THE SCHOOL AND OTHER FICTIONS

by

KRISTEN ISKANDRIAN

(Under the Direction of Reginald McKnight)

ABSTRACT

The introduction, “Handbook for Administrators,” is a critical study of the underpinnings of *The School and Other Fictions*. It examines the project’s point of fixity, the school, through the lenses of urban modernity and narrative theory, and discusses its relevance as both a generative icon and an organizational strategy for the collection as a whole. Scaffolded by literary influences, theoretical claims, and personal anecdote, the essay explores the form of the short story as one that is in flux, and that aptly mirrors the flux of postmodernity.

*The School and Other Fictions* is a collection within a collection: a cycle of inter-related flash fictions (*The School*) embedded between short stories (*Other Fictions*), which echo each other in voice and image. The entire work employs a first-person narrator who navigates the school and the various landscapes of the *Other Fictions*, striving to make meaning out of instruction and instruction out of despair. All of these stories in some way grapple with the anxiety and exuberance of belonging: in the classroom, in relationships, and lastly, on the page.

INDEX WORDS: school, short story, flash fiction, story cycles, flâneur, postmodernism, Lydia Davis, janitor, first-person narrator, textbook, collecting, post-structuralism, arcade
THE SCHOOL AND OTHER FICTIONS

by

KRISTEN ISKANDRIAN
B.A., College of the Holy Cross, 1999
M.A., The University of Georgia, 2003

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

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2009
THE SCHOOL AND OTHER FICTIONS

by

KRISTEN ISKANDRIAN

Major Professor: Reginald McKnight
Committee: Jed Rasula
            Aidan Wasley

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
August 2009
DEDICATION

for Brian and Beatrice
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work would not have been possible without the instruction and support of Reginald McKnight, Jed Rasula, Aidan Wasley, Sabrina Orah Mark, John Dermot Woods, and Brian Connell.

My gratitude, too, to the editors of the following publications in which these stories first appeared, often in altered form:

*Action, Yes*  
“The Rationalists” (here: “The Professors”)

*Alice Blue Review*  
“Math”  
“Library”  
“Social Studies”

*Gulf Coast: A Journal of Literature & Fine Arts*  
“The Burial” (here: “A Burial”)

*La Petite Zine*  
“Dress”  
“Janitor”  
“Gym”  
“Phonics”  
“Hall”  
“Music”  
“Cafeteria”  
“Janitor Closet”  
“Science”  
“Lunch”  
“Beating”

*Memorious*  
“Nadja by André Breton”

*Denver Quarterly*  
“I Am Happiest Alone, Thinking About Happiness”
# Table of Contents

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS** ................................................................................................... v

**HANDBOOK FOR ADMINISTRATORS** ........................................................................... 1

  - MISSION STATEMENT .......................................................................................... 2
  - HISTORY ........................................................................................................... 4
  - ADMISSIONS ....................................................................................................... 6
  - ATTENDANCE/ABSENCE .................................................................................... 9
  - ACADEMICS ....................................................................................................... 11
  - DISCIPLINE ....................................................................................................... 16
  - SCHOOL GROUNDS ....................................................................................... 23
  - THE SCHOOL BOARD .................................................................................... 30

**THE SCHOOL AND OTHER FICTIONS** .......................................................................... 34

**OVERVIEW** ....................................................................................................... 36

**MAMMALS** ....................................................................................................... 40

  - JANITOR .......................................................................................................... 41
  - Old School ...................................................................................................... 42
  - DRESS ............................................................................................................. 56
  - COAT ROOM ................................................................................................... 57
  - PHONICS ......................................................................................................... 59
  - Friendship, A Semiotics .................................................................................. 61
HALL ................................................................................................................................. 67
PENCIL SHARPENER ........................................................................................................ 68
WATER FOUNTAIN ........................................................................................................... 69
ART ...................................................................................................................................... 70

NOUNS AND VERBS .......................................................................................................... 72
The Inheritors .................................................................................................................... 73
FIRE DRILL/CONTRABAND ............................................................................................. 91
CAFETERIA ........................................................................................................................ 92
SUSTAINED SILENT READING ......................................................................................... 93
Nadja by André Breton .................................................................................................... 95
AND SOMETIMES Y ......................................................................................................... 101
LIBRARY ............................................................................................................................ 102
LUNCH ............................................................................................................................... 104
To An Ex-Lover, Now Minorly Famous ........................................................................... 106
LANGUAGE ARTS ................................................................................................................ 109

STATE CAPITALS ............................................................................................................. 110
MUSIC ................................................................................................................................. 111
The City ............................................................................................................................... 113
SOCIAL STUDIES ............................................................................................................... 119
JANITOR CLOSET, LAVATORY ....................................................................................... 121
MNEMONIC DEVICE ......................................................................................................... 122
A Burial ............................................................................................................................... 123
CURSIVE, SPELLING ......................................................................................................... 131
HANDBOOK FOR ADMINISTRATORS:

A Guide to THE SCHOOL AND OTHER FICTIONS
MISSION STATEMENT

_The School and Other Fictions_ is, in many ways, a reification, a composite of everything I have ever storied, a key to the narrative map that I have been drawing for many years. It is an architecture, artifice and artifact. It is both sides of a transaction, and also the tender I have used to barter with the claims of memory and invention. Semantically, because of the “other,” the title reflects the mythical nature of the school, its fate as a fiction, as, perhaps, the mother of all fictions. I have been in it for over twenty-four years, and I doubt very much that I will ever be out of it completely. In this sense, although “complete,” this collection represents a cross-section of a boundless work, a work that I hope remains triumphantly unresolvable and unfinishable, a work exemplifying the Borgesian principle, that the only way to get out of the labyrinth, is to go further in.

As I see it, _The School and Other Fictions_ is a continuous narrative that keeps getting interrupted—or, if you like, keeps interrupting itself. Its central narrative edifice is, describes, performs the school—broken, as it is, into small parts and pieces—and longer, satellite stories build corridors between the classrooms. The _Other Fictions_-component of this project refers to autonomous works of short fiction that are linked to one another and to _The School_ by first-person narration—the shape-shifting _I_ is the protagonist of the entire work—and by the implications of this similarity. Certain images, attitudes, and objects surface and resurface, not only in the fictions that comprise _The School_, as one might expect, but in the other stories as well. What this looks like on paper is works of flash fiction alternating with short stories. Each section of _The School_ is named for the thing that the narrator attempts to describe, translate, overcome—“Math,”
“Coat Room,” “Janitor,” to name a few examples. Buttressing or buttressed by the school/The School structurally, the Other Fictions are also tethered to it by image or object or attitude (the latter generally being some form of bafflement), or what we casually may call “theme.” The school gives rise to these stories, and in turn, these stories bear imprints of the school, vestiges of its straight rows and cafeterias, its fixations and fabrications and humiliations. Each constituent is a “negative mirror,” in Calvino’s terms, for the other (Invisible Cities 29).

Without The School as a narrative thoroughfare, the assemblage of short stories risks arbitrariness, hazards the possibility of becoming a writing “portfolio” conjoined only by the somewhat myopic and fickle tenets of “style.” As connective tissue, The School offers the disparate works more correlativity. Stratified thusly, the whole of the work reaches for a more dynamic, expansive arc, with each individual part buckling against the compression and constraint of its form.
Fittingly, *The School and Other Fictions* took root in a classroom, during Jed Rasula’s seminar on urban modernism. As stated, this work initially arose as an inquiry into school—as place, time, object, metaphor, assemblage—and expanded considerably as I came to recognize in the indexical quality of the task, per our reading of Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project*, an apt organizational strategy, a channel through which to tell stories. Within the school, I discovered, I could stow and tussle with many of my other interests, including the problem of memory, narrative theory, the short story, modern and postmodern poetics of fiction—and in this vein, the work could become a culminating effort: an actual book.

The more I mined the school, the more it became, in myriad ways, an avatar of the binary, or more precisely, the dialectic—which wraps around my aesthetic consciousness like a mighty double helix. Though perfunctory, quotidian, accessible, the school stays partially mysterious: certain rooms not to be entered, certain things not to be touched; reasoning and explanation zealously withheld for the sake of order and decorum. We may know our own houses inside and out, but school—where we spend, often, more than half of our waking days—remains somewhat out of reach; formidable, even. It is a place of exile and a place from which to be exiled, a place of learning and of deep forgetting. Perhaps it is because I have spent most of my life as a student; perhaps because my earliest curiosities were shaped and misshaped by it; perhaps because I always felt myself both very much inside and very much outside of it—the school sits, in my imagination, suffocatingly asprawl. So, in a sense, writing these entries became a way
to poke some breathing holes into my sensitivities; to install, as it were, a vent through which unsteady selves—younger, student, cast-off selves—and the narrator self—ubiquitous and omniscient, but quite belatedly so—respire. Definitely perspire. Maybe expire. I am going back to the first learning, the primordial hand-raising, the essential apprenticeship—now armed with the rest of my life.
This work features an I who goes to school and feels around its contours and language, like a blind person reading. Nothing is quite familiar. This I has no concept of a school’s schoolness, so everything is quite new, and I is a translator. With I, we vacillate between the before, written from the perspective of the after, and the after, written from the perspective of the before, and this slippage, I assure you, and I maintains, is deliberate. It is improbable that I could exist without the school. I has no bedroom, no mother, no father, no bicycle, no signed permission slip. I is not an orphan, not some ill-clothed, malnourished wraith who haunts the hallways like an allegory. Rather, I is, in Walter Benjamin’s terms, both the school’s “aura” and its “trace” (Arcades 447). As we approach this work, we must concede that certain people are simply born into places they cannot leave because without them, such places evaporate. Such places never were.

At the other end of the invisible thread to which the I clings is the janitor, Mr. Buddy—the only character, incidentally, with a name. The janitor, in some ways, is the sandwichman of the school; for his intimate knowledge of its every brick and tile, its acoustics, its water valves and pipes and switchboards, the janitor is the apotheosis of the narrator I. He wears the school on his clothing, under his fingernails, and he is, to most, little more than a phantom or a fixture. But to the I, he is a touchstone. Both of them deal in the uncanny and the semiotic—what things mean is more important than what things are. The locked door is a refusal; the clanging bell, a liberator. Each watches the other comb the building, discern its secrets, and accept—sometimes willingly, sometimes hesitantly—that every inch of it echoes with consequence and often, heartbreak. The
School is the setting, but also largely the plot, the characters, and the conflict. All of the things in it eventually cede to its presence, bend to its will, or else find themselves adrift—and it is really this adriftness, this *bewilderness*, that forges the narrator, the *I* who sees but who has also already seen, who learns but who has also already learned, who tries but who has also already quit. If I had to hazard a guess, I would say that our *I* shares a lineage with the “I” of Sartre, of Beckett—alienated, liminal, oppressed by the proliferation of choices that bubble within the confines of an ostensibly choiceless place—vigorously bearing out Molloy’s dictum that “saying is inventing” (32).¹

A kind of impishness palpitates at the heart of *The School and Other Fictions*. Structurally, the work is two things at once: a story cycle, and a collection of short stories—one embedded into the other. The spaces that the narrator occupies are small, often chokingly so. The stories of *The School* demonstrate this unambiguously by honing in on its rooms and hidden enclaves, and also by appearing compactly on the page. The *Other Fictions*, too—even the lengthier ones—refuse to extend too far or include too much in terms of scope and setting. The result is an obsessive interiority, embodied by our narrator, whose psychic boundaries stretch wider and farther the more the walls close in. Only when cut off at every pass is the *I* able to be, able to see, and the seeing is always associative, poetic as opposed scientific, as Calvino suggests: “The eye does not see things but images of things that mean other things” (*Invisible Cities* 13). When *I* wanders into a longer story, we share, for a moment, the panicked exhilaration of having escaped the school. But the consignment shop, the duplex, the petrified city, the broken-down school, and all of the various sites of troubled domesticity serve to bring *I* back to the

¹ Molloy continues: “Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart and long forgotten, life without tears, as it is wept” (32). Our *I* stammers and weeps in agreement.
profound immuration of what it means to be human, of longing and belonging. And so, relieved, and ever-cautious, I returns to the task of excavating—out of the unlikeliest places—hope, and love.

In the beginning, the repetitive use of the first-person in the longer stories that I was writing felt like a liability. Writing workshops had impressed upon me the “value” of trying new things, assuming new voices, creating new characters. Workshops had also emphasized the primacy of plot, a topic that will be examined in greater depth below. I struggled to create variety, to incite drama. But my stories kept snapping back like rubber bands, to first person, and to small and delicate terrains that begged for an I, and that I begged to decipher. When the bell rang, and the doors of The School open, this I needs a place to go. The doors open unto these other fictions, and I enters them readily, finding them to be suitable accommodations for the time being, for the times between being schooled.

And thus, a collection was deliberately, fervently undertaken; a collector was born. The collecting was the momentum, the meaning, the goal.
ATTENDANCE/ABSENCE

While the school is my madeline, my *Speak, Memory*, my everyplace, *I* is not me. The first person narration used throughout creates a mutable, multifarious *I* who, from its place in and around the classroom, is granted access to other hovels, other lives, other modes of seeing and being and telling. But once in any of those elsewheres, it is only a matter of time before *I* gets returned to the School like an errant pet to its owner, like something leashed. The *Is* of the longer stories thus become prismatic projections of the *I* of The School. It is a bifurcated, permeable narrator, transmitting and receiving across (and in spite of) linear boundaries of time and space; porous in what it knows, what it senses, and what it does not know, so that virtually everything is suspect, apocryphal. The narrator skulks between neutral description and pained contemplation, inhabiting, again, a double or multiple self. Time, here, is used and abused. When I write other kinds of stories (such as the *Other Fictions* found here), I find the handling of time to be quite onerous. But in the world of *The School*, time must be flattened out completely. Within the simple past tense there is the potential for an every-tense, a simultaneity that accounts for the way the narrator knows things that the narrator cannot possibly know. I try to refrain from speaking of muses, but my narrator, *mon petit flâneur*, is the closest I have come to writing to, through, and for. *I* zig-zags between defamiliarization and refamiliarization. From Baudelaire: “To be away from home and yet to feel at home anywhere; to see the world, to be at the very centre of the world, and yet to be unseen of the world […] The observer is a prince enjoying his incognito wherever he goes” (399-400). The *I* shares this ability to see and be unseen, this vision-cum-invisibility, and, like
the flâneur that Walter Benjamin describes, tries to render readable the peculiar world to which it belongs.

The alternation of microstory and short story, the gear-shifting that this entails, is, to me, an integral part of the manuscript. The experience of reading these pieces, so to speak, is as important to me as any content and substance encountered therein—the writing is only half of the necessary bricolage. I want the reader to attend the work, to co-author it, to make from the shards an ode-worthy urn. I want, in some ways, to disappear—so that the I and the reader and myself can merge into one willing transmitter. Written, the work is still far from complete. The consummation is in the reading, the entering in, the yielding of text to reader and reader to text.
In his *S/Z: An Essay*, Roland Barthes discusses the distinction between the “writerly” and the “readerly” (4) text, exposing the reader of the latter as a nomad whose home, ultimately, is at once nowhere and everywhere—not, as it may seem, in some final acquisition of “meaning,” not in the characters as they orbit around one another, not in the deciphering of “symbol”—but rather, in the interstices between word and meaning, and between the five commingled “off-stage” voices. For Barthes, *Sarrasine* is the par exemple of every story unified into a single structure, and his vivisection of it reveals the reader as producer, not consumer, of the text. The ideal reader, according to Barthes, must discover her duty and ability to enact, create, perform, and make of the text inert a text alert, one that stands at attention in the full brilliance of its plurality. Acrobatically, exhaustively, Barthes argues against reductive reading, insisting that any time a text is read *for* something, it has been doomed—blighted by singleness, by the oppression of rote analysis. Barthes’s objective is not to shape the text into a coherent parcel of meaning, but rather to expand it to such a dizzying degree that it bursts into a gloriously infinite babble, an every-narrative, an Ur-story.

