbing some lunch downtown. He was saying grace over an avocado and sprouts on wheat. I've never seen a musician say grace in public—come to think of it, I've never seen anybody say grace in front of people like that. When he was done, I asked the kid if he had some kind of girlfriend, you know, just making small talk. He stared down at his sandwich and shook his head. He looked like he was about to say something, but he didn't, not right away. I started to apologize, but he waved it off. He swallowed, then looked up and said, "Mormon girls don't like jazz. They're not supposed to like things that don't make them peaceful."

"Having ten kids is supposed to make them peaceful?" I said. I thought he would laugh at that, but he smiled, barely, and took another bite, poking the sprouts back into the bread.

"No," he said, finally. "But if they don't understand jazz, they don't understand me. Jazz isn't something I do, you know." He looked around the joint and then sighed, "Yeah, you do." He slumped a little in his seat and scratched his head. "It's hard to get that across, you know, to people like that . . . girls, Mormons, whoever."

I nodded, then, tried to change the subject. "You all got one of those temples out here?" I asked. He nodded. While I was talking the whole place went soft, the

light, the noise. "What goes on in there? Is it like, animal sacrifice or something?"

He shrugged. "It's pretty quiet, like when you're up in the middle of the night. People get married in there, we look after the dead."

"The dead?"

"It's hard to explain."

"Maybe talking about getting married would be easier."

"Maybe," he said, poking his fingers into the sandwich again.

"You guys are supposed to get hitched forever, right?" Trying to make good. "I had an Uncle once—you know—join your church. That's what he said."

He nodded.

"I'm not sure I'd be up to that. I've been down the plank twice already, and I'm not anxious for any more. If I ever get that crazy, I'll need an escape route," I said. "No forever for this guy. It's way too long."

"It's not a choice, really. It's how we do it." He turned away and looked out toward the sidewalk. He chewed and swallowed, then just sat there staring out the window like he was the only guy on the planet. It was miserable to sit there like that, watching him smolder, me thinking about all those cute little blonde-haired Utah girls who think of Kenny G whenever he tells them he plays jazz.

After a few minutes, he glanced up into the few patches of sky between buildings, his lips moving. He was singing—"Bemsha Swing." A man in religious turmoil and he goes to Monk for consolation. That's the kind of loneliness I understand. After a while he stopped and said, "You know, it's funny about the team."

I stared at him.

"The basketball team," he said, and I laughed like I understood. "They went there from New Orleans, I guess. Should have been the Lakers, you know."

Everything inside that kid was in conflict—religion, music, women—and there was nothing he could get rid of, nothing he could just write off. I thought

about Medeski and his thing about crazy teaching you something, and I figured for once maybe he *did* know what he was talking about. I thought about the kid *should* pack it up and head to New York, but I wasn't going to tell him that. So I sat there with the kid, just sat there, listening to the quiet that surrounded him. I half-way hoped he would never find his little church girl with the blue note in her heart. If he did, the happiness might poison his music, turn him second-rate, and he was as good as anyone I'd ever played with. He knew it too. That's what was killing him.

We sat there in that deli for fifteen minutes, not talking. I never felt anything like it before. Then he stood up and left me staring at his napkin and half-eaten sandwich. I didn't follow him out, not even with my eyes. There was nothing I could have said that he didn't already know.

I felt like an infant.

The Holy Book of Babel

Carville had been given the blue book by an old friend who had become rich marketing certain sacred truths as organizational practices. This was a man he thought he could trust. The book's non-descriptness was a comfort, and in many ways, for Carville, its primary virtue. He did not read the book or even open it for nearly half a year after the old man had given it to him, but the book's weight was enough to stave off a number of his lesser concerns. Its mere presence in his briefcase, on the other hand, caused many of Carville's business contacts to mistake him for a religious man. Because of this, they began to confess personal matters to him.

One man had been losing money at the dog track and his oldest child was just starting classes at the university. Carville reminded him of his responsibilities and oaths. Another had been violent toward his middle son and believed that his rage had made a rebel out of the boy. Carville said that rebels are born not made. Still another man, new in business and young, doubted that there was a God. Carville said that he understood the feeling. A woman who was working with Carville on a price indexing project whispered that she wanted him to make love to her. Carville agreed.

When they finished, the woman wept, and Carville tried to dry her tears with a corner of the sheet. She refused the gesture, which wasn't a gesture, and rising naked, she crossed the room. Carville watched her as she stepped into the sharpness of the bathroom and closed the door. In the thinning bar of light, she looked like a painting. Carville dressed meticulously and left. He ate a mediocre breakfast by himself.

That Passover, Carville rose early and took the book from his briefcase. He could barely remember what the woman had looked like, but he had been dreaming about her, carnal dreams. He thought that reading the book his friend believed to be sacred would elevate his thoughts. He opened it, turned to the beginning, and began.

He had expected the book to be in English, but when turned the page he found Japanese characters running down the paper like brambles. The next page was in Russian, the next in Hopi, the next in Tagalog. Some of the pages were in Hebrew, some in Farsi. Here and there a recognizable word would rise up from the rubble of language: city, Sabbath, door, children, manna, milk, wilderness, war. There must have been a printing error his friend hadn't seen.

He closed the book and tried to remember the look that had been engraved upon his friend's face when Carville came at the old man's bidding.

"Carville," his friend had said, lowering his voice. "I always hoped *you* would marry my grand daughter. Your mother and I spoke of it often. When I was courting her."

Carville was embarrassed and looked away. "Maria has her own plans," he said. "It's been a long time since she has paid any attention to me."

His friend smiled sadly and nodded. "I am old, Carville, and want to leave you something." With this he handed the book to Carville and said, "When you're ready." Carville accepted the book and left his friend alone in the den. He did not stay for Maria's wedding, and he did not return for the old man's funeral.

3. Where Have All the Cowboys Gone?

Cowboy Prose Poem

Here's what public television is good for: last night I saw a show about how a cat ate this English fella's heart, some writer by the name of Tom Hardy. It makes you wonder how a man's heart gets left in the kitchen where the cats can get to it and why they had it out of him in the first place. Maybe there was a knife stuck in the wood next to it, like the cook was just off in the pantry for some corn meal. Next they showed how these quacks cut off this German's head and then lost the body. It was some symphony fella, name of Hadyn. They wanted to read the bumps and get his skull dimensions to find out how he got so good at music, but before they could finish, everything from the neck down got shipped off separate and buried. So they jarred what was left and charged admission to look at that old pig's knuckle floating around in a gallon and a half of formaldehyde.

I plan on going the regular way: a single room in Ely, a sliver of Army pension and a smaller slice of social security. I'll shit myself to death with a half-bottle of whiskey sitting on a wash cloth on the toilet tank and my cigarettes across the room on the TV.

Elegy for my Brother-in-Law,
The Danish Warrior-King

This is the boat Russell talks about when people start to discuss the achievements of their children. It's a twenty-four foot launch with no motor and the paint job of a derelict gas station. At night he sits out there smoking cigarettes and thinking about all the ways his life has curdled since he lost his knees to an onside play in a Division One playoff game.

That's the way my sister reads it.