I had a hard time escaping the structuralists and post-structuralists as I wrote *The School and Other Fictions*, which seemed to want to become my own version of Barthes’s treatment of *Sarrasine*, the kind of work that could contain everything (or at least, *my* everything), and that could withstand rigorous unpacking—a great textual

---

2 Barthes defines these as cultural codes, hermeneutics, empirics, symbols, and semes—the unwritten languages that shape and distress the text as it appears on the page (18-21).
Matryoshka doll. José Ortega y Gasset, in his “Notes on the Novel,” compares the novel to “a vast but finite quarry,” emphasizing that form is the compensation for an increasing scarcity of “material” (McKeon 294-295). Although we are not discussing a novel per se, and although I might argue against finitude, and rather for the idea that material is in the eye of the beholder, and as such inexhaustible, I find the image of a quarry—a hollow to be mined—very appropriate here. I am not sure what came first, the container or the contents, but I see these stories that follow, in the words of Donald Barthelme, as “both a response to constraint and a seizing of opportunity” (Not-Knowing 22). These words, juxtaposed—constraint and seizing—nicely illustrate the dialectical nature of my aesthetic, invoking for me something akin to Newton’s third law, that every poetic action has its equal and opposite reaction. To maximize and minimize, in the same instant. To subvert, overwhelm, while trying to quiet and restore order. To leave and to stay, with the result of being no place, having no place—except the page, which is its own kind of no place. Alongside my will to upend, my wish for an everlasting openness and a vulnerability verging on Blanchot’s principle, vis-à-vis Mallarmé, of “Igitur,” exists a very real need for tidiness, for resolution and control. Isn’t this, after all, the doctrine of most schools, most varieties of instruction? To stay within the lines, to follow the rules—even as late as graduate school, a school we enter freely, this is the expectation; even when the lines become more fluid and bendable and the rules fancier, less rule-seeming:

---

3 One of the Other Fictions, entitled “Old School,” deals rather explicitly with the anxiety of telling—the narrator wishes to write “the consummate story, that would contain all the other stories”; the universe, to paraphrase Blake, in a single grain of sand. An impossibility, of course—but there is perhaps something to be said for the trial of trying. It is the sister-instinct, I think, of the one that yearns to capture things “as they are”—a desire that prevails despite the implausibility of success, despite the tyranny of language.

4 Are motifs born or made or both? It is probably not mere coincidence that several of my stories co-opt the lexicon and imageries of geology.

5 From Blanchot’s The Space of Literature: “Igitur is an undertaking in which poetry itself is at stake […] an attempt to make the work possible by grasping it at the point where what is present is the absence of all power, impotence” (108).
we students cannot get enough. We thrive off of being hemmed in, perhaps for how it spurs us to unfurl, break out. Creating this collection has been, in one way, a bonfire of the hardest-won lessons, whose ashes stick in my throat still. I feel myself on both sides of the classroom and the page, engaging in some version of Jed Rasula’s notion of “wreading, or how poetics exceeds its poetry” (163), while also wanting to write a good, difficult story, one whose reading would require a pleasurable exertion. Peter Brooks, in his Reading for the Plot, writes about Barthes’s concept of “déjà-lu”: “The reader is in this view himself virtually a text, a composite of all that he has read, or heard read, or imagined as written” (19). This assertion as it is certainly resonates here. But I can’t help but want to replace “text” with “school.”

Brooks’s defense of plot hinges on movement, on impetus. For him, plot emerges as the embodiment and unfolding of the text’s desire, while our reading of the text simulates the fulfillment (or thwarting) of desire. If the plot is a hastening toward the finish line, and the finish line is the “victory” of the plot—then, Brooks claims, plot becomes a “dilatory space” both of reconciliation and tension, blindness and recognition (18-19). The primary role of the reader is that of detextive, so to speak—to seek and find clues in structure and language, to anticipate the textual double logic, that as the text is, so the text does. Terrence Doody contends that meaning is created not through the what of the story, but through the how of its narration, and that both the instability of language and the unreliability of humanity (in the form of the story’s readers as well as its characters) parallel the volatility of the novel. How we read depends on what we read: the novel tells us how to read it; the instructions are encoded in its every aspect. I wanted this

---

6 Donald Barthelme writes: “Art is not difficult because it wishes to be difficult, but because it wishes to be art” (Not-Knowing 15).
work to emulate, in some ways, the spirit of the school itself, and as such, I used as a basic model (more from memory than mimicry, although the “Overview” is adapted from a 1919 spelling primer) the elementary school textbook. Hence: this rather cheekily arranged introduction, the aforementioned Overview, the grouping of stories into some basic watersheds of learning, and, occupying the final slot at the end, the glossary—which I hope will read as its own kind of story, à la Gertrude Stein’s _Tender Buttons_ or Ben Marcus’s _The Age of Wire and String_. Postmodern fiction in all of its permutations confronts head-on the impossibility of telling and arriving; it relies upon strategies rather than structures; fluidity rather than finitude. Joseph Frank calls this the “at-once” experience of perceiving a whole within a fragment (as in Proust) as well as a whole comprised of fragments—a fine description, too, for a story cycle within a fiction collection (McKeon 793).

Having said all of this, I believe it would be textual suicide to try to purposefully imbue one’s work with some kind of imagined readerly response. But, as Walter Benjamin writes in _The Storyteller_: “…traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel” (_Illuminations_ 92). Indeed, these traces, these fingerprints, these tiny fissures where the story leaks out and the world seeps in, these moments when we take note of the vessel as well as what pours from it—these are as much a part of the story as the story itself. The reality of “life,” the storyness of story, alchemized by the telling, by the page, and vice versa—I have tried, but I have not been able to elude the preponderance of form, the slipperiness of language. And within the tenets of narratology, I have glimpsed repeatedly the silhouette of my narrator, as s/he

---

7 “Realism” after Bakhtin is a difficult pill to swallow. Through the smudged, tinted, jagged lens of polyglossia, “the real” is in itself a construction, a myth, a unicorn.
“reads” The School, and the various dwelling places surrounding it. The sections of The
School are arranged to loosely resemble a school day, and the other stories inserted at
intervals are detours, or stumbling blocks. Plot, here, has been supplanted by plodding,
the narrator’s flummoxed stumble toward dusk, toward the end.
DISCIPLINE

The pervasive tendency to create or borrow metaphor in order to discuss craft, praxis, or poetics, is owed to the inherent “meta” nature of the enterprise: we need language, after all, to discuss language. And since language always palls in the face of what we really want to say, we root through the attic for the trunk of costumes that enables us to perform, masquerade-like, the belief systems underlying our best efforts at it. To the tradition of writing about writing, I submit my own model: the flâneur, and the habitat of the flâneur—the city.

Baudelaire’s modernity, of which the flâneur was both outgrowth and icon, referred less to a historical era and more to the almost seismic experience of disruption marked by the disintegration of standardized semantics—that is, as Mary Gluck suggests, individuals were no longer able to rely on established patterns and codes of interpretation. Meaning and significance became relative, mutable terms, and contemporary life became subjected to “infinite nuances” (Gluck 749). The flâneur represented, both for Baudelaire and for Benjamin, a way of navigating and comprehending the dialectical extremities of modernity. Haussmann’s Paris did much to eradicate the milieu of the flâneur, and by the early twentieth century, he was but a mythic memory. So what possible currency can he have now, in the vanguard of the millenial age, in a time so technologized that “modernity” itself has become a quaint notion? And where might the flâneur stand (walk?) in relation to the all but stationary exertion of writing?

For Baudelaire, the flâneur was one through whom the world was siphoned. For Benjamin, the flâneur was a walking equator, separating dream culture from commodity
culture with every step. The writer-flâneur aims for Baudelaire’s vision, and is acutely aware of Benjamin’s. She perceives a difference between the language of the marketplace, and the language of art, and she will exploit each vernacular as befits the work. Blanchot avers that “to write is to let fascination rule language” (33). This is the cornerstone of the quintessential writerly binary, the perpetual zig-zag between defamiliarization and refamiliarization. The word exists in the lexicon, in the mind, in the mouth, in the heart, and on the page—and once there, it enters the consciousness of the reader, the first of whom is the writer herself, and the extrapolating process begins anew. The word is not only duplicitous but multivalent; it changes with each utterance and encounter. As the flâneur was a hinge between worlds, so too is the writer/reader. Language and the labyrinth of the city are not so very different.

And happily so, for my current purposes. The infrastructure of this metaphor is also a rotating axis, such that the meta can be pivoted into the fore. Writing and reading, true, are a joint kind of figurative flânerie, but as a writer, I also find walking—literally—to be eminently useful, an instrumental part of my praxis. My feet may log more miles than my fingers do text, but the two are inextricable. The walking that presupposes and accompanies my writing is not purposeful; it is, at its best, the kinetic equivalent of idleness, a pacing or wandering that syncopates the mental peregrination. This idea, what was for the Romans solvitur ambulando—it is solved by walking—applies to certain works that have informed not only my craft, but also my attempt at a hermeneutics of language. The text cannot escape its textuality, its confines of time and space, and it cannot be absorbed in a glance, wholesale, as if by osmosis. The text is traveled, walked, paced; its sweep is trodden; and its spatiality, while finite, hemmed in by the page, is
latently transcendable. The flâneur may walk thirty blocks, but we say he walks the city. For the writer, every word is a chorus; every story becomes as many stories as it has readers. To once again invoke Baudelaire: “He began by looking at life, and only later did he contrive to learn how to express life” (406).

Paul Auster’s City of Glass rigorously demonstrates the multiplicity and breakability of language. The title alludes to the locus of the novel, New York City; it hints at the transparency of the conflict—Quinn, mystery writer (pen name: William Wilson), becomes embroiled in a plot he could have written, is overtaken by “the story itself” (3); and finally, the text itself becomes a city aglint with language that has ceased to obey, shards that have broken away from their meanings, from the slab of mirror where reflections could be trusted, taken for granted. Stillman (his very name a lie, since he spends most of his time walking) wants to invent a new language, since “our words no longer correspond to the world” (92). He asks, “What happens when a thing no longer performs its function? Is it still a thing, or has it become something else? When you rip the cloth off the umbrella, is the umbrella still an umbrella?” (93). Like Stillman, we are carried across the map of the cityscape, the storyscape, and we are confronted with the possibility that the words we carried with us from the outside have ceased to work. Like the flâneur, we are in a self-imposed exile; we are removed. This impasse, again, represents the difference between commodified language and what we will loosely call “poetic” language—the “dream,” in Benjamin’s terms. The writer, like Stillman, is shouldered with the responsibility of invention—not just of dizzying plot twists that can be summarized on the back of a hardcover, of memorable characters whose wizened faces or comical stutters remind us of so-and-so, of dialogue that “snaps” or food real
enough to be eaten off the page—but of language that can expand and contract to fill its form, its city.

The enactment of narrative—the collaboration between reader and writer and text—is largely what, I think, is meant by form. In the introduction to the collection of Edmond Jabès’s work, Richard Stamelman describes Jabèsian reading as its own kind of writing; the hole created by the “physical,” “violent” act of reading is the space of the text, passivity made passage, the “activating of an errant language” (ix; xvi). As writers, we find that we are never able to say the thing; the thing absconds and leaves only its residue, inky dregs that we use to build wholes, knowing, painfully, that we will only ever achieve splinters. It is in the transaction of reading, however, that these fragments have a renewed hope of wholeness. The flânerie of both writer and reader makes us experience the text “as space and as movement rather than as meaning” (xvi). In my most treasured writing moments, after I have paced enough for the gait to get inside, I know what this means; I can somehow transfer onto the static page the movement that I have internalized, setting it, too, in motion. These are the times when meaning becomes movement; when a story’s pace is literalized, performed; when word follows word and sentence follows sentence as readily and as meaninglessly as footsteps down an empty corridor.

These are few and far between moments.

So, barring these rare instances of fluidity, what is the “work” of writing? Can it be likened to the “work” of the flâneur, or are they only linked by their inherent discursiveness? I posit that the first and fundamental and ongoing work of the writer, one

---

8 That is, the words seem guided by their own momentum, rather than by any kind of overarching theme, logic, or sense with which I’ve attempted to yoke them. (It is this compulsion to harness, I’ve found, that frequently halts the Jabèsian movement mid-stride.)
that she shares with the flâneur, is *openness*—a misleadingly easy undertaking. An “open” approach to language means never using language as a means to an end. Rather, we use it as a means to a means, or, even better, we let it use us, find utterance through us; we humble ourselves enough to become conduit and courier. The use-value of language is the currency of the hawkers and the merchants—“five dollars” refers to five-hundred pennies refers to one shiny toy gun. Instead, the language for which we struggle enables us to be removed, and once removed, we feel dizzy, disoriented, unable to presume.

Whatever character or conflict or setting I might create, in the end, I am always, in some way or another, writing about language. It is, for me, the only muse. I like the telling more than the told. The hedging more than the bold. When I write, I aspire to the line, to the image; I want to use every resource of my imagination to change things-taken-for-granted into things-never-before-seen. In this regard, writing fiction is quite like a purification ritual, a cleansing from cliché and disingenuousness. The writing about writing of devout fictioneers like Virginia Woolf and Henry James, writing which, along with their novels, I much admire, admits and explores the hopelessness of consigning to fiction any other “obligation”: James renounces the “platitude of statement” (*The Art of the Novel* xi); Woolf flings “the proper stuff of fiction” out the window and impugns only “falsity and pretence” (McKeon 744). I cannot hope to qualify those terms. I agree fully with Calvino’s belief that “writing prose should not be any different from writing poetry…in both cases it is a question of looking for the unique expression, one that is concise, concentrated, memorable” (49). He writes this in the “Quickness” chapter of his *Six Memos for the Millenium*, the whole of which has been enormously edifying. He does
not sacrifice bewilderment for lucidity. And when I don’t feel bewildered, I don’t write well, or at all.

I have, in the course of my study of creative writing, pored over and absorbed a certain number of well-meaning, craft-oriented texts. I furrow my brow at any attempt to make the whys and wherefores of writing more accessible, “easier.” Methodology, to be frank, gladdens me little. The language of “art,” if I may be broad and borrow a bit from Woolf’s distinction between “art” and “self-expression,” is intrinsically unmanageable. If we wrestle a poem into submission; beat it with a hose as in Billy Collins’s “Introduction to Poetry”; pin it, like Prufrock, wriggling to the wall—we will have demobilized it, made it a point of fixity, a ware for the street vendors rather than the everywhere of the flâneur. If anything, I want to make the endeavor of language more, not less, unwieldy. Flâneur-like, I follow it to its nethermost reaches, and back again. Here, with this collection, I wish to amplify the static of absurdity within the coherent moment. To free the taxidermied unseemlies, catharses, and oddities from their curio cabinets and to narrativize them, resuscitate them with story, set them teeming and scheming once more. The territories that I am interested in uphold the promise of post-modernity, that the world is and ever shall be in flux, advancing and decaying in the same moment. I may strive to decipher them or neaten them or set them to music, but I do so knowing all the while the vanity and futility of my attempts. The result may be bleak, but it will be, I hope, symphonically, vibrantly so. I am inclined toward the short story for how it seems to scratch against its own walls—begging, it would seem, to get out. And the clamor created by this effort, this tension, is the sound of our petitions for resolution being
denied: “…tear a mystery to tatters,” writes Barthelme, “and you have tatters, not mystery” (Not-Knowing 19).
Countless inquisitions of the short story reveal it to be a vexing form. Its essence, its identifying feature—brevity—is also its albatross, either wrapped around the story’s neck or in full swoop, deftly plucking the story from the impending crash of the taxonomic tidal wave. There is no final diagram, no property lines. Like its kinsman, the novel, the short story resists, and bears/bares its own deception sullenly or exuberantly. The shortness of the short story may make it discernible, but it does not make it manageable. We are lured in by its seeming smallness, its “ability to be read in a single sitting,” and then stifled by its restrictiveness, or perturbed by its openness, or disgruntled by its unfinishedness. And so we need words to add to the precious few we’re given, words to help us cope with our enchantment and frustration over having been offered so little and left with so much. Borges dealt with the problem of story through story, taking as his starting point the impugnability of invention. The rest of us find ourselves theorizing, like John Barth does in his 1967 essay “The Literature of Exhaustion”: “It’s easier and sociabler to talk technique than it is to make art” (65). What do we talk about when we talk about the short story, its place in the literary consciousness, the implications of its form, the rhetoric of its restraint?