Sometimes when he's out there surrounded by the suburban crickets, he folds a piece of eighty grit sandpaper into thirds and sands half-heartedly, intending to get her sea-worthy, intending to disappear someday beyond the smoggy California horizon. He's asked me to help him with the prop shaft, but I can't bring myself to push his trundling little dream along.

He's always just about to show people that he'll disappear someday, that the boat will make him a legend of the fishing shows. But before he can start stripping the spars or overhauling the engine, he falls asleep with his arm dangling overboard and a cigarette burning slowly toward his knuckles. The stars wheel overhead, and Russell lies sleeping in his driveway.

The boat has been dry docked in the driveway for ten years now.

My sister has her countdown figured to the minute. She's certain Russell will pass out behind the helm again tonight with the steering wheel unbolted and loose in his lap. She tells me that his fat arm will be stretched out over the driveway, that she will sneak down to the garage and find the five gallon fuel can that's been sitting next to the freezer and put it too good use. I ask her if she

knows what she's doing, but all I hear is the pulse of the telephone line.

She tells me she told Russell her plans to christen the boat with gasoline, and he threatened to cave in her skull if she thought about it. This is the only time Russell has stood up to her. The rest of the time he's too lazy to be visibly abusive. I offer to let my sister come and stay with us for a while. She lies poorly and says Russell will never make good on his threats, that he'll never make good on anything that might be important to her.

That was Fresno in the seventies, back when we all had ideas about how to change the shape of life in California.

Back Into the World

Most of the windows in the neighborhood were dark, but the street light on the corner crackled and spit like an industrial bug zapper. I was depressed and bored of Flagstaff night life, so I crept around to the side of the duplex and crouched down, trying to peek through the shades and see if there was a light on in my neighbor's place. His girlfriend's car was parked in front, but the joint was dark, so I snuck back around to his motorcycle, took the throttle in one hand and ran the other along the gas tank. My heart sounded like a two-stroke go-cart engine. That chump had to have been blind to the fact that once he got married, his wife would have that gorgeous machine sold inside six months. I didn't have to know them to think a thing like that; selling motorcycles is what women do. It's how they closed the frontier.

Swinging my leg over the bike, I took both of the grips in my hands. It was a beautiful gesture. I smiled slightly when the seat leather popped, and I adjusted the mirrors so I could see myself, and even though it was dark, I got a pretty good idea of how things looked—me and Robbie Kenevil. Karla should have seen me sitting up there all set to launch. She would have had to eat every evil thing she's said about me and the way I express myself.

After a few minutes of just sitting there haloed in revelation, I dropped the bike off the kick stand. The moon had cleared the trees, and it cast a short, navy blue shadow behind me. I was, in general, in the complete agony of the mortally lonesome, but in that light, my neighbor's motorcycle had become the most beautiful thing in the world, and I was beautiful because I was straddling it.

Pulling in the clutch and nudging the gear pedal up into neutral, I rolled the bike to the edge of the driveway and pushed off with both feet. Gravity caught

me immediately, and I felt it dragging me and the bike down the driveway. I hung a left and let the momentum pick up. The street below was empty, and I scanned the road for headlights. There weren't any. My future was clear.

I couldn't hear anything. I couldn't see anything. The wind was whipping my hair around like a string of car lot flags. The engine was silent as I picked up speed and started hurtling down the hill toward the intersection. There was nothing at all in the world then except me and the laws of physics. I dug my toes into the nubs on the foot pegs and leaned down across the gas tank. I imagined that my neighbor was sleeping with his foot twitching through the middle of some dream about hunting rabbits. His girlfriend was probably snuggled against the curve of his back, awake and holding her ring finger up in the dim light, imagining the diamond that isn't quite there.

Neither of them could see that their lives were bearing down on them. I'm ignoring that fact in my own life, so why should they do anything different? It's what people do. Still, the only thing I knew for certain was that everything was finally out of my hands. The forces of the universe had me in their control, and during the descent it felt like I'd been wrapped in gold foil and lightning struck.

I crossed the intersection on a red. On either side of the street, unlit houses flickered past like frames in an old movie. I was carrying the momentum of the hill, but eventually I began slowing down. I made it another half of a block before the bike petered out. A vague nausea crawled through me as the thin desert wind died out of my ears and the random night sounds of the neighborhood reasserted themselves. I rolled out next to a pickup with Colorado plates, and as I set my feet down on the street to balance the bike, a sense of dread settled around my shoulders like a python. I wasn't worried about humping that bike back up the hill barefooted, not even if my neighbors were awake and calling the cops. I was and am worried about addiction, an affliction to which I am especially prone.

As I turned and started paddling back to the intersection, I realized that for the first time in years I wasn't even thinking about Karla. It had only been for a

few glorious seconds, but they were something I hadn't been able to manage in a long time, not since the night I came home from work and found her closet empty.

Cops Don't Understand Poetry

Back when my life was poetry, I used to take walks in the cool desert evenings. I thought they would be a good way to gather my thoughts and try to make sense of things between myself and Marie. She was living so far away in the emptiness of the East, and we were both so uncertain about the idea of falling in love, then. Yes, I understood: the mystery between us was gone, and I knew that we had passed through the veil of every day life to live in a world of buildings, scaffolding, and traffic. I was here in the land of enchantment, thirty-two hours by car, two by phone. She was still at school in Boston.

My walks would take me down to the town square (I'm sorry, what do they call them here, fairways?) to the fountain under the towering shadow of the town hall. This fountain was not particularly fancy. Water dribbled decadently from the center of an unadorned concrete urn and splashed down, bubbling into a shallow pool. I used to walk there late at night when I couldn't sleep, remove my shoes, place them carefully on the steps of the town hall, and then walk along in the water. It was a wishing well, I could see, and children had thrown coins into it, coins that shimmered like little copper fish.

Some nights I would stand in the center of the pool and empty my pockets, just reach into them, grab the bottoms tightly, and rip them back out, letting everything dump into the water.

After a month of this, after it had probably gotten too cold for a sensible person to be walking in a fountain singing and dreaming up all the different sorts of poems he could write about a woman from Waltham, Massachussets, I started missing Marie so much that I thought perhaps I could wish every wish in this fountain again and have her appear to me.

So I started in one corner and began picking up all the coins in the fountain. One by one, I took them out of the water, scrubbed them dry on my pants, and then set them on the stone edge of the pool. I moved methodically from one side to the other as if mowing or raking the grass. Sometimes a coin would slip and drop back into the water, but before I could fetch it, I would be caught up in how much the plunking sounded like Marie calling my name from her balcony.

My world, at that point, became one giant swirl and I knew that if I re-wished all the wishes in this fountain she would appear. I was certain she would know this fountain from how I had described the town and written about my nightly strolls. She would have flown here without telling, hired a taxi and found me. That's how wishes work. They're not real magic, just connections like a telephone switching machine.

What a wonderful poem this would make, I thought—me in the fountain, in these great green open edenic causeways. I started keeping track of every detail so I could write it once Marie arrived. I didn't want to lose one instant of the event, not the gurgle of the water, or the pale, indirect glow of the moonlight, or the police car pulling up to the clubhouse with its lights off, and the cop inside watching me wish for the impossible.

Sunset

I have cleared out Heilani's things and packed them in sturdy cardboard boxes and stacked them carefully on the front lawn next to the ma' o hau hele bush by the street—as carefully as I could, given the present circumstances, which are *her* circumstances, not *mine*. They look like *my* circumstances or at least like *shared* circumstances, nut they are not. I am now sitting in the front yard, waiting for her to come home from "work" or "working out" or wherever it is that she's been going in the evenings. When she pulls up, I will be here with my cooler, fenced in by four bamboo torches, sipping a Kona in nothing but my underwear.

This is a freedom I deserve.

Besides, I want Heilani to rest assured that there is nothing left in the house that she'll ever need. I want her to know where we stand before it becomes impossible to extricate her from the house. If she gets past the door, she'll dig in like a cat in a hurricane. It is important to be proactive. I am naked, or nearly so, in order to remind Heilani that I am still in the kind of shape that will make replacing her as easy shifting gears in a Ferrari.

In the distance the sun is slipping down over Maalaea Bay, and a few bats are swooping into the halo of insects around the torch flames. Somewhere nearby some frogs are peeping, and then a truck rattles past. It is summer, and I like these sounds. A white and tan ocean bird wanders up to me. I'm tempted to remain motionless like a lava tiki man, but I sip at the Kona and that is my hula. It is a gentle motion that doesn't frighten the bird. I sip again.

In management seminars this would be called a win-win situation. I sip again and she keeps hopping closer through the grass, trying one eye on me,

then the other. I guess my stillness and self control has allowed me to become joined with my chair in the bird's brain. Perhaps the cooler, the chair, the tiki torches and I are one great lawn creature.

A car full of college girls drives by, and they see that I am bound only by my skivvies. They honk and call out. I raise my glass and toast them. They honk again and disappear.

While I wait, darkness gathers behind the boxes and floods toward the garage.

In Canada, All Yow Have to Worry About is the Stanley Cup

1.

The singer I knew from Long Beach, the one who went nuts from the stress of bad chorus auditions and cut her hair off with dull scissors then begged me to shave the rest of her skull clean with the trimmer on my Norelco—she reminds me it hasn't always been hand to mouth and a month of overcast. At her house, everything was a shower of kumquats and the sharp pain of an agave stabbing me in the leg while she skidded herself up the front of my shirt and pants and bit into my lip, imagining that somehow I wanted it this out of control.

2.

Once, outside Bloomington, on my way back to the coast, I watched some Hoosier's teen-age daughter mop up coke and ice cubes with a dirty dish rag—one coil of her golden hair helixing down from her visor—and I thought I could stay here forever watching her knead that wash cloth dry. I thought I could make a Midwest go of it, lean into the wind, forget everything I loved about the Pacific and face her gilded, standing tall to tell her the truth of things I knew nothing about. Then the oscillations of a siren whined back the memory of too many long winters, and those sad words: "good-bye stranger" left me tied me to the mast.

3.

A brown-eyed waitress from Nashville carved up my Coltrane records one night while I was on swing shift. She destroyed all of them except *A Love Supreme*, which I played over and over until she typhooned into the room, snatched

it off the turn table, and threw it, discus-style, against a barbecue in the courtyard. She was amazing in that rage. Her eyes flickered like opals, her lips pulsed and glistened with expletives. I was in love and beside myself. When I pulled her to the floor, she took hold of my ears, and all around us, the tone arm against paper filled the air with a manic electricity like we were fused together and sealed up in a spent rocket drifting toward Mars.

4.

The depressed genius sculptor from Fairbanks reminds me of January and the winds that blow down the Inland Passage like some howling kind of revenge. There are days I wish I had somewhere that good to go, somewhere better than Aberdeen or Hoquiam, some place without a house full of welding equipment and rusted scrap iron or with a town where hooking your arms over the edge of a bar and looking exasperated isn't the only full-time occupation. I loved her, but she could spend a whole day at the window in my underwear, watching rain glaze the glass into something unrecognizable.

5.

They've all come to hate me before leaving and going back home. They've all burned me down with their eyes and thrown my books across the room, trying to make some rock and roll statement about my bastard promises of fidelity. So I have packed my car and bought a pair of fur-lined boots. Those kind men at customs will ask me simple things: questions about the fruit in my cooler, where I'm coming from and where I'm headed. And when I have made my declarations and satisfied them on their end, they will welcome me and wave me on to a safe demise in the north country.

Skagit Valley Under the Crush of Matriarchl Equinox

In the dream I am married to a small-breasted woman with a kind face and strong hands. We live in the house in La Conner where her father was born. I am always halfway through a project of either re-glazing the windows or sanding the hardwood floors, and when she comes in from the garden to ask me where the children are. I look up and see that she is backlit. The French doors open: apple blossoms fly loose and out of season in the wind. I tell her that the girls are in heaven with her mother.

She sets her trowel on the table and stares past me the way people stare when they are trying not to weep. I look past her and watch our blackberries uncoil as if someone were filling the vines with an air hose. She tells me she is too old to have any more children. I tell her that I am just dreaming this, that we are really still young, that we haven't met.

She shakes her head.

I ask her if she knows my name, and she draws away. I ask if she can remember who introduced us, what I was wearing when we first met, who was president, the way I like my toast. She turns in horror and runs down the stairs and into the garden. I rise and step through the French doors onto the back porch I don't remember building. The berries have died, and the vines are thorn-studded. She is gathering the bitter last berries into her apron.

"This is all I know of the earth," I say, gesturing to the neighborhood, then I am distracted. I realize that I'm forgetting my future wife's scent, the shape of her face, the weight of her hair. The house buckles silently behind me like a cardboard tube. The dead berries smell like pemmican. From one of the buildings

positioned above our street, I hear an old Salish woman say that when the winds change, we'll begin to see the daffodils again.

Camoflauge

You are just coming into the office when you hear that Charles Braunstein died. He was flying on one of those commuter planes they route through Cincinnati in order to meet with editors at the Midwest office in Omaha. You stand around like everyone else in the office, watching the news reports.

A corespondent in a wind breaker is holding a microphone two inches below his lips. The anchor is asking him questions. He touches his ear piece and says that there was a problem with the vertical stabilizers, though nothing, he says, is definitive. Nothing is ever definitive with these people. They want to keep us watching through the commercials. Still, you know what you have heard: a plane went down.

Charles Braunstein is now dead, and everyone in the office has frozen in their tracks. You feel like crying, but you don't know how to do it in the office in front of these people. Other women have their hands stuffed with Kleenex. Yours are empty. The FAA is launching a full investigation. Your eyes feel like they are on fire.

You curl around the lump in your heart, aware that you are not the first woman to feel this way. But maybe for him, you are. Charles Braunstein is a cipher. You want him to fade away, to become another sad story at the turn of the century, but he clings to you like mussels to a pier. The filaments of his ghost burrow into the spaces between your ribs and fix him there.

A quiet man who wore gray suits and nondescript, geometric ties, Charles edited computer books and software manuals. As you picture him, you wonder if

you're really seeing him at all. He disappears as you focus on him, as a stars does. You try to turn your head to one side, see him out of the corners of your eyes with your peripheral vision. This is something your father taught you, one of the few things you can remember about him.

For you, Charles is like a fish holding himself in the stream. You keep losing him in the shadows and among the stones. If you relax, he will appear. He is shifting—a star, a fish, a mussel, a ghost.