Poe’s delineation of the short story’s “singularity of effect,” which became an inalienable, if nebulous, “standard” to which his successors would be held, emerged in the late last century as a noose to be slipped, a pentameter whose back was broken by practitioners as diverse as Stephen Dixon, Lorrie Moore, and Ben Marcus (among many others), who instead seem to aim for diversity of effect, a certain kaleidoscopy. Again we
face, as we are bound to, the slippery, wily nature of the form. Most stories undertake the same challenge, but it is a multivalent one: capturing reality in a “glimpse,” to invoke Borges. “Realism,” therefore, cannot be a delimiting concept. Sherwood Anderson lampooned plot as the ultimate device of the antireal, the consummate artifice. And yet there remains an insistence on plot as the fundamental unit of the story, the arbiter of its success. Plot is the testing ground where words become story, where we do or do not “relate,” where the car filled with an innocently squabbling family, as in Flannery O’Connor’s “A Good Man is Hard to Find,” veers off the road and into the realm of the Misfit, in the same way that the story itself veers into the paradigm of action-climax-denouement. Consider as an antithesis Lydia Davis’s “Our Trip”—the car trip is uneventful, save for a minor incident involving Wet Ones, and the language is wry, seemingly as tired of itself as the three people in the car are tired of one another: “Things went on pretty much like that” (Samuel Johnson 10). The former offers chaos in order to organize and redeem it; the latter offers tedium in order to organize and redeem it. In the end, no abundance or dearth of plot can make either story three-dimensional. Realism is itself, necessarily, a fiction. One could very well argue that the short story strives less for a “singular effect” and more for a collaged totality, a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. This is perhaps the most beguiling feature of the short story, one that, again, distinguishes it from the novel (more so than the mere issue of length): the novel creates a world, whereas the short story suggests one. And it is the intimation of this world that we then try to inhabit. The world of the short story grants us safe, swift access to dangerous places or shows us the incipient danger of our safe hovels. The fantastic, grotesque, or supernatural elements may make a story less empirically or materially “real,” but the
metaphysical space of the story—how it asks us to approach it, how it inveigles us to stay—seems eerily close to the way we encounter and handle the unfamiliar or the strange.

The story cycle, as in Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio*, squarely shifts the “what” of the story to the “how.” Each story operates dually—as its own specimen, complete; and as an appendage of a larger body. The narration is an unraveling and a probing into the lives of unremarkable people in an unremarkable place that, by virtue of being narrated, glint with the bizarre. Each story in *Winesburg* revels in its smallness; the attention paid to the most mundane detail elevates its importance and hyper-attunes us, the readers, to “real life” at its most familiar and provincial—which, paradoxically, recasts it as exotic. Consider the “extraordinarily large” knuckles of Doctor Reefy, the window in his empty office that he never opened: “Once on a hot day in August he tried but found it stuck fast and after that he forgot all about it” (35). The pared-down, almost listless language parallels the stultified characters, stuck like the window, but it is in Anderson’s assemblage that these characters have their being in an altogether new way. Their reality is protracted and intertwined—Anderson maintains the formal integrity of the short story but extends its moment to create something akin to a scrapbook, a collection of artifacts. One has the sense that these stories do not exist until the moment they are read, and that although they are bound by the tightness of their form, they seem to stretch endlessly. This is the effect and reverberation of negative space, the crucial annex of modernity (and postmodernity) where a story’s notes sound long after its chords have been played. It is the origin for writers such as Grace Paley, Raymond Carver, and
Donald Barthelme, all of whom, in varying ways, use elision to establish milieus that seem to teeter on the edge of disappearance or collapse.

The redaction impinges on the realm, the force-field of the “anti-story” heightens the drama of the story’s frequently quotidian events. The physical frame of the story, its spatial restriction, becomes a very “real” problem with which its innards—the elements of setting, character, plot, and conflict—must contend. Both the form and the fact of the short story—particularly the overtly minimalist short story—indicate the same thing, and so it becomes paradigmatic of itself. In Barthelme’s very Beckettian “Nothing: A Preliminary Account,” the story of “nothing” exists quite literally because of everything it isn’t: “It’s not an ‘O’ or an asterisk or what Richard is thinking or that thing we can’t name at the moment but which we use to clip papers together” (Sixty Stories 240). And in his more narrative “The Balloon,” a balloon expanding over Manhattan is the story’s setting, action, conflict, and main character; it “stand[s] for a lifetime of thinking about balloons,” it is the consummate shape-shifter and placeholder, embodied by the story itself (Sixty Stories 48).

The short story, then, is the perfect antidote for too much freedom. To paraphrase Walter Benjamin, it opens up to the reader as a landscape, even as it closes around her like a room. Lydia Davis’s “Examples of Confusion” consists of fifteen sections that deal with the inadequacies of language, the impossibility of “true” articulation, the inherent faultiness of perception. In cutting the story down to the quick, Davis intensifies the space around it, so that each seems to be an aspiration of the other. She takes this notion

---

9 A longer treatment of these ideas would take into account the omission of quotation marks, a stylistic tactic occasionally deployed by writers such as Paley, Barthelme, and Dixon that seems to aim for a closer reading and thus a greater degree of absorption, less scaffolding between the reader and the written. See also my story “The Geology.”
to the extreme in pieces such as “Examples of Remember,” just two sentences long: “Remember that thou art but dust. I shall try to bear it in mind” (Samuel Johnson 28). Is this a story? Or perhaps more importantly, could this be a story? It seems to be the realization of Barthelme’s avowal—that the fragment is the lone trustworthy form—and compels us to weigh the possibility of the shard. Is it too light, too jagged? Framed as a story by the auspices of a collection, it leaves us uneasy, angry, even, so willfully does it defy any definition we’ve heretofore encountered. But it is precisely this agitation that keeps the potential of the short story, the capability of its form, thrumming. A story’s subject matter, its “realism,” is in the end, as proffered by Sherwood Anderson, always subjugated—and sublimated—by its form. The permutations that the genre has undergone over the course of the last century or so are neatly expressed—prophesied, really—again via Doctor Reefy: “Little pyramids of truth he erected and after erecting knocked them down again that he might have the truths to erect other pyramids” (35).

I would not be telling the whole truth if I did not address my physical reality over the course of the past sixteen months, a time during which much of this collection was written. First, there was my pregnancy, after which has been my daughter. As my body expanded, my relationship with my environs changed; I had to consider in advance actions like bending down, and getting up from the floor. Tight spaces required extra negotiation. Despite understanding intellectually what was happening in my body, I was deeply confounded. I had always been most comfortable in the smallest nooks and corners, as a child tucking myself into the tiniest places I could find in order to read and daydream.\(^{10}\) Suddenly, I was not only shunned from these niches, I was, well,
conspicuous. A walking announcement. A sandwichman for my own body, for the most private sector of my life, for the most intimate, most hidden act. It was an exhilarating time, being so without and so within in the same moment, and I had many complicated emotions about it. I thought of myself as a living bifurcation, like my narrator; a breathing, gestating metaphor. I am not laying any claim to pregnancy that doesn’t belong to every other woman, and I am quite certain that every woman manages this phenomenon in her own idiosyncratic fashion. But my response, here, is relevant, because it insinuated itself into this work—not just in terms of content, but more so in terms of space. My exposedness moved me to write smaller, to burrow down deep into the narrowest apertures I could find. My sprawl demanded a counterpoint, and the short-and-shorter story provided an ideal one. In this regard, pregnancy was its place, its own narrative form, a bodily setting processed through the page. From Invisible Cities: “Each city receives its form from the desert it opposes” (18).

Following the birth of my daughter, I have been made aware, once again and continuously, of so-called spatial relations. My world, and my body, have shrunk. In the first few months especially, I could count in footsteps the length and width of my days as I walked the small expanse of our one-bedroom home, starting and ending at the crib near our bed where this tiny person was learning to sleep, finding her circadian rhythm. But in the diminished scope of my everyday, everything felt bigger: the difference between, for example, a marble placed in the middle of a gymnasium floor, and a marble participating in a shoebox diorama, acting, perhaps, as a crystal ball. The marble did not change; only warmed by the heating vent that also shared the corner. With the back of the chair facing outward toward the rest of the room, I was well hidden, and could often hear family members asking about me: “Where is she? Did you see her?”—which, of course, was thrilling. As though being in that place was somehow akin to being vanished.
its circumstances did, and with them, our perception. Every aspect of my life took turns being the marble crystal ball, from my coffee cup to my walk to the mailbox. The baby remained tiny and light, and also so immense and heavy that I marveled at the strength of my arms, and my heart, too, which felt constantly on the verge of exploding and covering us both with the silt of every feeling I have ever felt. Among many other things, having the baby fundamentally changed my relationship with matter (and, yes, trite but true: with what mattered). My writing time was dream-like; I would drift between the baby and my desk, sometimes spending days on a single sentence, its every word enormous to me, capable of filling an entire book. Lydia Davis writes about the strange contraction and protraction of the space-time continuum in her story “What You Learn About the Baby”: “Now there is only one hour, and again later, on some days, one hour, and again, very late in the day, on some days, one last hour” (Varieties of Disturbance 121). And: “You are lying on the bed nursing him, but you are not holding on to him with your arms or hands and he is not holding on to you. He is connected to you by a single nipple” (119). I know this posture well. It is an apposite characterization not only of how I am tethered to my baby, but also—how I am latched to my work as a writer: tenuously, and with all of my being.
THE SCHOOL BOARD


Frank, Joseph. From *Spatial Form in Modern Literature*. McKeon 784-802.


Moretti, Franco. *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to García Márquez*.


---. “Modern Fiction.” McKeon 739-744.
THE SCHOOL AND OTHER FICTIONS

stories by

Kristen Iskandrian
While I was still in it, I had been restless. But out of it now, I was still attached to it. I had had to ruin it to get out of it, but once I was out of it I had to remain attached to it, as though what I needed was to be on the edge of it.

Lydia Davis, *The End of the Story*
OVERVIEW\textsuperscript{11}:

*The School and Other Fictions* represents an attempt to teach only the essential stories of the written literature of children and adults. These essential stories are those that are used frequently by the majority of people, and not those used occasionally by a few. It is an effort to study the narrative problem scientifically. It advocates fewer words and more drill, since psychological evidence now shows clearly that narrative comprehension results chiefly from appropriate and continuous drill. The selection of these 40 stories represents a vast amount of labor extending over a period of several years. Thousands of compositions have been examined, and use has been made of scientific studies of adults’ and children’s vocabularies. The resulting list contains not only stories which children are most likely to use in their daily written work but also stories which they will most probably use after leaving school.

The stories of every textbook need supplementation from the personal story of the individual pupil. Each child is somewhat different from every other in his personal experiences and impressions. This leads to the spontaneous use of stories not on the common list. These must be mastered if the individual’s writing and reading are to be fluent, correct, and free of folly.

\textsuperscript{11} This entire section is adapted from Henry Carr Pearson and Henry Suzzallo’s *Essentials of Spelling, Lower Grades*, American Book Company, New York: 1919, iii-xii.
For the Teacher:

(The use of this book is not confined to any single device. Some teachers may follow the plan of the book more or less rigidly, while others may use the book in a manner that will allow the pupil more initiative and judgment. The aim should always be to make it possible for pupils to acquire good methods of study. What follows are suggestions that many teachers have employed with favorable results.)

(a) While reading the stories aloud, articulate them distinctly. Pronounce every word carefully.

(b) Develop meaning orally: ask pupils for their response to the material, and offer your own freely.

(c) Show the parts into which each story is divided, either by drawing vertical lines between “happenings” or by covering parts of the story with your hand (if using a projector) so as to expose only one part at a time. Call on pupils for summaries. Have them indicate the part of the story that presents difficulties, or the part of the story they already know.

(d) Have the pupils rewrite a story on practice paper several times, narrating it quietly as they write.

(e) Allow the class a moment in which to look at a story again, and then have them close their eyes and try to visualize it. Provide considerable repetition, both oral and written.

(f) The time for independent study should be limited so that every pupil will attend vigorously and intensively. Call upon pupils individually and in concert to recite passages of stories without looking at the book. Refer them to the book again when they hesitate.
(g) An important duty of the teacher is to develop a *narrative consciousness*. This may be secured by making the pupil feel that he should look over all written work to discover errors of judgment and that he should verify the meaning of a doubtful story from the dictionary or from some person before attempting to memorize it. Discourage guessing.

(h) Some form of competition will furnish a desirable stimulus in reviews. This rivalry may be between two groups or teams in a room, each with its chosen captain, or between two rooms, or each pupil may compete against his own record. In the latter case, charts showing the weekly or monthly progress of each pupil should be posted in a conspicuous place in the classroom. If these reviews are written, which as a rule is advisable, the words should be dictated in sentences or connected discourse. The short sentences for dictation found in this textbook may be used for this purpose, or the teacher may formulate a new context.

(i) The pupils should be taught the use of the diacritic marks, as a preparation for using the dictionary.

(j) If it is apparent that a considerable number of the stories assigned to a grade are already known by a majority of the class, it is obviously a waste of time and effort to drill upon all stories alike. Under such conditions the wise teacher will first find what stories the class already knows and then concentrate her attention on those stories that require special drill. Such a procedure requires skill and adaptability on the part of the teacher, but is highly effective. The teacher will probably find many stories that should be taught to all her pupils by the class-drill method,
while others that present special difficulties to certain pupils only should be studied by them independently.

For the Pupil:

(a) Keep a notebook specifically for this subject. In it write questions or difficulties that you have with the material as they might arise.

(b) You may also write (lightly, with pencil) in the margins of this book. Underline any word that you don’t recognize and can’t make sense of in context. Circle words whose meaning you can guess based on their context. Look up all of these words in the dictionary and spend time each evening committing them and their definitions to memory.

(c) Ask yourself as you read: Who is speaking? Where are the events taking place? What is the feeling each story creates in you, and why? How does the story create this feeling? Practice summarizing the events of each story in one or two sentences. With a partner, share your ideas about what happens in each story, and what each story might mean.

(d) Use your partner to practice recitation. Take turns, reciting longer and longer passages until you have memorized each story in full.

(e) Always ask your teacher for help if you are uncertain. Reading comprehension takes time and patience to develop. Work diligently, and you will master all of the stories in this book by summertime!
MAMMALS
I found Mr. Buddy in an empty classroom, gnawing on a chicken leg, well before the bell rang. We looked at each other with the same eyes, the eyes of early morning, of exile, of before-the-others. Everything about him was thick and dirty: his crew cut; his black t-shirt, jeans, and belt; his brown work boots; his fingers; his protruding belly and chin. Every day I looked for him, but we never said a word. I knew the route; it never varied. In his presence I could see what he saw, the footprints and smudges and electricity and mildew. The studs in the walls. He lived underground, I felt certain, deep in the bowels of the school. I wanted to see the furnace, and the narrow bed where he slept, and the rusty locker where he kept a change of thick black clothes. If he left the premises, all of it would disappear.
Old School

I would never have known that the road existed if I hadn’t gotten stuck behind the very erratic driver who slowed suddenly and then clumsily turned onto it, causing me to press hard on the brake pedal and sort of lurch to the left. I righted my car and tried hard to right my composure, breathe out my anger—I had, after all, a baby in the backseat, cooing away and oblivious to the fact of bad drivers. Still, I couldn’t help but glance behind me with what I hoped was a mean look, as I drove past the narrow inlet where the car had turned. I saw so many things in that brief instant, an impossible number of things: a tired patch of daffodils; a billboard for an insurance agent whose name was Rhett Butler; a shiny red can in a patch of gravel; a street sign, smaller than most street signs and a different color green, its white lettering as off as the words it spelled out—School Mill Rd Lane. It was a homemade-looking sign, furtive and sorry and proud, askew on its shorter pole. A minute or two later, the incident was all but forgotten, and my mind was loosely stuck on something else. Lunch, probably, or how much I hoped to accomplish while the baby napped.

When I got home, I carried my now fast-asleep baby in her carseat into the house, and put her in the bedroom. I left the lights off, and kept the door partially open for the cat, who liked to stare at her while she slept. It always looked as though they were communicating, the sleeping baby and wide-awake cat, as though the cat was telling the baby what dreams to have, and the baby was responding by dreaming them.

I made a sandwich and sat at my desk and started switching between the two open documents on my computer. I kept thinking there would be one story that would be the
consummate story, that would contain all the other stories I had ever wanted to write and would ever want to write. It would have a beginning, a middle, and an end, but it would be so complete, so replete with all the choice phrases I’d scribbled down over the years, notebooks’ worth of observations and overheard bits and good similes and memorable characters, that it would be less like a story on the page, with story elements and story sequence, and more like an experience which was a facsimile of every possible experience—my *Ulysses*. This would be the story that launched my career and sealed it, and the critics would say something like “If this were a lesser work, we’d be waiting on tenterhooks for more, for the next one, and the one after that, and maybe by the fifth story, we would be able to say confidently that this is a writer of true merit, whose influence will be felt. But the story is perfect, and anything further would be an insult to virtuosity. You would no sooner add a stroke to the Sistine ceiling than change a thing about this work,” etc. The story would have to make the reader feel envious of both the narrator and the writer (me)—envious of the former because of all the things the narrator would get to see and do and eventually understand, and envious of the latter (me) for having conceived of it so convincingly, tantalizingly. Because—and I realized this with a *harrumph*, like a police sergeant who has connected all the dots and is now making a great, languid display of his authority and skill to a roomful of rookie cops—if my narrator undergoes it, I must, on some level, undergo it also. I would not be the *I* on the page, but the *I* on the page would have had to pass through me, and I through it. Maybe this, beyond any sort of renown, was my main motivation for wanting to construct such an ambitious story: the desire for experience beyond my scope, the chance to fashion all...
of my instincts, wishes, neuroses, and beliefs together into one mighty vehicle capable of
transporting me from my lonely little desk to all manners of lively places.

It was an immense amount of pressure to work under. And I wasn’t completely
convinced that my reasoning was clear. I had, after all, long stopped thinking of reading
and writing as forms of escape. If anything, most of what I read and wrote made me
happy for my own reality, made me want to escape back into it, although I recalled
phases during which I yearned for more difficult circumstances—the rough, dirty streets
of Dickens’s London, the cold desolation of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s prairie. Envisioning
suffering while wrapped in a warm blanket, safe in a clean home, was admittedly
luxurious, comforting. But these sorts of thoughts meant that I was conflating writing and
reading, seeing myself on both ends of the telescope, and as such, very little was getting
done. My Ur-story was trapped somewhere between my receptors and my fingers. I sat,
switching between documents and still feeling hungry, having finished my sandwich. It
was a rather small sandwich, with no lettuce or cheese, since we had run out of both. Idly,
I thought about what would happen, domestically, if I died. Would my husband know
that the baby’s clothes needed to be washed with special detergent? Would he sell my
car? My car was newer, so it would probably make more sense for him to sell his car and
keep mine. Would he remarry? I had mixed feelings about this. I wouldn’t want the baby
to grow up without a mother, but I also would not want the baby to think someone was
her mother who was not. Would she sleep in our bed? I decided I’d better not die, but if I
did, that it would be much less complicated for my husband to hire people—maid,
nanny—than to remarry. I reminded myself to discuss all this with him later, maybe over
dinner. I hadn’t made progress on my story, but I had, at least, figured some things out.
I drank some water and thought about making a pot of coffee. Then I thought about including a murder. Or some sex. Then I started arguing with an unseen opponent. Couldn’t my story be about things that were, as most things are, mostly boring? I wondered if I was too fond of writing about checking the mail, for instance. Exchanging one’s house slippers for shoes and leaving the house for the first time all day in one’s robe, with one’s faintly sour smell, to walk from the back door to the mailbox and back. Noting, on the way there, that the forsythia were starting to bloom, and recalling that at one time, forsythia seemed to be a very sophisticated name to know, the type of name that might make someone think I knew a lot about flowers and shrubs. After a while I did make coffee, and spent the rest of the afternoon and evening shuffling between my desk and the baby.

The following day, driving home, I found myself behind another car that abruptly turned onto School Mill Rd Lane. Again I wondered about it, about why I’d never noticed it in the five years I had been driving this route, about the peculiar sign and how long it had been there. But I was in desperate need of the bathroom, and the baby was beginning to cry, so I shelved my thoughts and focused on my immediate, concrete reality. Before the baby, I was not very good at doing that, but after the baby, I found I could do it expertly.

The Consummate Story was not going well. I was trying very hard to find in the rubble of my notes and abandoned attempts some narrative, some hook, as it were. Late in the afternoon I sat on the couch holding my baby, feeling her warmth, her sleepy crumpledness, and I allowed myself to pine for all the things I would never have. It felt good, like an inventory feels good, and I decided that for the rest of the day, I would not
sit at my desk. I put the baby in her little seat and brought it into the kitchen. She watched as I put on an apron and took down some bowls from the cabinet. She watched as I set about making a complicated dinner, pouring and mixing things, chopping vegetables, poking at raw meat. I began to feel strange, being watched by her, nervous that I would make a mistake. I wondered if I should be talking to her or telling her what I was doing. I tried it for a few minutes—“Now I’m going to pour oil into here slowly, and whisk it. This is called emulsifying”—but my voice sounded too loud, and her gaze just grew steadier and more fixed, and her silence during the pauses in my speaking was unsettling. After a while she switched her concentration to her hand, stretching and curling her fingers, and with relief I stopped talking. Dinner was good that night. I kept it warm while we bathed the baby and put her to sleep, and then we ate slowly and drank wine. Both of us stayed up late reading, and as I turned out the light I had this feeling that on a simple scale, I was a successful, competent person. That maybe for much of my adult life, I had been using the wrong scale.

On my way back from town two weeks later, I again wound up behind a car that turned down School Mill Rd Lane. This time, though, I was given fair warning—the car’s blinker started flashing at least ten yards before it made the turn, an interval during which I decided—because I was curious, and feeling rather bored with everything; because home wasn’t beckoning me the way it usually did when I reached this point in my drive, and because the baby had fallen asleep during our errands-running and was still sleeping peacefully—to follow. Driving behind the car, I felt exhilarated, as though I had accepted a playground dare—jump off the swing at its highest point—and was executing it brilliantly. I thought about those saccharine pieces of advice and wisdom from television
and from hardcover bestsellers on display at the bookstore, the ones written by “doctors” or “life coaches” or sometimes both, to do one thing new every day, to “surprise oneself,” little pastel marshmallow bits floating in the milk of my brain that now, here, looked appetizing. Maybe, in all earnestness, I had not been surprising myself enough. Maybe I was a Richard Yates character after all, hopelessly ordinary in my belief that I was somehow exceptional, deserving. Certainly my days were predictable—I arranged them that way; I enjoyed them that way. I might have argued that my predictability bore some mark of genius, created some climate where genius was more apt to occur. That my very sensible, very run-of-the-mill decisions were different than other people’s, more self-aware, designed to carry me to the peak of some unknown greatness. But rounding the curve behind this mouthwash-colored car seemed momentous precisely because of how it made me feel like an entirely ordinary person, gleefully ordinary, sporting the whole ordinary package—comfortable, regular clothes; slightly messy, slightly gas efficient sedan; baby in the back layered in appropriate baby gear—on the brink of something definitely, physically—not theoretically, academically—new. I felt honest. I felt like a good, old-fashioned American, ready for adventure.

The problem with such sensations, such exultant commotions of the spirit, is that they are woefully temporary. By the time I’d followed the minty car—whose sole bumper sticker read “For a small town, this one sure has a lot of assholes”—for about twenty yards, the bright sun of my feelings had slipped behind the clouds of my other feelings. And this, I believed, summed up my fundamental problem: I was never able to stay in one place long enough for one feeling to prevail. I zigzagged through emotions like a car changing lanes, anticipating my getting-out as soon as I got in.
In due fashion, I began to feel uncomfortable. The road was becoming narrow and uneven; twice I swerved to avoid craggy potholes. The car ahead of me bounced haplessly along like a puppy with an oversized stick in its mouth. I kept checking my odometer, convinced that I’d been driving for ten miles or more, and that somewhere amidst the numbers and dials there would be some sign of validation or piece of advice—*keep going, you’re almost there!* or *turn back, you fool*—but it just kept clicking off tenths of a mile, nonplussed, all business. When it told me that I had gone 1.3 miles, I found myself at a dead end, facing a vast clearing edged by a dilapidated building. The expanse in front, which looked like it had once been a blacktop but was scarred over with grass and gravel, was now a makeshift parking lot, which the car I’d been following was pulling into. It parked neatly between the only two other cars that were there. The driver, who looked from the back like a middle-aged man with thinning hair, got out and moved jauntily toward the building. I was sure he would offer me some signal, or at least turn around to acknowledge the fact that I had successfully followed him to this place, to whatever place this was, but he either pretended that I wasn’t there, or hadn’t seen me trailing him.

I parked at a small distance from his car and sat watching, trying to decide what to do. The man tried the heavy front door, first casually, as with the expectation that it would spring open, and then with two hands, feet braced. I felt his frustration. Things that didn’t open were among my least favorite things. I found myself really wanting him to get inside, hoping for it, feeling like people who watch sports probably feel when they yell for the person with the ball to do something specific with the ball. The man stood with his arms at his sides framed by the big, ancient-looking door, a portrait of defeat. I
took his stance as a cue that I should get out of there, drive back to the main road and then home, and that I should remember in the future to subdue these worthless impulses where and when they struck—but then the man was hoisting open a tall window adjacent to the door, which slid upward seemingly with no effort. When the man turned sideways to enter the building through the window, I was startled to see that this person—whom I’d been watching, whose attempts at opening I had cheered; whom I, by my loneliness or boredom, felt I had come to know—was actually a woman. Her shirt jutted out tellingly; her lips were a glossy fuchsia. From this angle, I would have never mistaken her for a man—her face and neck and body were entirely feminine—but from the back, I would have never believed her to be a woman. An inch of smooth, white belly flesh was exposed when she nimbly hoisted herself over the sill and disappeared inside, leaving the window open behind her.

The discovery was somehow vindicating. All at once, all of it—the drive, the building, the voyeurism—seemed to have meaning, hidden meaning that I was meant to decipher, and once again I felt energized. I turned the car off and put the sleeping baby in her stroller. It bounced gently against the uneven ground, making a noise I enjoyed. Despite the other cars, and the fact of at least one other person on the premises, the place felt lifeless—dramatically still, monochromatic, arranged and waiting as if to be photographed. I decided to walk around the building, uncertain as to whether or not I actually wanted to go inside with the baby, and certain that I could not fit both of us through the window without waking her up. I hummed a little as I walked, feeling a bit nervous. Something about the building seemed excessively remote, otherworldly. It didn’t remind me of anything; it didn’t make any kind of impression. As I made my way
around it, I felt that my mind had been expunged of everything other than what was right in front of me, that I was experiencing some kind of perfect immediacy. I felt swallowed up, as though I were Jonah and this place, the whale. In fact I kept thinking that I would find water on the other side, although I knew very well that we were nowhere near a body of water. Still, the thought persisted, the feeling that I was approaching the edge of the map, the farthest limit of creation. Here, it really did seem ridiculous: this notion that this earth is somehow round. Everything felt flat and finite.

I reached the other side of the building. There was a ramp that led to double doors—some kind of loading dock—as well as stairs. One of the doors was propped open with a brick, and I could see through the crack that a weak light was on inside. Pushing the stroller up the ramp, I felt grateful for the symbiosis between stroller and ramp, and pleased that I had an official reason to use both. I entered the building, fearing suddenly that I was being reckless, endangering my baby; that I’d be a news piece later that night, reporters speculating on my state of mind. But it lasted only a moment, until my eyes adjusted and I saw that I was standing inside an industrial-grade kitchen. Nothing reassured me like a kitchen.

Everything was large and stainless steel. I made my way past deep sinks and vast countertops, a formidable oven and refrigerator. The air was chilly, but somehow even and clean—not the drafty mustiness I’d anticipated. Beyond the machinery, I came to a display and serving area, where food could be kept warm in large troughs behind a glass partition. But it was the track—where you were to slide your tray along as you peered through the glass, trying to decide on the least embarrassing item to order, filling up with dread over where you would sit, terrified to spill or be spilled on—that made me realize,
with a weird trembling feeling, that I was standing in the defunct cafeteria of an abandoned school. I had this sense that I was dissolving into it, that I too had become defunct and abandoned. I pushed the stroller back and forth, a few inches forward, a few inches back, like an animal pawing the ground. I didn’t want to stay; I didn’t want to leave.

The dining area was empty, save for one long table that had been folded in half along its rusty hinge and propped against the wall closest to where I stood. The wall opposite was almost entirely windowed, and looked out over the back of the building where I had come in. The glass was dingy to the point of translucence; the light it let in was the color of dirty water. I took in my surroundings, feeling rooted to the spot, wondering who or what might compel me to move. Surely the baby would wake up soon and need to be fed. We would have been home by now, rocking together in the antique rocking chair. Where would I feed her? Here? The car felt thousands of miles away.

But the baby continued to sleep. Every once in a while, one corner of her mouth would twitch upward in a half-smile, and her eyelids would flutter, as if in a breeze. I wondered if she were dreaming about being in an old school, with only her mother to protect her.

Slowly, I started pushing the stroller toward the inside doors of the cafeteria, through which I could discern vague, shadowy shapes—some columns, a stack of chairs, the gleam of a clock. Then I saw the shape of someone walking hurriedly, arms filled with stuff.

I kept walking. The cafeteria opened onto a huge foyer. The floor was gritty; I could hear it beneath the wheels of the stroller. The person whose arms were filled with
stuff appeared again from around a corner, arms emptied. It was the woman I’d followed, whom I’d thought was a man, and I found that I was still having difficulty allowing reality to override my initial impression. She waved cheerily, as though we were next-door neighbors, taking out the garbage at the same time.

“You brought your baby! There’s not much left out here, but room 18 is a goldmine,” she said. “Eliza and Jan have been coming almost every day for three weeks—they took a card catalogue! Most of the drawers were missing, but still. I guess they’re making a small fortune, selling everything off. Me, I like to keep it for myself. I’m a collector. Are you looking for anything in particular? Oh, I’m Lou, by the way. She is cute.”

I was staring at Lou’s mouth as she spoke. Its movements did not match the sounds coming out of it, like a badly-overdubbed movie. And she kept coming closer, very close, now bending down and peering into the stroller. Her voice was a conspiratorial murmur, but too loud, echoing in the emptiness of the large space. She was talking directly to the baby. “I wanted an entire blackboard but I couldn’t get it off the wall. But you know, you can bang out pieces of slate with a hammer, just whack the board as hard as you can, and some of it shatters and gets crumbly, but some of it comes off in big sheets. Real blackboards are becoming extinct you know—everyone uses those fake green ones, or those horrible dry-erase things.” She looked up at me. “God, I love a sleeping baby. Such a complete sleep, so pure. Just—really precious.” Briefly, she put a hand on the handlebar of the stroller, less than an inch away from mine. I saw my knuckles whiten.
“Annnyway,” she straightened and sighed, and when I felt her breath on my face I knew that I hated her a little bit more than I feared her, “I have one more load to haul out to the car.” I recalled her car, her bumper sticker, how sad and silly they had seemed. She was still staring at the baby as she said, “Nice meeting you. Good luck,” and took two lingering steps backward before turning sharply, as though wrenching free from the stroller’s magnetic field, and moving swiftly in the direction from which she had come. I realized that I had not gotten out a single syllable, that her prattle had acted like a gag. I felt the unsaid words in my mouth, acrid and cottony.

I walked the opposite way, hurrying, my first objective to put as much distance as possible between Lou and the stroller, which now seemed like a dangerous vehicle, flimsy, capable of being commandeered by anyone with fingers and a will. I thought about just leaving, going directly to my car, but I did not want to run into her in the parking lot. I was in a darkened corridor, but daylight was coming from somewhere. At the end of the hallway was another, brighter hallway, running perpendicular to the hallway I was in, and from the intersection I could see that the light was coming from windows on each of its far sides. I wondered where the other two people were, Eliza and Jan, and suddenly the only thing I wanted to do, the only thing that made sense to do, was hide. I had, apparently, wandered into a scavenger hunt. I recalled neighborhood games of “Ghosts in the Graveyard,” that point I always reached midway through when I wanted to forfeit and go home, but knew that I couldn’t. The penalty, unknown, unstated, always seemed too great.