His hair was thin toward the back like a professor's. He never bothered to comb it over like other men do. The honesty of his hair clarified his priorities. His glasses were thick and his shoulders slumped under his jacket as if he were yoked to a sled full of old dictionaries. We all have our own dead weight, but with Charles it was pronounced, and it made him more human than other men. Humanity is not a trait you can fake. Again, this is something your father taught you, though the lesson came via your mother. Charles was not particularly handsome. Plenty of men *are* handsome, but at forty-five, handsome is less an issue than honesty, and he did seem—above all else—like an honest man.

Though you should not have done so, you mentioned Charles once to one of your girlfriends in research. She thought you were out of your gourd. "That guy is vanilla, Kathy, straight vanilla," she said. You knew she was not the one to tell these things, but you had to tell someone or it would have killed you.

"Listen, Alice, this is not a sex thing," you said. "It goes to a different part of my brain, like when you're at the symphony."

"If we're talking about Charles Braunstein from technical, and we are, aren't we?" she asked, clicking her mouse, "If you're talking about him like this, then you need help, serious help."

She didn't get it. She was twenty-seven and addicted to margaritas, so how could she understand. That was the first time you felt a generation gap from the crippled side.

Because the truth is, you surprised yourself by thinking that poetically about him. One bad marriage could have jaded you for the rest of your adult life, and you wouldn't have been out of line. You could have explained it to any of a million other women in three sentences, and they would have accepted it as gospel. But everything with Charles was different, though it shouldn't have surprised you. The quiet ones who disappear, these are the men that women dream of when they have stopped listening to the women who only desire what men have insisted upon.

Before Alice, before the accident there was this: You were on your lunch hour, eating cottage cheese on the front steps of Pioneer Square. A bluegrass band was playing. People sat as usual in a great bank on the thick brick steps with food in their laps, sipping from sodas or plastic tumblers of iced coffee, all of them enjoying a rare moment of Portland sun. Your blouse was open to the third button, and you had parted the collar.

Then Charles appeared, surrounded by a handful of pre-school kids. He was swaying side to side, keeping time with the music. He wasn't really dancing. It didn't seem deliberate like dancing is deliberate. It was more like the movements were happening *to* him, more like he couldn't *not* dance. From time to time, he looked around at the children, then flapped his hands and high-stepped like a giant gray bird. One little blonde-haired boy standing next to him jive danced for a moment. When he saw Charles, he started flapping his arms too. Charles smiled, then changed his dance while the boy kept flapping. You could not take your eyes off him. Suddenly, he had become the most beautiful man in the world.

After a while, he began to step side-to-side to the bass beat, bending his legs like he was running in slow motion. He made his hands into fists and started pulling them back and pushing them forward on the down beats. It was awkward but very sweet. Every now and then, he would return to the old pattern. From time to time, like a symphony conductor, he would encourage the children

around him to turn circles by pointing his fingers to the ground and spinning them. They would follow his promptings, laughing all the time.

None of the mothers seemed particularly concerned that a man in a gray suit was dancing with their children. It was as if he were as benign as a street clown. The band played for another minute or so, then introduced the next song with a joke and some friendly on-stage banter. Then it struck you—no one could really *see* Charles unless he allowed himself to be seen. He could move without attracting attention. He had managed the perfect camouflage: innocuousness.

As the next song began, Charles suddenly stopped dancing and looked at his watch. A shocked expression washed over his face. He turned suddenly and slipped out of the crowd. As he left the group of children, you saw that he had no shoes on, no socks, nothing but bare feet. His tie was still on, and he wore his coat, though it was unbuttoned. He walked over to his loafers, pulled the socks out of them, and put one in each pocket of his jacket, then slipped his shoes on before checking his watch again. He grabbed his lunch bag from the brick steps, and without a second glance, he left.

When you got back to the office, you ran into Alice in the stairwell. You wanted to tell her about the socks, about the dancing. You wanted to tell her something about the way Charles Braunstein made your body feel like a whirlpool, but you couldn't articulate your mouth around the words your brain couldn't supply.

Alice kept saying "What is it? What's going on?"

You stumbled down the stairs, took the rest of the day off, and drove to the coast.

The sound of the Pacific engulfed you as the tide slowly swallowed the base of Haystack Rock. Gulls wheeled overhead and a monstrous kite swooped against the falling sun. A man walked by with his daughter on his shoulders. A dog ran

around them in widening, irregular circles, his nose to the sand. Your emotions tasted like saffron.

The next day it was like nothing happened, except you knew better and had no one to explain it to you.

After the confusion of the announcement has run its course, you mill around the lobby, planning to send flowers, but not knowing where or to whom they should be sent. You try to bring the dancing Charles back into your mind, the sockless Charles, slump-shouldered, and everything. Did he pray? You wonder. Was he a religious man? Was his preference for the scientific? What would the tips of his fingers have felt like as they combed through the hair at the top of your neck? You wonder if he prayed as the plane dove, if he shut his eyes and dreamed of paradise.

You have been afraid to tell your therapist that you have gone back to church. She will not understand the impulse. You have always been antagonistic, but she does not know it was just camouflage. This tendency is what made you understand him, made you fall in love with him. The two of you could have hidden yourselves together and faded into the brick work like the wings of a moth.

But after all of this, church seems like a reasonable solution.

4. Don't Fence Me In

Fallout

Father, we buried the Indians too close. Now their bones are knit into the soil. Even dead they outnumber us. They ignore our fences and rise up cold among the wooden crosses, creaking against this wind. It is all a bad omen, and it grinds their sheep into dust. We have been watching time as it winnows truth from tradition. Our Catholicism is now a strange attractor, a local event.

We pretend we haven't seen you screaming at the moon, claiming that the Son of Man is a shapeshifter after all, once come down, now white and gibbous and out there watching us gorge ourselves on politics. We see that you traded "blessed are the meek" for "I will fight against them with the sword of my mouth." We could make records of your descent, but who would believe the atomic priests anyway, Rome? Not with our new Vatican at Los Alamos. Do you think the cardinals care about a mad Jesuit with no parish? Let the old man bide his time and go the way of all the earth; we are all finally less than dust: protons, neutrons, and worse.

You mourn these clouds that rumble dry and pass us over, which might be the only sanity you have left. I tell the others that it is simple to keep our vows under such a sky, but Father, without meaning to you have taught us the futility of trying to follow God by mail—*Roma locuta, causa finita est.* Isn't that how it goes in the end?

You say we must concede and let them drum the Mass familiar. If we allowed it, they would leave and let us grow decrepit out here in the scrabble, our cracked and swollen hands knocking away the vultures. We would be left to crawl back to the church and lie frozen in the sacristy, our catechism dissolving into a bone-chatter of Oppenheimer and Aquinas.

Perhaps you are right, all we do out here is shiver and sweat, while racks of red candles flicker down one by one and blink off. The plaster Joseph and Mary fade in a trembling of shadow and adobe until the church is full of empty molecular wind and a ghost-choir of coyotes. They voice the escape we wish for.

My life here is forever sunken into some drunk week of sacrifice like something these people want to haul away and dump in the desert. Father, I wonder if you're going to finally rise under some full moon, fight against your vestments, and wander out naked across the playa toward the mountains. I wonder when the price of this mission will have become too much for any atonement. I saw the edge of it in your lips tonight as you said Mass for the one old woman who slept through communion. You're starting to mumble the creed again in German. You're starting to shake as you lift the Eucharist.