I turned right and tried the first door I found. It opened heavily to reveal a rusty sink with two grimy buckets underneath. Some kind of janitor’s closet, too small for me
to fit inside with a stroller. The next door down wouldn’t open, but the one after that was partially ajar, and the light was bright enough for me to see “18” carved into the wood. No one was inside. I hesitated for a minute or two, feeling cowed by this school, by Lou, by the ghosts of indignities still swarming the hallways, until I finally entered the room. It was dim and contained desks, mostly. On the wall was a bludgeoned blackboard.

Through the windows I could see the lot where I’d parked, and Lou at her car, trying to fasten her trunk shut with rope. The protruding legs of some piece of furniture—a desk, I guessed—were making her job difficult. Pushing the stroller forward and back, forward and back, I watched her struggling for a while. Again, from here, she looked like a man, which made me feel, inexplicably, more compassionate toward her. Or really, toward him. After a few minutes, she got into her car and drove very slowly away, the trunk still open wide, its door bobbing up and down. The other two cars, I noticed, were gone.

I became aware of a sense of certainty thrumming somewhere within me—a rarity. I was certain that tomorrow would not resemble today, which was something that I couldn’t say on most days. So, another rarity. I would wake up and feed the baby and do many of the same things, but I would not follow a car to an unknown destination, and stand inside a deposed and broken-down school—museum to a thousand failures and confusions—and look for places to hide from a woman named Lou. This understanding had a mitigating effect. Lou had said that this room was a “goldmine,” but I didn’t see much. Then again, unlike her, I wasn’t exactly here on purpose, and I wasn’t sure what to be looking for. I kept wondering why and when this place closed, and also, though I tried to suppress it since it seemed terribly mother-ish and dull, about the legality of being here at all. Still, I wanted something, a small memento, that could fit on my desk at home. A
protractor, maybe. I lifted the lid of a gray metal desk, but it was empty. The next desk wobbled when I opened it, and it was also empty, save for an impressive pile of eraser dust that hadn’t lost its pink.

I sat at a desk, my knees barely fitting beneath it, and thought.

About the kind of learning that I had undergone in classrooms not unlike this, and how long it had taken me to recover from it, and how much of it I would never be able to unlearn. I thought about all of the inert, obedient writing that had come out of my studenthood. I thought how I would like to write the way I used to write after I had finally distanced myself from it, but before the baby, before there was any possibility of a baby: when I would go until four in the morning, smoking cigarettes, the words coming now with agonizing slowness, now in a feverish torrent, and then, after sleeping late the next day, eating lunch alone, dawdling over coffee and a book, feeling the warm headiness of work well done.

But that would mean no baby. I looked at her, and was brought firmly back to the moment. There was a time before her, just as there was a time when this classroom was operational. The time before the baby was the equivalent of sitting here now, in a too-small desk, surrounded by too-small desks and crumbling slate.

The baby opened her eyes, then closed them again. I wanted to hold her, here amidst the ruins of spelling bees and long division. I lifted her out of her stroller and held her close, smelling her bready smell. She felt light, as only something with no memory can feel.
DRESS

We were not permitted to wear any article of clothing that featured objectionable language or decoration. We were not permitted to wear any article of clothing that advertised alcohol or drugs. We were not permitted to wear anything by itself that was intended to be worn with or underneath something else. We were not permitted to bare our bellies or our shoulders. We were not permitted to expose our underwear by wearing low-slung pants. Backless shoes and heavy jewelry were considered dangerous. Hats and sunglasses were considered disrespectful. Short pants were allowed in warmer weather, but they were to reach no higher than four inches above the knee cap. Shirt and sweater lengths were not to extend past the second knuckle of our index finger along our leg when standing. Expensive clothing and jewelry were frowned upon. Any piece of clothing or personal item that violated the code was subject to confiscation.

Somewhere in the school was a rack on which hung long-sleeved shirts and long pants in various sizes. These were the punishment clothes, taupe and itchy. Anyone spotted in them had transgressed in some way. I wanted to wear them, but I didn’t want to commit the requisite sin. There is a word for that. It is not laziness, but something else, worse than laziness.

Mr. Buddy wore black from head to toe. I availed myself of many layers. I veiled myself against many dangers.
COAT ROOM

I was cubby-sized. Could stand in the space made for raincoats and lunchboxes, the upper shelf just touching the top of my head. I hung my coat and crept in after it, smelling the self who had been inside it, feeling its soft, empty arms. I wished for it to grow a body, to grow from its worn and quilted innards another me that could walk out of it, out of the coat room and into the classroom and then later out of the classroom and into some marvelous place. But first there was the classroom. I could stay here, and the other me could go. I had provisions, shelter. I could watch from the coat room, take notes, learn what I do. I only wanted to learn what I do.

I am striding purposefully across the classroom, taking my seat, opening my desk, and removing pencil and workbook, as well as a shiny piece of calcite for show-and-tell. I am sparkling about the face with obedience and good manners. I am leading the class in the Pledge of Allegiance, singing “You’re A Grand Old Flag” robustly. I am sitting down and explaining the mineral, passing it around the room, talking about the museum whose gift shop it came from. Everyone is satisfied. I am satisfied also, and prepared for language arts. I have memorized the to be verbs, as instructed, to the tune of Frère Jacques. I am feeling my efforts beginning to pall, but nonetheless:

Be Am Is Are (Frère Jacques)
Be Am Is Are (Frère Jacques)
Was Were Been (Dormez-vous)
Was Were Been (Dormez-vous)

Has Have Had Shall Will Should (Sonnez les matines)
Would Does Do Did Must May (Sonnez les matines)
I am performing unwaveringly, my pitch strong and clear. Still, I am feeling unconvinced. I am trying to hold back my less rosy feelings, trying hard to continue cooperating, but it is foolish, I am thinking, such an attempt at grammatical taxonomy. The effort is not commensurate with the reward. It is more memorization merely for its own sake, for the sake of the daily humiliation quota, for the sake of how to fill the time before math, where things would be done for the sake of filling the time before lunch. I have managed to flawlessly finish and am now looking straight ahead. I receive a beaming nod, and turn pink around the ears. The pink was what gave me away. That part that announced that I was not me, after all, that I was an impostor, that the real me was still hiding in the coat room, nestled against my coat, safe for the time being.
I was made to determine the intentions of the letters. What were they getting at? I didn’t know; I never knew. They were disembodied, and I felt disembodied looking at them. This, I believed, was not a way to learn, words euthanized and parsed, their innards splayed out in unnatural combinations. I wanted everything back where it belonged. I did not want to abide by the alphabetic principle. I could read the words, and I understood what each word meant. I did not need to know why I could read the words. I just could.

Seeing them this way, so exposed, so broken down, made me uncomfortable, produced in me the kind of anxiety one feels when one is about to fail utterly. The instructions were like a very long joke with no punch line: circle the short vowels, underline the long vowels, underline each schwa twice, draw a line through the closed syllables, draw a star over the open syllables, place an “x” beneath the diphthongs, highlight the digraphs, put a dot over any vowel-consonant-E spelling, write the sight words on the lines provided.

This wasn’t funny at all. I was only one person. Furtively, I looked around. To my right, a boy worked feverishly, one hand arced around his book, the other white-knuckling his bite-marked pencil. There was no access. To my left, the diabetic girl calmly circled and underlined, her workbook wide open. It must have been the extra sugar. Hers was a candy-eating disease, the only cure for which was to drink a juice box and eat two pieces of chocolate, every morning at ten o’clock, while all of us watched. And even though it was difficult, I forgave her. But this—her nonchalance, her aptitude—was too much. I felt like she was taking away my knowledge, siphoning it from my brain with a straw, as though it was ten o’clock and my head was the juice box and she had permission. I
wanted so badly to pull her hair, to bring my fist down as hard as I could on one of her chocolate-scented hands. Instead, I craned my neck, just a little, just enough to see which things got circled and which got underlined. I made my page a more perfect duplicate of hers, my lines straighter, my circles rounder.
I have some friends with whom we discuss our parents. We say that our mothers are unhappy or overbearing, and that our fathers are infuriatingly punctual or unkind to our mothers. From these assessments, we make evaluations about ourselves, about our own unhappiness or jealousies or obsessions, our own inabilities to love and be loved. We don’t, as a rule, connect what we might consider to be our good traits to our parents. After I leave these particular friends I feel vaguely angry with my parents, but also guilty for criticizing them, and subjecting them to the scrutiny of people they do not know. I also feel that I have better parents than my friends, and an outlook on things that is generally less bleak and more promising than I would have thought if I did not have these friends.

I have other friends whose parents I know nothing about, and who know nothing of my parents. With these friends, I go to restaurants. If a new restaurant opens, I will meet these friends there, and we will talk about the menu and the décor and the demeanor of the servers. We will order drinks, and then discuss the drinks, and pass them around to one another to try. We will order appetizers, and discuss them, and entrees, and discuss them, and lastly dessert, which we will also discuss. We will scrape our forks and spoons against one another’s plates and say things like, I wish I had gotten that, or, too salty. When we are not talking about the food, we will make polite inquiries into the least personal aspects of our personal lives. But mostly, we will talk about the experience of being in the restaurant, and when the bill comes, we will argue over who will pay, and make promises that next time, we will pay.
There is one friend whom I don’t look in the eye, and who does not look me in the eye. We are close, save for this fact, which makes me think we are not close at all, but dishonest with each other, and unable to encounter one another on an intimate level because of certain deep fears. We see one another frequently, and talk of many things, and yet I’m fairly sure that we make each other uncomfortable. Still, we insist on spending time together, as if to prove that the opposite is true.

Around some friends, I feel the presence of something sexual. It’s contained, and pretty much in the background, but there nonetheless. At times I have had dreams about friends I’d never been even remotely attracted to, but in the dream we were together in a hazily sexual way, and since then, I find myself regarding these friends differently, with an offhand, detached kind of lust that is more idea than longing. I have the sense that each of these few friends have had the same dream featuring me in the role that they played in my dream. It is as though we, as a small ruling body, have vetoed sex with one another in favor of latent sexual feelings that make us laugh hard at one another’s jokes and compliment one another’s hair: the harder we press the feelings down, the harder we get along.

I notice that every group of friends has its own culture, its own customs and language, and I find myself therefore traveling from one little country to the next, fluency wondrously restored to me the moment I disembark. In some places, we speak entirely in metaphor. The thing is never the thing that it is, but a different thing that makes its antecedent, its denotatum, more totemic. Or, we say the things that are next to the things we really want to say, thereby creating two conversations, one that runs between us and
another that runs amok in our heads like a shiny pinball, ricocheting noisily off of the first conversation and clamoring at us for days.

I have friends who like to talk about politics, and whose politics they assume I share. They assume this because I neither disagree nor agree with them, but make reassuring noises and affable facial expressions as they speak.

Among two or three friends, I feel confined to my adolescence. We meet in memory, at the bleachers or in homeroom or at the prom or in the basement of someone’s house, and we talk about what we see. Around one another, we are very careful to remain as close to whom we were as possible. Again and again we reveal the same things, using slightly different words each time. Very little is said about anything current; we are experts of all the past tenses and can make fun of ourselves skillfully. If we are married, we talk about our marriages as extensions or foils of relationships we all remember. If we are divorced, we talk about closure the way we did after we first learned the word. These friends know my first favorite foods and details about my body during its tenderest times.

I have friends I have never met, people I know strictly through e-mail correspondence. We sign off “Best” or “Cordially” or sometimes just our names or initials. We do not make inquiries about family or hobbies. One time I wrote “I hope you and your family have a happy holiday” because it was December and because I was reasonably sure that this person had some kind of family. But generally, we are specific and task-oriented in our communication.

I don’t feel as though I have many friends, but when I really think about it, I see that I do, where I define “friend” liberally and exhaustively. But I am not a person who particularly likes having friends. I don’t like the telephone, and I don’t, in general, like
making plans, and since talking on the phone and setting up opportunities to meet in person and then actually meeting in person seem to be important practices for sustaining friendships, I find myself at odds with the very nature of the enterprise. I become nervous before I attend social situations, and check my hair and clothing many times in the bathroom before entering. I still feel the way I felt when I was quite young and quite alone on the playground, because of my glasses, and how my hair looked, and because I did not have the courage to perform daring feats on the swings. And yet, here I am, in relatively secure possession of many friendships and many kinds of friendship.

Here I pause to reflect on the legitimacy of friends, the requirements.

The earliest friendships are based on proximity (neighborhood friends, friends from school) and shared experiences (same bus stop, riding bikes). This doesn’t totally change. Bus stops become workplaces and riding bikes becomes cycling or writing poetry or knitting or going to business school. Often, I choose friends who remind me of myself, or I am chosen by friends for the same reason, or I become mixed up with “mutual” friends where the choosing becomes a matter of compliance. Then there is always a friend who has nothing to do with me, whose interests don’t intersect with mine and whose weltanschauung is decidedly different. Under the influence of such a friend I have behaved in ways I would not have otherwise. I have stolen candy. I have put wet, wadded up things in mailboxes. I have bought astoundingly expensive shoes and blacked out from drunkenness.

From a young age I understood that there were always things a person wanted to hear in the pauses of their speaking or storytelling. I became adept at filling those pauses with the desired responses, and as a result, over time, I have gained many friends. I
understand now that they are not admiring me; they are admiring themselves in the mirror I provide. When I was twenty-five I left the man I’d been in love with, telling friends—the friends I talked to about relationships—that he was not right for me. What I meant of course was that he was not me; he did not act how I would act or say what I would say or deliver the coveted reactions when I told him things. For two dark years I contemplated the implications of this. I allowed myself to be set up with people, and went on dates with them in an almost catatonic state of politeness. I worried about what would happen if I stopped being polite and started expecting things of them and found them unable to perform those things. My worry made me very popular with men. They wanted second dates, and third. My friends, the ones who engineered the first dates, reported that the men found me charming, fascinating, beautiful even. Which confirmed my fear that love was an ignoble trick based on pretense and the delicate calibration and tireless negotiation of the ego.

But this was a conclusion arrived at in my late twenties, and as such, unreliable. I have since stopped forcing love to be one thing, and I have become humbler and more reverent toward it. I stand somewhere in the narthex, looking out over its pews and stained glass and impossibly ornate chandeliers, and I don’t snort at the heavy grandeur as I would have once. I feel instead sort of dazed, but happy enough to be a witness, to be just inside. And then I go home and I catalogue my friends, and see my own needs and the needs of each one very plainly, and I feel no guilt or confusion about how these needs, across friendships, are met. Each friendship is a synecdoche of friendship, and all friendships are the products of communication and desire. Communication and desire are made up of so many parts, and instead of looking at those parts, I look at the people who
render them for me, and based on this rendering, I determine whom I choose as friends, and why. This much is clear to me, and the clarity is a comfort. But beneath the comfort buzz unpleasant questions reminiscent of the late-night, booze-soaked, cigarette-studded revelations of my late twenties: is a friend only a friend insofar as she or he adequately performs a certain part of a social equation? Does the friend matter at all, or only the words of the friend, and very occasionally, the actions? And aren’t words really only words, and even less than words, since they are received as sounds that purport to mean things, but fail, since a word can only be the sound of the word, or the sight of it, but never the thing itself, and the thing itself is only definable with words, which puts us in the miserable spin-cycle of the world’s most symbolic washing machine? Couldn’t the specific friend, in fact, be anybody, anybody at all who sensed the need, and filled it? Do I have friends, or only prismatic projections of myself, echoing meaningless sounds? And does this possibility make me more alone than if I had no friends at all? Because if I had none, I would be alone but somehow more accountable?
A riddle, from the construction-paper pages of the book I was constructing, whose working title was My Big Book of Jokes and Riddles: what connects everything and is connected to everything but remains, in itself, a place apart, a place with no atmosphere and no instruction, a public byway that yet is quarantined?