What I see and what you tell us is not what Christ meant when he taught the disciples to lose their lives so they might come to find them. What I see is the world shrinking down to a mathematical point on the horizon. Then I watch it flash into nothingness.

Pre-Columbian Dream #12

The woman sitting across from you is wearing a linen pant suit, and she seems to want the window open so the half-dozen pigeons flapping back and forth across the transom will have somewhere to land. The birds appear to be frantic and indecisive. She looks like she is from Phoenix, but you catch a whisper of ocean and sandalwood in her perfume. Her voice breaks over you. You are suddenly her confidant, and she whispers something about feeling fat, fat as cow.

She beautiful, but you can tell that this is one of those things women feel they have to say to keep men interested. You notice the sculpture of her breasts and neck, the way her clavicles blend into the shadow of her cleavage as she leans toward you. Her hair grows suddenly darker, and the cut is suddenly different, but she has not left the room. She says she eats a pound of celery every three hours, and then, looking away, she says, "But I do crave pastry, cognac, truffles, crême bruleé..."

As she tells you this, she unbuttons her blouse—first one button, then two, then all the way to her belt. You see nothing at first but the wire-ends of her brassiere clasped together and then her almond-shaped navel, smooth and swaddled in silk. A bell sounds. Three men enter. They are aquiline, meztizos, with slick dark hair and starched white shirts. Each carries a tray with an etched silver dome. The figures look Mayan, like jaguars or water glyphs. The engravings of the priests speak with curls of inspiration emanating from their mouths. The servants wait at the fringed edge of the carpet in silence. She beckons them, and they come. She leans to the side and bids them to lift the covers from their trays.

The pigeons have gone now, and the skyline—it seems like desert skyline—

disappears into the smog. You hear a metallic ring as one of the servants lifts the cover of his tray. Now the woman's hair has fallen out of its pins, and hangs loose across her nape. She places one hand into her blouse and takes hold of her nipple. You break into a sweat and kick both the sand and the sand fleas away from your feet.

The men lower their trays and you can see they are full of glazed bread and confections. She points to one in particular; it is a colonial dark chocolate crowned with a curl of gold leaf. The man lifts it from the tray and eats it in small bites while she watches, with no variance in her eye or in the curve of her lip.

When he is done, he places the tray down on a side table and leans over. She takes him by the neck and kisses him. You see her tongue penetrating his mouth, her chest heaving. Her blouse has fallen open, but the man does not touch her; his hands are clasped behind his back. You see her hand on her breast rising against the cloth and falling back into the crescent of lace and silk. You spring up and fumble for one of the trays and knock it to the ground. The other servants step forward and beat you back with their fists until you can no longer stand.

The Tonto Drive-In Theater

Earle should've quit drinking at noon, but you can understand why he kept at it so hard. They put his old man in the ground at nine, and by ten-thirty he was slurring his words. It was a mess. No one had seen him on a five-star bender before, so they didn't know when to stop him. Carlos told me that he didn't know if he should try to help or if he should just make himself scarce. I said either way and you're screwed. Earle's a big guy, half-Ute/half-Navajo, so people thought he'd just ride level for a while then conk out. We should have known better.

We were at his Grandma Winnie's for the wake. Earle's old man was Grandma Winnie's last kid. She lost the first one to a land mine in Vietnam during the clean up. The second one went to a drunk tourist who smashed into her car on I-17 near Camp Verde. By the third, that old lady was way past feeling it. Earle's old man used to give Grandma Winnie a lot of grief. She threw him out of the house sometime last spring. I'll bet it's easier for her knowing a dead man can't make things any worse for himself. They say the old bastard lost a race with a Sante Fe locomotive out near Canyon Diablo, but that don't sound like Earle's old man to Carlos or to me.

Earle lived with me and Carlos. Earle's mother didn't live in Winslow anymore. She was down in Tucson, alone, which left Earl's old man with nowhere to go but into the bed of his pickup. I guess since he'd missed the last couple of payments, he was about to lose that too. After they carted the body off to the funeral home, Earle had a tow truck haul what was left of the wreck to the Norwest bank in Flagstaff. He took the keys and dumped them in the night deposit slot to save the repo man some trouble, which I'm pretty sure is when he started drinking.

Earle'd been talking with a couple of Mormon missionaries, hoping he could get his girlfriend back. They baptized her and her whole family a couple of months ago up in Chinle. Happens all the time around here. Once the Mormons got a hold of her, she stopped having sex with him. Earle got pissed off at that and dumped her, calling her an apple, saying that Indian people got no right taking up with *bilagáanas* at church.

Last we saw of Earle, he said he was going out to the Tonto. Some of us thought he meant the national forest and was headed off toward Tucson where his mom was. But Carlos said that maybe it was that old drive-in west of town. Carlos said Earle hated that old place ever since he got to town, and one day he wanted to burn it down, sign and all, in memory of Jay Silverheels and all that "me no see-um outlaws, kemosabe" bullshit.

We didn't say nothing, just piled into Carlos's Cutlass and took the frontage road out to the drive-in. On the way, Carlos said that there wasn't anything out there anymore except the screen and the place where you get popcorn. Nobody said anything after that, not until we got to the gates. When we pulled up, we saw Earle's truck smashed into some chain link fence. The chain they used to lock the gate was loose enough so that everyone but Carlos could slip through. We told him to just chill out and watch the cars.

He bitched a lot at first about it, but he was glad he didn't come. It was so bad in there one of the cops threw up in the dirt. And you know the cops around here. They've seen some things that would make you wish you were blind.

In The Orange County Suburbs

Someone said, "Go get Saul's dad," and someone else ran off across the vacant lot to find him and bring him to the game. No one could connect any of the names and faces with anything that anybody said, not for a long time. The rest of us just stood there in the dry field and watched a thin bead of blood drain across Saul Goldberg's eye socket and down the length of his nose, where it pooled in the dirt under his head. Some voice kept asking him if he was all right. Tommy Mitchell stood in front of the plywood home plate and held his bat, clutching the handle in both hands.

I was pitching and had Tommy two-and-two on fast balls. Saul signaled another one because Tommy was swinging early. So I leaned my whole shoulder into the wind-up and threw the last one as hard as I could. It was a little outside, to make Tommy reach for it. Peter was leading off third, and he knew I was watching for him. Saul read my stance and leaned in to make a good catch in case Peter tried to steal home.

That's when the pitch and the crack and the ball flying up out of Saul's mitt twined together across the diamond. I ran in to cover home. Peter took off from third, and Tommy lit off for first, scared of a double play, but he was the first one to realize that something had gone wrong. He must have felt the second impact, because he knew, he didn't even drop the bat before he slowed and turned to find Saul lying curled up around home plate.

We all ran in and stood in a ring, expecting Saul to start crying, but he didn't even twitch. His breathing was shallow. We could see that in his ribs. No one would touch him. We were chicken. When the weak rise and fall of his ribcage became invisible to us, we just watched him lie there bleeding until somebody yelled something.

Rabbi Goldberg eventually arrived, pushed through, and fell on his knees. He was shouting, but we couldn't understand him. When he lifted up Saul's body, the head lolled over. When he screamed, "You bastards!" to no one in particular, Tommy dropped his bat and ran for the orange groves. Tyrone followed. The rest of us said nothing, did nothing, but watch the Rabbi's neck wilt over and tremble until an ambulance came and the paramedics sent us all home.

That was seventeen years ago. I play it all back in my mind as I stand here in front of the mailboxes outside my apartment building. I have a cream-colored envelope in my hand that can't be anything but a wedding announcement. The return address reads Thomas Mitchell, and the postmark is from Sacramento. Little Tommy Mitchell engaged. Who would have thought? I hold the envelope up to the light and try to squint through and read what it says without breaking the seal.

I wonder if he has told her, if it has come up some night while they were trading intimacies, her breath on his neck, his fist balled up and jammed against his temple. How would you bring it up: "I killed a Jewish kid. When I was ten. It was an accident, but I was Irish-Catholic, and you know how things can get in those suburban neighborhoods"?

Shaw Landing

A shroud of diesel and dank fog clamps over the shallow cove: a morning full of gull-cries and ferry-rumble lying blunt against the landing house, an old building that just seems to materialize out of the water. The half-dozen Franciscan nuns who live in the abbey here manage their lives as if it were the fifties and still all innocence. Maybe it *is* innocent here. Perhaps it is far enough away to have survived the roll-over of the millennium

An iron ramp rumbles down between the pilings and clangs on the ferry deck beneath a driftwood sign gone gray. A lone ochracious sea star clings to them, singular against the air, feeding on the jagged coagulations of mussel shell. A nun descends to meet the boat. Her face is raw-cheeked and stern. She moves deliberately, ignoring time like a saint. Then, noticing the shadowless gulls, she claps her hands sharply. Some mutt ticks around in circles and sniffs at the down in her vest. His eye settles canine on the gulls that cap the pylons. They ignore him and the nun's attempt to organize their confederacy. It is ineffectual, yet she claps and then claps again, changing nothing but a silence that coats the engine drone like motor oil. Mergansers beat the water south, down the starboard side. The boat idles here with the rest of creation.

On board, no engine turns over, no one loads or off-loads, so she waves the boat along and shuffles back to the landing house in her habit, her heavy hands curled and hanging. Above the rolling wake of foam and the skewed pilings, those glaucous gulls trade places in tight half-circles. They scream at each other and flap against the morning as if the old nun had never come down, and no ferry had ever arrived.

This is Still America

"What you staring at, Dean?" E.J. asks, wiping coffee off his mustache and onto the duct tape-wrapped sleeve of his denim jacket. His brother sits on top of the roof of his pickup, staring south across a patch of open, bellyslung ground, which runs about ten miles to a draw then lurches into the red curve of rim rock. He's watching a minute, spider-sized car spin a white line of dust up the road. He grinds his teeth as the car stops just outside the last gate. Both the car and the man are specks.

Gesturing toward the car with his chin, Dean says, "looks like our city mouse is bamboozled by the latch."

"It's just a wire latch."

"Still," he says, "you know how they get."

The two brothers nod at each other, then Dean digs out a pocket knife, and turns his eyes on the sky. The thin, white wire of jet contrail burrows across the sky and fans out into the atmosphere.

"Somebody'll have to drive down and close up after him," E.J. says.

"I suspect someone will, won't they," Dean says, opening the knife.

E.J. tosses his coffee out onto the ground and smears it into the dirt with the toe of his boot, then spits. Dean begins to methodically dig the grease out from under his nails with the tip of the knife blade, something E.J. has never seen his brother do before. Dean looks up from his perch and gestures toward the car with his knife hand. "Here comes the cavalry."

"What do you think he wants with us anyway?" E.J. says, starting to look squirrelly.

"I got a pretty good idea."

"IRS?"

Dean shakes his head and chuckles. "I wish."

"USDA?"

Dean flicks a half-crescent of black grease off his knife blade, letting it drop into the truck bed.

"Well, shit, Dean. Why don't you just keep it to yourself then?"

Dean runs his tongue around the chapped rim of his mouth and squints. A line of northbound Canadian geese pump in formation above him. The sky is cloudless. "It's a lawyer from Amarillo, E.J., bringing me divorce papers," Dean says like he's reading out of an owner's manual. Then he tilts his head toward his brother and thumbs his hat back, a crackled expression frozen to his face. The geese keep going.

"Goddammit," E.J. barks, throwing his mug toward the propane tank, the coffee dregs fanning into the air.

"Pick up the mug," Dean says, "and watch your mouth."

"Pick up the mug? Dean, this is horseshit, and you know it. What you need divorce papers for anyway?"

"Only way I know to leave a man and hang onto some money when you do it."

E.J. starts to speak but stops, looks at his brother, who is staring at him, then marches over toward the propane and fetches his coffee mug. He takes up his spot again, mug banging like a lunch pail against his pantsleg. "Can't you just divorce her first?" E.J. says, "This is still America, isn't it? Last time *I* checked it was." Just over the edge of the rise, the swelling of the visitor's engine.

"I suppose I could, if I felt like leaving her."

The car pulls up, tires crunching in the gravel.

"You ought to throw the book at that broad for coming after a hard working man like you. For God's sake, Dean, you got rights. Use 'em."

Dean burns a look at E.J. but it doesn't catch.

"Think they own the whole planet—goddam title-nine pussy-eating bitches."

"Hobble your lip," Dean says, leveling the knife in E.J.'s direction. "I won't say it twice."

The car door swings open, and Dean's eyes flick away from his brother for a second, then settle back on him. E.J. slumps under the weight of his brother's gaze, but straightens himself when a man in a blue suit stands up behind the open door and stretches his back. Dean unwraps his finger from around the knife and stubs it at E.J. to make himself clear, then folds up the knife and hops off the roof of his truck. The man has stooped back into the car and is soon unfolding himself again, this time with a briefcase in his hand. He sets the case on the roof of his car, flips the two brass catches and opens it, removing a small bundle of papers.

Dean strides up to the car.

"You Dean Abernathy?" the man asks, turning.

Dean nods.

The man hands Dean the papers, almost-tossing them like they were covered in entrails. Dean holds them as if they were.

"Anita Abernathy is suing you for divorce," the man says. "You'll probably want to get a lawyer yourself. Someone in town, maybe in Tucumcari."

Dean just squints at the man, watching him the way a man watches unbroken horses. The man just takes the lashing until Dean takes off his hat and scratches the side of his head.

"It's all in there," the man says, gesturing to the papers.

Dean looks at the papers then at the man, who is standing there motionless. "You aren't looking for a tip or nothing are you, law man?" Dean says, his hat suddenly back on.

He proceeds to thumb now through the papers, pretending to read them. E.J. snickers into the fleece collar of his work jacket. The man's head snaps in E.J.'s direction, then he stares alternately at the both of them. The air draws tight around the men, the three of them flickering their eyes from face to face to face

until E.J. breaks and averts his eyes. Dean and the man then take up like a pair of street dogs: Dean's breathing slow and metered, the man's quick and uneven. When E.J. feels like things are about to snap, he laughs out loud and waves the coffee mug once in a clockwise circle. "Shit, fellas. Anyone feel like a beer?"

"It's nine in the morning," the man says.