Also: I had the sense, standing in it alone, that I was nowhere, that I did not exist. Or, that I and only I existed, while everyone else had turned to stone or disappeared. I felt as though the world had gone completely still and blind and mute and deaf, and that I could run around upsetting things, with no fear of the pink slip, with no fear at all. But how terrifying, I thought, to have no fear—everything obnoxiously possible, like too many dares issued at once in a loud, principal-voice.
PENCIL SHARPENER

We could make a dull point sharp (necessity) or a sharp point sharper, breakably sharp (luxury). A sharpened pencil was a symbol of promise, of better luck next time. It might make the answers come more easily or the handwriting better. It was a pleasure to go to it, a reprieve, an act of volition. I visited often, there in the corner where it was affixed to the wall, and emptied the shavings, secretly, into a plastic bag that I kept in my desk. It was my way of helping Mr. Buddy. The bag was filling up nicely with taupe and golden curls, and when no one was paying attention, I lifted the cover of my desk and inhaled deeply, comforted by the smell of molted pencil, of efforts that had been made—a potpourri heady with optimism. I wanted to give it to Mr. Buddy, but I also wanted to keep it, in order to have something to give him.
WATER FOUNTAIN

I had an arcane thirst, always, and there was always a line. In line, it was impossible not
to think about water: water in a fishbowl, the bluish-tinged water of the toilet, water
tipping the bucket of a well, middle-of-the-night water, watery words like cistern and
quench. Waiting in line felt like waiting for the first or the last water, water that came
from deep beneath the school, deep beneath layers of dripping, biblical rock, water that
would, upon pressing a silver button, appear. I waited, endlessly. I worried about the
flow, the curve of water from the jagged-rimmed hole, how quickly it would meet my
lips. I worried about the gaping mouths of others, how close they would get to the spout. I
suspected that many did not yet know how to swallow at such an angle, and would let the
water merely coat their mouths and tongue and then fall thickly into the drain. I worried
there would never be enough, or that it would grow warm. But I was never first in line,
for fear of the row of thirst at my back, its eyes boring into my neck, willing me finished
too soon.
ART

What was different about it was how different it was. We sat on metal stools, for one thing, instead of chairs. The air, too, had a metallic quality—cold and damp, with the essence of chemicals lingering, as though solvents, maybe a hundred years ago, had been poured over every surface and were still in the process of drying. The tables were long and scarred. I closed my eyes and ran my fingers over them to identify the textures—streaks of paint, bits of clay, glue, plaster of Paris. I loved knowing that there was something in the world called Plaster of Paris.

Entering art meant entering a state of nervousness, a state like an actual state with its own bird and flag and traffic laws. It was a state that I found exceedingly difficult to leave. Sternly I had to remind myself, long after art was over, when I was returned to the rest of the day with its familiar landmarks, that I was not in it anymore, that I could stop being nervous and resume being invisible. But my injunctions never worked. The nervousness of art remained with me like a citizenship, like a bit of black watercolor stuck to my brush that kept disrupting the other colors, so that my work always looked a suspicious, immigrant gray. More confusing still was that I liked being there, despite the clamminess in my body, the nebulous fear of ruin, the perspective exercises I never got right (bowl near, apple far). When we were told that we would have one class period to create a model of what art meant to us, using any materials that we wanted, I throbbed with eagerness. Huddled over a large, thick piece of paper, I felt the hive of activity at my back—the sharing of scissors, the plastering of Paris—enticing me to join in. I refused,
ardently wanting the metaphor to be all mine. But the ecstasy of possibility was too much: when the bell rang, I handed in the paper nearly blank, its only adornment the muddy scribble of my name in the bottom right-hand corner.
NOUNS AND VERBS
She and I worked together in a consignment shop called Second Chances, which many people thought was a homeless shelter or soup kitchen due to the name; the round, convivial font on the sign; the lack of any qualifying tagline, and also the part of town it was in. The front windows, too, were thickly curtained, making it necessary to go inside to find out what was inside. In fact I had gone there initially to inquire about volunteer work, but as soon as I entered I felt compelled to pretend that there had been no mistake, that I was a bona fide thrifter, and when the owner introduced himself it seemed inevitable that I would either buy something or ask for a job. The other person in the shop came over from where she had been doing something with safety pins and greeted me curtly, one pin in her mouth, and asked the owner a question about a credenza, and immediately she reminded me of someone I couldn’t place. For weeks after I started working there, having abandoned my plans to achieve some kind of insight about my life through unpaid service to others, she irritated me, because she had used the word “credenza,” and more so because she was familiar in a stubbornly untraceable way. I couldn’t look at her without not-seeing her and seeing instead a placeholder, a version of her as she was reflected by my straining memory. Then I realized that it wasn’t a person she reminded me of, but a thing, a thing depicting a person, and by then the gradations of recall and association had blended into a kind of folkloric confusion to which she, in my mind, remained bound.

The thing she reminded me of was this painting that used to hang in my parents’ living room, of a girl waiting for a train that was approaching from the upper right corner
of the canvas. The girl stood with her back to the living room, relieved or frightened, who could know, by the train’s imminent arrival, with her wrists poking out from the too-short sleeves of her red jacket, one hand white-knuckling the handle of a weathered suitcase, the other stretching itself, fingers spread and pointing downward, as though trying to pull clean of its arm. Her feet were close together and turned slightly inward, and her legs, thick and a bit misshapen, shone whitely where her gray skirt ended. The painter probably wasn’t much of an artist; I think my parents bought it at one of those hotel expos, along with a few smeary watercolors in thick gilt frames that hung in the powder and guest rooms. But I always liked this girl and wished I could see her face, and H. Teale, whomever that was, did a nice job with her hair, a round bob that looked womanly somehow, not the flaxen, glistening hair of children, but dusty and heavy. Sad hair. The hair, and the stance of protracted waiting—a paroxysm of expectancy eternally sustained—are what brought her to mind when I thought of the painting, and what the painting brought to mind when I saw her.

I don’t know what happened to it. After my mother died a lot of things went into boxes that then seemed to disappear, and for a while I hoped and half-believed that it would turn up in the shop, and I imagined that I would have a hard time deciding whether to give it to her or keep it for myself. Most of what’s now in my dad’s condominium in Florida, save for a few ashtrays and photo albums, is unrecognizable. I don’t like going there, being amidst all of that desperate, widow-y newness. It’s the kind of sad that makes me angry, a feeling she termed “sangria” during a particularly slow day at work, with not a little bit of pride. She claimed as a pastime the reappropriating of words and was oblivious to how distracting it was in the midst of serious stories. She also greatly
enjoyed using certain expressions and figures of speech, however wrongly, such as, for example, ad nauseam, trump card, au courant, and countless others. I like being sad, which mystified her; I like it until I reach the nadir where sadness changes, as if chemically, to repulsion and self-loathing, making me wish that I was “capable” of “handling” things instead of turning away from them in disgust, until my disgust disgusts me, and my anger at my inadequacy as a human being angers me, and all of that pure, easy, delectable sorrow gets squandered. She refused, cheerfully, to understand this, and it wasn’t her refusal that was maddening but her cheer.

But both of us liked old things. She liked them as a lifestyle, a matter of ethics. She clung to old things the way I clung to sadness. And she could be emphatic, which could be tiresome.

“There’s just no need for it. This world is choking with stuff, drowning in it. I think there is enough stuff in the world for every single person to have plenty, enough old bikes for every kid in the whole world to have a bike and enough coats for everyone to have a coat. Buying new, it’s pretty much criminal,” she said. “Everything, and I mean everything in my apartment is pre-owned.”

“Same here,” I said, which wasn’t completely true. “Except for socks and underwear. That I can’t do.”

She sniffed. “Oh.” She was sorting buttons and had a large red one between her teeth. “That doesn’t bother me,” she said around the button. “But,” she took the button out, “actually, my mom got me a three-pack of underwear for Christmas last year. I never opened it.”
“What about your appliances?” I asked. My landlord had put in a new refrigerator that year. I loved it. Its hum was almost melodic, and the freezer made perfect half-moons of ice, automatically.

“Nope,” she said. “Old, old, old. My stove takes twenty minutes to heat up and then burns everything.” She sounded pleased. “So do you want the underwear?”

I checked to see if she was joking. She was not. “No,” I said. “But…thank you.”

She made a face. “Fine,” she said, moving some buttons around on the counter.

“It’s a shame, though, since you like brand new underwear and everything.”

*

For a while, I wasn’t sure what kind of friends we were, she and I. It seemed at first that we could become close, but I didn’t seem to make friends like that. My closest friend had been my boyfriend once, but we somehow transitioned seamlessly from having sex to not having sex, and were able to meet each other for breakfast and watch movies on the weekend and fall asleep on each other in comfortable and unromantic positions. Then he moved to Oregon to be with someone he knew for a week, and my life fell apart a bit, as it would have if we had never stopped dating. I hated Oregon with a hatred that almost became exciting. There were other men, before and after, and other friendships, mostly before, but nothing lasting, nothing remarkable. So I remained confused about relationships, all of them, and she seemed especially hard to place. I couldn’t even remember what she looked like when she wasn’t around; I’d think of the painting first, and then every time I saw her, her features came as a vague surprise. I wanted to know
how she felt about me, if she considered me a person in her life or just a person. If she asked for a ride home, did that mean something? Probably less than it would mean if she borrowed a sweater. I wished that people, eligible friends like her, came with conversion charts. Without mile markers, material guidelines, I felt lost. Mornings, I looked hard at myself in the mirror and practiced making kind, open expressions. But then I would walk around brushing my teeth and return to the mirror and see my face as it normally was—worried and weirdly cavernous, everything pushed back, my cheekbones and eyelids like awnings. Throughout the day I reminded myself to smile but then would do so at the wrong time—not after a joke or greeting but in the middle of a conversation when it would be my turn to speak, when certain words, and not a facial contortion, were appropriate—or else alone in the aisle of a grocery store, grinning at boxes and cans like a demented person. Having a disruptive mien, I felt certain, was not conducive to making friends. This had been my problem throughout school, throughout my life.

“You always look like you’re up to something,” she said.

“Like what?” I concentrated on looking hapless. I felt hapless, and I wanted my face to look hapless also. That nothing about me seems to happen automatically, without self-consciousness, seems to me significant. Or maybe it is my thinking so that makes it seem that way. In general I had too many thoughts about my thoughts, a condition that translated into an uncontrollable urge to doodle if pen and paper were at hand. Hypergraphia, the school nurse had called it.

“No, the ‘something’ is part of the expression—‘up to something’, ” she said. She sounded exasperated, like a teacher, or a substitute teacher. “Identifying the ‘something’ defeats the idiom.”
“Oh,” I said. “I’m not, I don’t think.”

She looked at me for a long moment. “At first I was sure you were stealing things. When you drove me home I was going to make an excuse for you to open your trunk.”

I laughed. She laughed. “What would you have said?”

“I don’t know, I couldn’t think of anything. Something about your spare tire.” We were laughing hard now, just letting the laughter be the reason for more laughter. I felt something shift, something skeletal and real, like discovering a new vertebra and then walking differently. We were nearly friends now, and for the moment, I wasn’t questioning it.

*

At a bar in the early afternoon, she talked about being adopted. That was the first time she’d ever mentioned it and subsequently it came up a lot, casually and in passing. The owner had told us to close early. It had been a slow day and a slow week; the whole town seemed to be hibernating or shopping in department stores. She took the lack of business personally.

“No one cares about stories anymore, about history,” she said as she counted out the register. “The world doesn’t want a lampshade that is a lampshade. A lampshade that collects dust and gets dusted every week by a person, maybe an old lady, maybe a divorced man. They want biodynamic lampshades, or lampshades that double as clever hats or wall sconces.”
She was probably right. Everything did seem newly invested in multi-functionality. Traffic lights that took pictures. My father had a refrigerator with a television built into it. Unless it was, maybe, a television with a refrigerator built around it. I looked around and everything in the store looked dingy, primitive.

“Those are pretty,” she said. “I’ll probably buy one.” I was folding a stack of tea towels, softened with age. I imagined the Floridian, widowers’ variety: self-cleaning, self-folding. I saw them scrubbing out their own stains, embroidered corners curling in like starfish, while maybe simultaneously announcing the time. I wanted to say this to her, wanted her to find me funny, and at the same time I wanted a bit to unravel her, to find a loose thread and pull at it, as though she were the towels I was folding which seemed suddenly twee and self-satisfied.

“Are these called tea towels?” I asked. “Tea towels?” My voice was high, almost hysterical. “It doesn’t even sound like English.”

She looked at me quizzically.

“It sounds like some old Welsh saying reserved for wedding days,” I said. “Wedding days during the rainy season.” I don’t know why I felt cross. “Tee-tow-wuhl.”

“That’s silly. Tea. Towel. It makes perfect sense,” she said.

“But why are they called that? Are they only supposed to be used for cleaning up tea? For wiping one’s fingers if they get tea on them? Aren’t they just fancy dishcloths? What is their meaning?” I wanted to stop, but felt unable. And she wasn’t cooperating.

“Seriously, who has the time for tea towels?”

“What’s wrong with you?” She asked.

“I don’t know.” I didn’t know.
“We should drink beer,” she said. “Do you want to drink beer?”

It was a nick-of-time clemency. It was okay with her that we did not share a sense of humor, that she liked to laugh at real things as they happened and I liked to laugh at imaginary and macabre things that would never happen, that she took most things seriously whereas I did not, and that these characteristics made each of us occasionally lonely and agitated around the other. I felt grateful, humbled by her forgiveness, and I did my best to leave it at that, without further aggravation for unknowingly having needed it.

We turned out the lights and she locked up. I drove. She didn’t have a car. She fiddled with the radio as she usually did when I took her home, then turned it off.

At the bar, I drank my first beer very quickly. She was only about a quarter way through hers. “Two years ago, I started calling adoption agencies and asking if they had my records.”

“Why didn’t you just ask your parents for them?” I concentrated on saying every word. The beer made me feel pleasantly out of control.

“My parents insist that I’m not adopted. They insist that I am their biological child,” she said. “But I know I’m not. I just know it.”

“How do you know?” I was intensely curious. The intensity of my curiosity seemed, to me, to be worthy of discussion in itself.

She took a straw from the plastic cube on the bar that also held cocktail napkins. She stuck it in her beer. After a labored sip she looked at me closely. “I know that I do not, biologically, belong to my parents. Like, if I told you that the bartender was your father, what would you say?”
I never knew how to answer taunting questions like that. I tried never to ask them. I suspect she liked the drama of them. “I’d say, no, he’s not.”

“But what if I told you I was 100% positive that he was your father, then what would you say?” She took another big sip with the straw and the bartender brought another beer for me. I kept my head down. I didn’t want him to hear us.

I made a noise. “That man is not my father. My father is on a beach in Florida, memorizing the jokes in Reader’s Digest. You’re making an absurd analogy.”

She leaned in, and her eyes were the color of every color having quit its dream and taken a straight job. Give-Up Green, I thought. Broken-Down Brown. Bruised-Hopes Blue. “That’s exactly my point. It’s as absurd to me to think of my ‘parents’ as my real parents, as it is for you to think about that bartender as your dad. They’ve buried the paper really well, but I’ll find it.”

If she weren’t so convincing, I’d have thought she was crazy for sure. Or her convincingness made her a kind of crazy that I envied. What was family, anyway, I mused drunkenly. Skin and cells chafing together, hatching things, and then demanding loyalty? I wished I had something to prove or disprove, something outlandish. We talked about what our mothers looked like, her saying that she dreamed frequently of hers, her “real” mother who looked like Eva Marie Saint, nothing like her pseudo-mother who was small and dark. I said that my mother’s ears never aged, never looked sick. She said something about Plaster-of-Paris and used tête-à-tête incorrectly and then she paid for our beers and we left, me blurrily driving twenty miles an hour and her singing snippets of songs as the radio scanned from station to station.
I was taking nail polish off using nail polish remover and toilet paper when she called. There’s still a bleached, grayish spot on the side of the phone where I touched it with damp toilet paper. I put the phone between my cheek and shoulder and continued plucking at my fingers. She was telling me that she’d been bored for a week.