Dean turned and tossed the papers in the back of his pickup without looking to see where they land. The man follows them with his eyes, then glances at E.J., who is digging his toes into the dirt and laughing gently to himself, muttering the words, "law man" under his breath.

"Have trouble with the gate?" Dean asks.

"Well, it was—you know, stuck. Sort of."

"Well, law man, if we have to chase any loose stock, me and E.J. are going to bill you all two hundred an hour for the round up," Dean says, deadpan.

E.J. snuffles into the sleeve of his jacket, then covers by pretending to cough.

"I'll make sure I take care of it," the man says. "Mr. Abernathy, you're going to have to come to town and be deposed in a couple of weeks. Do you get mail out here?"

"They bring it out every now and then. When something comes."

"No phones, I assume."

"Nope. E.J.'s got a beeper, but the batteries are dead."

"Beepers work out here?"

"Nope," Dean says, "Are we about done?"

"That depends on you."

Dean turns and walks up the hill toward the trailer and the rusted oil drum stove. The man looks over at E.J. again, who waggles his fingers derisively at the man's face. "He's serious about the gate," E.J. says, grinning.

"I was in 4-H," the man says. "I'm not an idiot."

E.J. guffaws once, then apologizes for being coarse.

The man gives E.J. a last quick glance and pulls the briefcase off the roof of

his car, then he gets in and sits behind the wheel, his head panning left to right like a security camera. Then the car engine turns over and the man swings the vehicle around and heads back down the road. E.J. watches the car dip behind he rise only to reappear a few moments later in the middle distance. He watches it shrink until he is bored of it, then he turns and surveys things for himself: the trailer, pickup, and two cutting horses hobbled by the bathtub water trough, the plastic privy, plywood tool box, oil drum stove, and the clear blue dome of open sky. Beneath it, his brother is pissing on a rock, its gray parietal curve crowning slightly out of the red dirt. The stream of urine falls in a long yellow arc that glistens in the morning sun like fly line.

"He's gonna screw up with that gate, ain't he?" E.J. says.

Dean shakes and tucks himself in and turns toward the valley where the thin line of dust is rising again into the sky. "I think somebody ought to follow him down or we'll be eating our supper tomorrow morning," Dean says back. He then saunters down to the center of the camp and digs a can of snuff out of his hip pocket, snugs a dip of it down against his gums, and flicks the excess off his fingertips. After a moment, Dean examines his brother, who has slunk over to the trailer and has plopped down on a sawhorse. He is bent over and picking at the outside seam on the leg of his jeans with a fingernail. Dean watches, chuckling to himself, wishing his life could wind back to a time when it was that simple, when all a man really had to do in the face of uncertainty was pick at his pants.

Neighborhood Watch

From her room upstairs, Carrie was watching her brother, Ross, and his little deaf friend, Nigel scurry around in the back yard with their baseball mitts and a step ladder. Across the fence in the next yard, Mrs. Prendergast was sunbathing naked, and the boys knew it. Carrie let her eyes float from the scheming in her own yard to the placid vulgarity of the next. There was no whiteness on Mrs. Prendergast's breasts or around the wide triangle of her pubic hair. The woman looked like a witch, like the real ones who actually *do* show up in Pasadena.

Down in the yard, Ross pointed to Nigel, who lobbed the baseball over the fence like a Marine. Mrs. Prendergast, on her chaise lounge by the pool, didn't hear the ball land in her yard. Ross and Nigel huddled together, waiting, and when Ross signaled, they scurried up the ladder and clung to the top of the cedar fence like two fat little owls.

After surveilling for a few seconds, Ross pushed at Nigel's back and sent him clambering into the breach. Mrs. Prendergast awoke, and shielding her eyes, she looked down toward the fence. Her mouth flashed, then she sat up, her breasts bobbing, her hands clamped on the arm rests of the lounge. Carrie tried to keep herself from noticing the way Mrs. Prendergast's body changed as she sat up, the way her belly divided in two, the way her navel disappeared, the way her breasts folded over, the dark nipples turning like toes to either side. Her mouth drew shut then slid cravenly into a smile. Mrs. Prendergast's mouth moved again, then she stood—slowly, gracefully—and then turned and bent over at the waist and rearranged the towel she had been lying upon. From the rear, her shape played out, her waist narrow like the neck of a pear, her hips wide and thick.

Carrie's mother was a slight woman, small-breasted and narrow-hipped, with

a thin trail of pubic hair that vanished between her legs. Carrie had seen her naked only once or twice, the last time recently in the locker room at the public pool. Seeing her that way seemed to Carrie like staring at unhappiness. Her mother looked like she was hungry. Lonely. Cold. Her nipples were very small and brittle-looking, her neck like a bundle of reeds, her hands spidery, her feet long and callused, the toenails thick like small yellow tiles set crookedly into the floor. In the sun like that, Carrie's mother would have burst into flame.

Down in the yard, Mrs. Prendergast continued to adjust her towel. She stepped her feet apart, letting the light shine lewdly through the gap. At this point the baseball popped back over the fence and bounced lamely on the lawn. Ross backed down the ladder, leaving Nigel to fend for himself. Mrs. Prendergast rose again and turned to the side, drawing her hair back with each hand and tying it into a large overhand knot. Her belly was curved at the base, echoing the curve of her breasts. Her legs were stout and round and dark. Ross tried the ladder again, but chickened out. Nigel had disappeared somewhere in the other back yard.

Carrie pressed her hands against the glass. The woman was beautiful, she thought. Full. Threatening. Monstrous. Soft. She turned her head toward the fence and began speaking into the space. As she did Nigel crept back into view, charmed, it seemed, like snakes are charmed. By the stillness of his head, Carrie saw that he was trapped by the mere sight of the woman. She didn't cover herself, but instead began to gesture in sign language, her hand tickling the underside of her chin, then stroking the imaginary brim of a baseball cap. She gestured wildly for a few seconds and then pointed Nigel to the sliding glass door of her house.

Nigel's head drooped.

Carrie watched him cross the yard and heave his weight against the door, curl around the edge, and disappear inside. As the door slid shut, Mrs. Prendergast turned and lifted her head until she was staring at Carrie. She

made eye contact and nodded and then walked up onto the pool deck and dove in. Ross remained crouched and blind at the base of the ladder. Nigel was surely on the next street over, bolting across the cul-de-sac like a raccoon set to be treed.

Carrie, held her stomach with both hands and stepped back into the cool darkness of her room, away from the window and the delicious spectacle of that woman.

The Kill on the Street Between Us

Between the hospital and 152nd street, a mountain lion boarded the bus with a fresh kill in its jaws, a mule deer as far as I could tell. She struggled somewhat trying to drag the animal up the stairs; its antlers kept catching on the rail. But the bus driver was patient. It was a hospital route, and it sometimes took the patient passengers a while to get off or to get on. Many of them were old and sometimes very ill, all of them too poor to take taxis.

The mountain lion didn't look sick, just beleaguered, especially since she had to try to juggle her kill and the transfer slip. A man up front tried to offer some assistance, but the mountain lion drew her ears back and snarled. I'm sure it was more out of reflex than anger. Predators are creatures of instinct; they don't get angry. They're beyond that sort of pettiness.

Once the bus driver checked the mountain lion's transfer and saw that the mule deer's hind legs were out of the way, he pulled the doors closed and started back out into traffic. The mountain lion lurched a little as the bus accelerated, but she kept hold of her kill, dragging it up the aisle to a row of side seats in the back half of the bus. Stopping for a second, she let go of the mule deer's neck and looked around as if she were unsure of something.

After some maneuvering, the mountain lion finally managed, by leaping over the adjacent seats, to reach down, re-grab the kill by its neck, and haul it up half-way on to the side seats. Once she had the kill's head arranged, the lion leapt off the seats and nosed its hind legs on to the rest of the seat where they pointed straight into the aisle. I was going to help, but after the lion's row with man up front, I wasn't ready to test her limits. So I kept reading. In the city it's often easier and more expected of a person to do nothing. So I did nothing.

At the hospital we picked up a few passengers, and a few got off. The mountain lion, who had climbed onto the adjacent seats by then, looked like she was dozing. Big cats have to spend a lot of time sleeping, so they'll have enough energy to hunt. It takes great strength and endurance to explode over short distances the way they do, and a metabolism as intense as theirs requires a lot of fuel. A kill like that mule deer would sustain a single lion for close to a week. It is hard not to respect a creature that refined.

Once the lion settled in, I returned my full attention to my book. We made a few stops. I covered about half of a chapter then looked up. The lion was snoring deeply, her ribs filling and falling like a bellows, her face and whiskers twitching, the thick rope of her tail hanging off the seat, curling slightly at the end. Then as if called, the mountain lion woke and looked out the bus window, stood groggily and pawed at the cable to signal its stop. As the bus pulled out of traffic, the lion grabbed her kill clumsily by the neck and dragged it off of the seats. He turned down the rear stairs with it, but the hooves became entangled in the seats opposite the door.

After struggling fiercely for a few seconds, the lion let go of the kill and leapt over it and onto the street. The bus driver's eyes flashed in the mirror to see if the door was clear. He didn't see her, so he closed the doors and pulled back out into traffic. Outside the lion screamed. It was not a roar but a scream; people don't know that it sounds like that. It was a shock: the lion chasing the bus in the space between the parked cars and the right-hand lane of traffic. Her head was low, her ears turned back, her stride long and graceful, her eyes locked on the haunches of the bus.

I looked out the window and saw the head and antlers of the mule deer poking out of the doors, shaking slightly as the tires struck seams in the pavement. I closed my book and looked back, and though the mountain lion was still chasing us with everything she had, she was loosing ground.

You see, urban living has turned us away from ourselves and from our

surroundings. I've been saying that for years and I'd had enough of it then, so I reached out and pulled the cable, causing the bus to pull over. Setting down my book, I went to the back door. The driver opened the doors just as the lion caught up to us. Reaching down with both hands, I lifted the deer by its rump and shoved it out into the street.

The lion looked up at me, and I at her. Her green eyes were deep and beautiful. We stood watching each other—the kill on the street between us—until the driver said, "Hey, buddy are you getting off or what?"

I looked up at the driver, who knew this was not my stop, and said, "No, I was mistaken."

When I looked back, the lion had taken the kill again by the neck and was dragging it between two parked cars toward the sidewalk. The brake hydraulics exhaled, the doors hissed shut, and again we pulled out into traffic.

I leaned toward the window—my hand on the glass—hoping the lion would look back up, maybe offer some gesture of thanks, but she didn't. Mountain lions are creatures of instinct, and it was wrong of me to have expected anything. I've lived alone long enough to have understood the ecology of our exchange. I ought to have known what to call it, but this city has hard-boiled my sensibilities. I have lost touch with the vast and terrible beauty of things.

Spring at Point Reyes

It feels right to find the sheep drifting down again across this grass, slipping toward the shed as if no time had passed since we vanished into our own separate futures. We came here often, and I would lay you down in the musty straw, stand again and light a lantern after working the plunger and fumbling with the matches. Your hair was always sweet and cedar-scented, and you kissed me first, without sweet talk.

In all that time before the war, I never said I loved you. The suddenness of your naked body always surprised me and kept me from anything but comic book dialogue. As our shadows flickered against the tack and harnesses that hung from the shed wall, I only wanted to remember my imagination of you and the drift of your hair across my chest, not the pain or the crescent of smeared blood I found on myself. That and the awkwardness of my football hands was something I hoped I would forget.

You knew the bad news would send me running. And in the weeks that followed your note, I drove as much of America as there was between here and South Dakota, then I bucked wheat and slept in bad rooms until the newspapers sent word of the U.S.S. Arizona. I went to enlist, but they refused, said I was more important loading train cars. So maybe running away saved me from the heroics that might have finally set things right.

I never answered your letters, and that was out of spite. Mother sent them along in bundles with the grace not to ask why I hadn't at least sent a card with the boarding house address. She knew what running meant and didn't want me home unless I could mean it. She thought I would resent you both for the

mistakes and the past. Most days she's right. She never told me that you disappeared and left a baby girl behind for her to raise, until the war was over and I could justify leaving the elevator to head home.

After I drove north into Washington that first winter I was back, I sold the Plymouth. I had gone up there to check a few bad addresses, but your trail washed thin, and the people you once knew there all thought you had found God. They seemed to notice your smiles, but told me those kinds of things, I think, because I showed them a picture of the baby, told them you'd been hurt, that you might not have known that you were a new mother or that you were from California.

It's spring again, and I'm back, closing the hasp on this shed door, driving a nail through it and into the weathered jamb. I hope this is the right thing.

Lily managed two steps alone while I was up north. Now she's all over the place now and into everything. Soon the hills and the fences and the scrub oak will become her everything, just like it was when the rain washed us clean. She doesn't have your eyes. It does not bother me to say that. I don't care how the world has changed. Salk and the bomb and the Red Menace—there's always something for people to fawn over while they're ignoring their lives.

I have come alone finally, and now I lay my head against the damp wood, breathing until I have reassembled you for a moment. And for a moment, I have a kind of kingdom here.

Fields at Evening

Before I leave the fields tonight, I will pause and the horizon disappear into the gloaming, a word my grandfather used to make the night sound exotic. "Irishmen love language," he would tell us. "This darkening of the sky is what they call the *gloaming*."

The word seems like a tool that only fits Idaho colors, but I know that's wrong. I am an old man and have not found a better word for the way evening fades around here.

My wife's voice echoes out in these rows of rye. The years since she passed have been too lean for a good reckoning, but I have tried to keep the house organized and uncluttered. It is good that I am out of here at dawn and home at dusk. My sons worry that I will work myself to death. I tell them that I hope it goes that good for me. Their mother died in town. I suppose they want that for me. I sell out, get an apartment, drink cheap bourbon, and yell at the church ladies until they slam the door and waddle back to the bishop, cacking about perdition. So much for "go West young man." We're no better now than the Bannocks, except we've got nobody to blame.

I'm turning into a sorry son of a bitch, sorrier, I guess, because I didn't see it until I was too worn out to do anything about it.

First snow came early this year, before Halloween. An elk cow has been picking around the edge of the field all day, ducking in and out of the pines. I've been watching her all through the spring melt. The space between each tree out there is like some old Indian woman sitting alone on a church pew. If this is to be my last spring, all the better. I hope I can make it to winter. Then I'll pick a clear

night and walk to the edge of that rise.

They say freezing's a pretty easy way to go.

Vita

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