“Even at work. Just—bored,” she said. “I don’t feel bad or anything. But I can’t believe how aware I am of each minute. It’s like I’m waiting…” she paused. “Waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

A new one, I noted. The nail polish wasn’t coming off all the way. “What’s the first shoe that dropped?” The nails on my left hand looked pink and bleary, like they’d just woken up. I could hear her start to protest. “Never mind. What will you do today?” I asked. It was a Monday, but the store was closed.

“I don’t know. I just had sex with someone. I thought it would help, but I feel even more bored now.”

I don’t know why I felt surprised, and very surprised, but I did. There was something about her that seemed to predate sex, that seemed to live wholly beyond and in spite of it. Maybe it was her pervasive certainty that she’d been adopted, that she had occurred by the regular means but then had been removed from her sources. I concentrated on my nails. “Who did you have sex with?” I was making a little progress. My thumb was getting whiter.

“This guy. He just left. I met him at the grocery store this morning.”
I stopped rubbing, focusing now entirely on her. I felt maybe this was a test of some sort. But she kept talking. “Anyway, I got a squash. I’m going to make it. You want to come over?”

I was relieved. “Yes,” I said. She told me to come in thirty minutes. We hung up and I resumed work on my nails, not quite calmly.

She lived on the second floor of an old Victorian house. I had never been inside. On the wraparound porch there were plastic chairs and a couple of bikes. “Not mine,” she said, when she met me at the door. “The downstairs people use this porch a lot. I think they hate me, but they’re nice. They sold me their T.V. for forty bucks, down from fifty.”

We went upstairs. Her door was ajar and strong smells wafted onto the landing where we stood. She turned to face me and I had the feeling of being in a crowded elevator. “Sorry,” she said. “It’s a little bit messy.”

We entered the kitchen. There were things on nearly every surface—inches of mail on the table; birdhouses, mason jars, and hats on the counters; three ancient radios in a row on the wide windowsill, partially blocking the light being kept at bay by the smudged glass. On top of the refrigerator was a towering stack of phone books.

“I love old phone books,” she said. “Here, sit.” She pulled a chair out for me, tossing the few articles of clothing that were on it to the floor. When I sat down something sweatory was underfoot. I pushed it to the side but there was a magazine beneath it. I gave up and sat still, trying not to disturb an environment that felt, despite its clutter, very precise. Unlike Second Chances, this seemed not to be a site of haphazard assemblage, a depository for sad or frustrated purges. It was, actually, quite sophisticated, lending the air of a laboratory where serious, life-improving science could be undertaken.
I felt as though I had walked inside of her, past the unruly glen of her instincts, past the exhausting expanse of her quirkiness, and arrived at some clearing, some place of deep wisdom, where she knew far more than me but would refrain from making me too aware of it. Here there was a certain restraint emanating, it seemed, from the clocks and jars and papers; it was as if the items themselves owned the apartment.

“I like your place,” I said.

“Yes,” she said, sounding almost wistful, as though the place were not hers, “me too.”

She handed me a chipped yellow plate with cubes of squash on it. They were flecked with bits of green and something that looked like cinnamon. I tasted it. It was not cinnamon, but close. It tasted good. She sat across from me, her own plate red and heaped.

“Thank you,” I said. “This is good.”

She nodded. “Nutmeg,” she said.

For a moment, I felt like crying; a strong tenderness filled me, for her nutmeg and her small bare arms reaching to put more squash on my plate from the bowl between us. We sat quietly, and the feeling passed, and we were just eating.

When we were finished, I started to bring the plates to the sink. “Leave them,” she said. “Let’s watch T.V.”

I felt glad for this plan. It was nice not knowing what would come next, there in that apartment. And I did enjoy television, although I’ve never owned one. My father offered me his old one, but said I’d have to pay to have it shipped, which in my mind ruined the transaction. I told myself that it would cost more to ship it than it would to buy
my own television, but I didn’t know that for a fact, nor did I try to find out. So the offer kept me suspended between two possible courses of action, buying my own set or paying to ship his, and there, seemingly helpless to move beyond the potential of television to its actual ownership, the offer finally dissipated. This still bothers me, with something like regret, but it seems, as so many other things have, always too late to do anything about it.

I think I am frequently held hostage by my hunches. I think my father gave the television to someone else, someone uncomplicated and close by.

I followed her to an oddly-shaped room that had a large television on one side. The room was cold like a cellar. To the left against a recessed wall facing the television was a folded out sofa strewn with sheets and pillows. A blanket hung off the edge. One corner of the thin mattress was visible—a shiny, patterned blue—and curled up slightly where the sheet had sprung off of it. I tried not to look at the bed, not to think of the sex that had occurred there, but both bed and sex seemed very much alive, filling the drafty spaces between the inert things of the room, between me and her, like a vague electricity.

She sat on the edge of the bed and I sat next to her. She groped around in the muddle of sheets, and finding the remote control, switched on the T.V. A talk-show host’s face filled the screen. It was a close-up of the host talking. I sat back, leaning against my elbows. I felt the metal beneath the mattress. She changed positions and lay on her stomach. I kept thinking about the sex, which she seemed completely oblivious to—it, and my thinking about it. She was listening intently to the talk-show host, and her engrossment had a soothing effect. All at once I felt comfortable, part of the room, part of the bed, part, even, of the earlier tryst. My body relaxed into the sheets, which smelled faintly like roses and something else I couldn’t place.
Now the camera showed that the talk-show host was sitting on a sofa next to a woman. The woman was talking animatedly but with a stricken look on her face, and she was using her hands. The talk-show host looked stricken, too. I registered all of this before I made sense of the words, and when I forced myself to pay attention to the words it was as though they were coming from the television itself, and not actual people.

“That is pathological,” the talk-show host was saying. “Truly pathological.”

“I know!” the woman said. “I know. And I couldn’t stop. Nothing could stop me.”

“It sounds as though you were at the mercy of something greater than yourself,” the talk-show host said. “More powerful than yourself. It’s almost…mind-blowing,” she looked at the camera, “how pathological this is.” The camera panned across the audience, the majority of which was nodding its heads or wiping its eyes.

“I know. It really is.” The woman was crying now. “I’m so ashamed.”

The talk-show host touched the woman’s shoulder and looked again at the camera. She was wearing purple and her lips were shiny and purplish. “When we come back, a mother reacts to her daughter’s shockingly pathological behavior.”

A car commercial came on. A man was wearing a cowboy hat and yelling. I looked at her and she was still staring fixedly at the screen. It was too early to be dusk, but outside, through the window opposite and tinted by the gauzy curtains, it looked like dusk. I still felt mostly comfortable, but my mind was beginning to move beyond the room. When would I leave? How would I leave? The commercials had disrupted the sense of timelessness, and now I felt a decision pressing to be made, pacing back and forth between us and the television.
She got up and went to the kitchen. When she came back, she had the bowl of squash. She sat back down on the bed with the bowl in her lap. Now the earlier part of the visit was here with us, which seemed to signal something. I felt the urgency and anxiety of the previous moment lift. She ate squash with her fingers. I hesitated, and then ate some too. It tasted better than it had before, as though it was supposed to have been eaten this way all along, with our fingers, with us slanting into one another on the pull-out bed.

*

We watched a lot of television that day, into the night, and we talked little. I felt strange when I got home. It was after midnight, and my mind was deadened and jittery at the same time, from the television and the odd room and the lack of conversation and the inactivity that all combined to create a bizarre but unquestionable intimacy. I was at a loss for what to do next. I felt like calling her, but I didn’t have much to say in the last nine hours, and I didn’t have anything to say just then. I poured a bowl of cereal and sat eating it, trying to think of something I could call her to talk about. As improbable as it felt, I missed her, the way I missed things when I was younger. I looked at the back of the cereal box for a while, and then at some unopened mail that was on the counter, and then eventually brushed my teeth and went to bed. I dreamed that I was drunk and disorderly at a party, and she was there and drunk and disorderly too, and when it came time to leave it was clear that we were despised by everyone else there, and we couldn’t leave fast enough because we were stumbling around, looking for my coat which was my mother’s coat and which I was desperate to find. But drunk-desperate, and therefore filled
with conflicting urges, to apologize, and to redeem myself, and to disappear, and to kiss
the host, and to explain the importance of my mother’s coat. In the end I seemed to do
some combination of all of these things, and I awoke feeling mortified, my
embarrassment like a hangover. I showered and drank coffee and decided to go to work
early, to busy myself and to distance myself from everything of the last three-quarters of
the day.

By noon, she still hadn’t come in. The owner looked displeased when he dropped
by to do some paperwork, and told me to call. “You shouldn’t be here all day by
yourself,” he said. “It’s bad for business.”

We rarely had more than one customer in the store at a time, and no real business
to speak of, but I didn’t argue. I called her and she answered on the fifth ring, just as I
was about to hang up.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi. Are you sick?”

There was a pause. “A little bit, I think.” Her voice got muffled. “…chills…but,”
her voice got muffled again, “…fine.”

“What? I didn’t hear everything you just said.”

“Oh, nothing. I’m fine.”

“Okay,” I said. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want me to bring you anything?”

“Nah. No. I’ll be in tomorrow. Sorry to leave you in the lurch. I owe you one.”
We hung up, and I told the owner that she would be coming in at one, and the owner asked if I would be all right by myself until then, since he really wanted to go to an estate sale and “scavenge.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said. “Don’t worry.”

I spent the rest of the day in the shop alone, tidying up racks and organizing inventory lists and dealing with two people, one older man who wanted to find a hat for his wife but left with nothing and seemed displeased, and one college boy who bought three extra-small-sized t-shirts that he would wear, I could only guess, ironically.

*

When she didn’t come in the next day or the day after, and didn’t answer the phone when I called repeatedly, forcing the owner—who by then was so flustered that he plastered the front door and windows with “Help Wanted” signs and left the curtains wide open, giving the shop an unnatural brightness that made everything look more drab—to work with me, I got begrudging permission to leave on my lunch break and drive to her place. One of her neighbors with the bikes was sitting on the porch.

“You here for your friend’s stuff? The landlord’s up there now, but go on in.”

“Oh,” I said, trying not to look as puzzled as I felt, “okay. Thanks.” I went upstairs and her door was partially open. A thin, middle-aged man in ripped jeans was looking in the refrigerator. He turned and faced me.

“Broke her lease, just like that. And no forwarding address. Called this morning and left a message saying she’d leave the key and someone would come by for the rest of
her things. That’s you, I’m assuming? You can tell her that she won’t be getting her security deposit back, not a chance.”

It looked like most of the phone books were still on top of the fridge. The old radio was gone. “She left all of this?”

“It’s all yours, or it’s getting trashed.” He looked at me and smiled, a little unkindly. “Is she in some kind of trouble? Where’d she go in such a hurry?”

I kept staring at the phone books. “She’s not in trouble,” I mumbled. I felt sick but also relieved—as though I’d had a fever and it was breaking and I could sit up and drink ginger ale, as though nausea and recuperation were happening in the same moment, the contrast its own kind of balm. “She’s—it’s her family, I think. Some kind of family—emergency, she said.” I thought to myself, it doesn’t matter what I say, it doesn’t make a difference, she’s gone, she isn’t here, she’s no longer here, and it felt almost like joy, but not really.

The landlord told me to lock the place up when I was done and leave the keys with the neighbors. When he left I wandered into the other room. The furniture was still there, including the television, and it looked expectant, like I could turn it on and it would tell me something. I sat on the folded-out couch and turned it on and it was a soap opera, one woman facing the camera and pouring amber-colored liquid from an ornate decanter into a glass, and swirling it, and turning around slowly, deliberately, and the other woman with her back to us, looking out a window and touching the edge of a lace curtain, framed by the window and the camera and the gaze of the other woman and waiting, it would seem, for some cue.
FIRE DRILL, CONTRABAND

We rose silently from our half-slumber, exhilarated, repurposed. It was that time again, for emergency theater. We enjoyed that feeling of alertness; of authority superseded by a higher, louder, more insistent authority; of knowing our cues and exactly how to respond to them—the whole thing was a delightful departure from the usual muddle. Diligently, we left our possessions behind and formed a double line, two-by-two like Noah’s refugees. I didn’t like the leaving-behind rule. It seemed to me only fair that we be allowed to carry something with us, a souvenir, a rescued object worthy of mythologizing. The alarm kept on, loud and real, even if the crisis it signaled was fabricated, and under its influence we became graceful, our expert pantomime deserving, I thought, of an actual catastrophe. I wished for one, without fully knowing what I was wishing for. I didn’t want the school to burn down. I just wanted to feel like it could, like maybe for once it really was. Out in the schoolyard, shivering, facing the defiantly not-on-fire building that seemed to loom even larger and more masculine under the blue sky and blaring sirens, I stuck my hands deep in my pockets. In one, a fistful of pencil shavings; in the other, a soft, warm eraser.
All the trays were a hard, light blue, except for one, which was navy. Stacked, the dark stripe was interruptive, unnerving—an offense to cafeteria orthodoxy, which mandated a high level of sameness. Each time I saw it, I wondered why they insisted on keeping it, on subjecting it to the daily degradation of us, and us to the daily degradation of it. I imagined it elsewhere, doing something different—on somebody’s desk, for example, laden with paper clips, staples, and index cards. Newly useful. Re-appropriated and re-integrated, like a parolee. Or else, taken behind the dumpsters and shot. No matter how many others he sat with, the one who chose this tray from the stack—and it was, sometimes, impossible to avoid, with the line closing in on you from behind, and the guilt of leaving it for the next person too great—would be alone. Everything on the tray would look ugly, and everyone around it would be stuck in his and her prejudice, unable to ignore it and unable to acknowledge it, food congealing as the collective appetite curdled. These were my thoughts as it appeared on top of the pile, the person ahead of me and behind me safe. I would be the one to bear it, which is one way of describing a hero.
SUSTAINED SILENT READING

This was to be classified, we were told, as “serious fun.” First, we had to write our names on index cards, which were then attached to the ceiling—little senseless spokes jutting from the removable panels. Against one wall was a very large bookshelf filled with books, and each day we were given ample time to read. Some days, we were to do nothing else but read. I read. Some pretended to read, but did other things, secretly, between the pages of the book that was not being read. When we finished a book, we were to bring it to the teacher at his desk, where he spent much of the day in a vague state of anguish, and answer several questions about it. If we answered correctly, we were handed another index card from his endless supply, on which we were to carefully print the title and author. We then stood on a chair to staple it to the card bearing our name. It felt dangerous, forbidden, this victory ritual—stepping on furniture, wielding the heavy stapler upside down—a perfect reward for finishing a book, as absurd and beautiful as finishing a book, the only right commemoration, the paper headstone. We watched as the topography of the room changed; we knew one another by the length of our tails.

Still, despite his brilliant strategy, I knew that this teacher was hugely disappointed in most of what his life had turned out to mean. Returning to the school as one of its wards/wardens was supposed to have quelled the ebbing nausea that had plagued him since early adulthood, but it had become instead its own kind of nausea, a faulty organ inside of him, a spleen perpetually on the brink of rupture. He was made of too many feelings, too many almosts, felt himself too full, too crowded. He spoke loudly—even
simple remarks came out like announcements—because of the constant din inside his body, and he felt a rising in his throat, some kind of existential gag reflex, whenever he wanted to say anything, which gave his words a choked, embarrassed quality. He lived with the suspicion that he had already said it all already, that it was much too late to append or amend. For all of these reasons, I believed his lessons to be the lesser sons of some great pedagogue, doomed to have no inheritance, inured to the blank, sometimes hostile stares they faced every day. His was a fated inadequacy, ordained centuries before he was born, before anyone was born, and this knowledge filled me with a sorrow and consternation that I didn’t know what to do with, where to stow. I sat uselessly toward the back, gazing at this man who was the sort of ageless age of an old tree, a tree wearing a sad man costume—nest-colored shirt, tweed jacket, wide plaid tie—all of it draped on him as on branches. Frequently, he squinted off to the side with a piece of chalk in his dusty hand. I thought about what it would be like to hold it, just briefly, to feel the chalk there, soft and smooth. From him I learned for the first time things that I already knew, and I worked hard to learn them more and better. I filled out many index cards, hoping it would help. The ceiling wept in long, fluttering strands that effectively obscured us from one another.
I am reading *Nadja* by André Breton. My husband has left the house. I am sitting up in bed, on top of the covers, with my shoes on. It’s quiet, and my hands feel dry, like pages. I turn a page and make a fist, press my nails into my palm. The result is four half-moons that look like unstressed syllables, with the perpendicular crease that runs across—what is called, I believe, the “lifeline”—a stressed one. I always read *Nadja* after I fight with my husband. I have never finished it, and I can’t recall it with any accuracy. Reading while fighting is an altogether different kind of reading, an unreading. It is a way to feel more poetic about fighting. The fight appears on the page over the words and in between them, crowding them out, erasing them, until the story of Nadja becomes the story of you, the story of your husband, and your fight, and finally, at its climax, how desperately wronged you have been, how wrong it all is.

Now, awaiting his key in the lock—the scrape of return, the metal-on-metal hyperbolic as the movies—I think about the common notion of reading as escape. But to where? The world of the book? A world enclosed by front and back cover? It would seem that “real life,” whatever that is, offers infinitely more possibilities for escape, more places to hide, to lie in wait. To lie, and wait. My fights permeate *Nadja*, and now I have two places to escape from. I want exile from my exile, which has become a cell, and I wish for the dimension of shadowlessness, of the de-obscured—that is, the place of no language.

What is a fight, but brokedown, distorted meanings, injurious not just for what they are, but for how they sound? How difficult to survive in a world of cadence and
It’s a wonder we don’t fight more often, perpetually, exclusively. In itself, communication is a lobbing of grenades, and ever-mysterious to me is how and why the pin gets pulled, over what change in weather or moment’s hesitation. We reach the realm of the irrevocable with some incredulity, still partly believing that we can change course, go back to the bowls of steaming noodles, back to what we’d want to have, besides each other, on a desert island. And then by some strange turn we are there, singly, arms waving, each of us jumping up and down on the shoreline as the sound of the last helicopter dies away.

This is what is called Aftermath. The possibility of stillness is here obliterated. No longer reading, no longer myself but a wild and exaggerated version of myself, bionic in my need, I scale the typeface of the book, swinging from letters hand over hand, hopping nimbly over ellipses, hugging the wide ends of apostrophes and commas between my knees. I am in anticipation, a land of vagrants and castaways, a penal colony, a country of customer service, of pound/star confusion, of lines at the deli where you are number 19 and number 19 doesn’t exist. I wish to be triaged. I am trying to reach the front, the counter where I will be told all is well, I am loved and good, where there will be free samples also. The sound of rapturous wound-licking is like an untuned harpsichord being played by a trumpet virtuoso—a reveille, a flourish, and next I am at the Restaurant Delaborde, watching for Nadja.

I sit at a window table and order a bottle of wine from my husband. He is now the one who waits, the one who waits more than, which is to say, the waiter, and we are comfortable in our agreement that something will break or spill. I am only waiting for Nadja, and he is waiting for us both. He brings the wine and tells me about a steak. The
restaurant is humid, so I ask him if he will increase the velocity of the ceiling fans. He
gestures with his arms and knocks over a water glass—Nadja’s, full and sweating. He is
apologizing. I apologize by ordering the steak. When he leaves, I direct my attention
toward the door, which is opening and closing with people coming and going. A fat man
stands at the front with a cigar, greeting people loudly and dusting at his sleeve.

I’m quite sure I won’t recognize Nadja, with her face like changing sky. She arrives at the same time as my steak, which is how I know it is her—me, staking her out; her, meat-colored in a brown traveling suit with a rose blouse, shoulder bag lumpy as with potatoes. My husband-waiter pauses after setting down my plate, turns slightly toward the door to see Nadja, looking so plate-worthy herself. The confluence manages to be staggering and boring at the same time. By the time Nadja reaches my table, my husband-waiter has disappeared into the steam beyond the swinging doors, and I am, again, alone. Since being with Nadja is somehow the same, better-and-worse, as being alone. I wait for her to speak. I take a bite, sip my wine. Her elbow is damp from resting on the wet tablecloth; her water glass remains tipped and empty. I give her mine. She doesn’t seem to notice.

“Everything I see,” I say, “is as if through the wrong end of the telescope.”

“Edith Wharton said that,” Nadja says, without looking up, “already.” She takes from her bag a silver cigarette case and opens it. It is empty. She looks at her reflection on the inside, smooths her hair.

“Everything I see,” I say, “is some version of myself in whatever condition I’m in.”
“Henry Miller said that,” Nadja says, baring her teeth to the cigarette case, “already.” Without looking at me, she reaches across and plucks a tiny roasted potato from my plate. She rubs it across her lips, englistening them, and then puts it in the ashtray.

“Everything I see,” I say, “is terribly triangulated. Each thing touches two things. One that I want, and one that I don’t want; or two that I want, or two that I don’t want, or some other combination of having, losing, wanting. But rarely is anything neutral.”

“You say that,” Nadja says, looking out the window, “all the time.”

“I have never said that before. Maybe something like it, but those exact words, in that exact sequence....” I can’t finish my sentence because I am too embarrassed. Our table feels suddenly large and crowded with people, elbows, allergies, digestion. There is only vertical room, to nod, raise one’s glass. Shaking one’s head has been prohibited, spatially. Beneath my table, a sprig of something lay curled on the parquet floor. Parsley. Parsley/parquet. I think to myself how it would make sense if we knew exactly where to be, based on the first three letters of our names. Nadja would have no choice but to huddle against her nadir, whereas my husband would come to rest in some husk, and I would be helplessly pinioned in a kriegspiel, and all of us would be frantically trying to get to the other, scrambling and bargaining to be somewhere else. Which is exactly what we do all the time anyway. We might as well be phonetic about it.

“You frustrate me,” Nadja says. “You should think less about yourself.” She pulls a radish from her bag and eats it. “You should think about me, instead. Think about him.” She points to my husband-waiter, who is gallantly sweeping crumbs from the next table.
Nadja looks tired, and I feel inhumanly sleepy, deadened like some volcanic ash. I try to speak. “I think about you as a kind of me,” I say, “and him as a kind of me,” but I am yawning, and I yawn out the “of,” and so what I confess to thinking about is him as a kind me. This is what goes on the record, stenographically. Nadja puts money on the table and gets up, and then she is on the other side of the window, mouthing something.

“I can’t understand,” I say. “Just speak normally, so I can hear you.”

Again she mouths something, more slowly and deliberately, showing me much of the whites of her teeth and eyes. Her mouth bends acrobatically, a vowel-gymnast. Then she is gone, and I am left wondering, as I am after every departure, how next to be. A, e, i, o, u.

* 

When my husband arrives, Nadja is face-down in my lap. I am, a little, “laughing up my sleeve.” My husband values macabre hilarity and joins me in the kind of laughter that is like the first word spoken late in the afternoon when you have been silent and alone all day. A gurgle, a fossilized sound. In the rust of our mirth there is genuine nervousness for how it is all supposed to go; we get to this point and begin to make decisions. We will, for a little while, speak only in vowels, noiselessly, miming the outlines of words as a kind of dress rehearsal. As for the fight, it has happened; it has followed, thickly and neatly, like ooze through a cylinder, its right course. To speak of it now would be redundant, melodramatic. There are people who believe in conciliating and there are people who believe in Nadja. There are people who leave and come home. There are
people who make promises and people who know there will be a next time, and that it will not be different, and that it will not be without some small, wincing degree of pleasure. There are people who fight to remember and people who fight to remember to forget. We are most of these people, most of the time. I put Nadja on the nightstand and turn to face my husband, who is sitting up on his side of the bed, on top of the covers with his shoes on. There is an indigenous vocabulary in his face, words going across and down and diagonal, hidden amidst letters he got from elsewhere. I read. A husband is not a book.
AND SOMETIMES Y

I never knew *which times*. 
The librarian was blonde and very pretty. She looked like one of those dolls that came with accessories, so that you knew what kind of doll it was. Sunglasses and bikini for the beach doll. Ball gown and stole for the party doll. And in this case, eyeglasses and a long, lovely index finger, effective for sshh-ing and pointing to words as she read them. I loved her with a confusing love, but forgot about her easily.

The librarian read stories to us. She sat on a chair and we fanned out in front of her on the carpet, appreciating this time on the floor, our bodies close together, shoelaces commingling, but our minds far-flung like the spores of a dandelion after a good blowing. Her voice as it read granted us permission to not listen to the story, to hear in lieu of it other stories that we told ourselves, about the clock on the wall, or the books on the shelves around us, or what we would eat for lunch, or the strange things we had overheard while standing outside of closed doors. I sat eye-level to the librarian’s shiny nyloned knees, feeling like an orphan among orphans, which is like feeling not like an orphan at all.

Sometimes, we were asked to close our eyes and use our imaginations. I kept mine open, and without everyone looking, I could see better, more. Birthmarks. Mismatched socks. Downy hair on legs and arms, catching the light. Once in a while, I caught the eyes of someone else who had not followed directions. I liked the feeling it gave me, but I
usually turned away, blinking, as though it had all been a misunderstanding, as though my eyes had been closed the whole time.

When possible, I spent recess period in the library instead of the schoolyard. It was not always possible; I did not know when or why permission would be granted, which gave my time there an unexpected sweetness. Often, a girl from a different part of the school would be there also. She may have been mentally retarded or she may have just liked making different kinds of faces and talking in desperate-sounding bellows. She could also be very quiet, and her quietness—emanative, quieting everything around her—made the library feel even more like a library. We sat one day at a table, reading, taking turns looking in one another’s general direction. The girl held her book splayed and close to her face, its dull green back cover in one hand and the rest of it in the other. She leaned closer. She licked the inside of the back cover hesitantly and then again, harder, her mouth pressing into the book. When she saw me, she stuck her tongue out as far as it would go. It was the pinkest pink I’d ever seen. Shyly, she turned the inside of the book to show me. A piece of chewing gum, gray and small and hard, like an ancient raisin, glistened. She slid the book to me, and I put my tongue where hers had been. It was fresh and minty, its purpose restored.
LUNCH

The cord of the burgundy change purse left a faint reddish stain on the back of my neck; inside, the leather was soft and crumby. There was just enough money inside for the week. Some kept bills in their shoes, slipped them into the tubes of their socks; some kept quarters deep in pockets, unfazed by the whiten and scrape of their knuckles as they retrieved them. Carrying a change purse was like carrying around a good-night kiss or a finger from a mother’s floured hand, like leading a pack mule with some rope. There was no good reason for it, not on the crowded body, not in the crowded line.

The meatsmell started there, in line. Everything, even the pudding and the bowl of sad apples, bore the meatsmell. The hamburgers, gray, sat in rows in their opened buns. Pearls in oysters, to me. But to most, they were for throwing, for mashing up with milk and mayonnaise so that days later, a hard, tell-tale speck would remain in the rounded corner of the tray’s main chamber. Or the boy with the fleshy lips would take a disc of meat from its canopy bed and put it on the seat of the girl with the pink sneakers, the ones that jangled from all of the bead-strung safety-pins. Called friendship pins. When she got up to get a straw.

(I didn’t know, until I did, that some food was for laughing at. I rehearsed in the coat room with a banana because bananas seemed inarguably ridiculous. When I was behind someone in line who chose a banana from the bowl, I sniggered my best snigger, with my whole body. Turned out I was wrong. Bananas were simply for eating, their ridiculous
peels not for any high jinks, but simply for throwing away. I picked up my purse from the floor, where it had fallen during my performance. I sat even more alone than usual, repenting hungrily, eating nothing.)

Lunch was a place for auto-didacticism. I needed to teach myself how to hate what I loved, and love what I hated, but in the meantime, hamburger day kept happening, every Tuesday. I’d get one and vow not to eat it, to play with it instead, or nibble only at the bread and proclaim it disgusting. But the moment I sat down, I was overcome—by the morning’s struggles; by the prospect of everything that the afternoon would bring; by the rustic, conciliatory smell of meat. I succumbed, first slowly, and then with abandon. I ate it as though eating my troubles, as though eating it would help me somehow. I told myself with every chew and swallow, I am a child of the universe, I have a right to be here. For the rest of the day I could bring my hands to my face and inhale the smell of the meat, the smell of defeat, or was it victory.
To An Ex-Lover, Now Minorly Famous

When I saw you on television last night, the first thing I noticed was your teeth. I thought maybe that you’d done something to them, or more accurately, had something done to them. They looked fluorescent, like two rows of tiny square light bulbs that lit up whenever you opened your mouth. I remembered that you always had nice teeth; what my German grandmother would have called “big American teeth,” though she would not have meant it as a compliment. On television, I found them distracting. You were playing the part of a man accused of killing his brother with a box-cutter, but in the end, you were found not-guilty. Your performance, while serviceable, felt to me a touch overwrought. You widened your eyes exaggeratedly to convey fear, and flailed your hands wildly when you were declaiming your innocence. I wondered, as I watched, whether these deliberate gestures were in keeping with the character you were portraying, or whether you were simply acting badly. Having once known you, my final conclusion is that you were acting badly, but an argument certainly could be made: the character was meant to seem shifty; we were supposed to consider him a suspect. Perhaps initially you’d assumed the role with more subtlety, but were directed to be grander. My husband suggested that your acting was commensurate with the kind of show that it was, which I thought was a wonderfully restrained—even elegant—thing to say.

The experience of watching you on television while sitting with my husband, my feet in his lap, admittedly is strange. It has happened multiple times, and it has been strange every time. My husband watches you with an inscrutable expression, something between compassion and disdain, but less recognizable than either of those emotions.
And then, of course, it’s possible that I read those expressions on his face because they are close to what I myself am feeling. Mostly, I think what we feel is embarrassment, and because embarrassment is such a difficult atmosphere to sit in for thirty minutes or an hour, we engage in separate but related struggles to overcome it, to cope with it by focusing intently on the dialogue or the other characters, trying to react to the things they are saying and doing as compliant audience members should. It is not unlike the experience of being at the doctor’s office and concentrating on a spot on the ceiling or a wan watercolor print while being given a shot or exam.

(You had a recurring role on a show that we were quite fond of watching, but after a string of your appearances, we rather tacitly lost interest. I guess because the program went from being one that my husband and I enjoyed, to being one in which you starred. I don’t mean to say that you ruined the show for us, but if I am being perfectly honest, you did ruin the show for us. You played a has-been, drug-addled rock star, and you played it well. I couldn’t watch you without recalling the Mick Jagger impression you used to do when we were together, so many years ago. You loved that impression. I loved it too, but slightly less. I remember once when “Start Me Up” came on at a party and you made quite a display of yourself, gyrating around the room, lips flaring. I had uncomfortable thoughts about you for the rest of the evening.)

All told, I would have to say that despite the imposition your vocation presents, I find it empirically interesting to see you on television. We are no longer in a relationship, but television—a medium that has nothing to do with me, one that I feel extreme ambivalence toward—has offered me a one-way mirror. I can watch you, form opinions about you, but remain invisible. And although the “you” that I see is not meant to be
“you”—is meant to be, instead, a drug-addled rock star in tight pants, or a murder suspect, or a salesman, or a burn victim—it is, unquestionably, you on my screen. I feel a peculiar kind of nostalgia, for a relationship we never had, and an accompanying confusion due to the fact of your altered voice and appearance, as though I am rifling through the drawers of my memory to find the garment I wore the last time we met, when I was a different version of myself than I am now, when we said goodbye and wished each other luck.
The story as a joke. The story is a joke: the more people it passes among, the funnier it gets. When someone was called upon to read, the joke would become almost unbearable. The first read with a lisp and the second with a stutter. Whoever laughed would have to read next. The third wheezed and mispronounced *virtue* and *pious*. I held my breath and ran my fingernail along a deep black groove on my desk, a ball-point laceration. The ink still glinted blue-black. I wished to disappear into it. Titters flapped wildly in my ears, tiny wings of cruelty. Toward the end, despite my wildest wishes, my name was called. I read the final paragraph without error, and the silence was worse than the laughter. I stared straight ahead when I was finished, at the clock whose impassive face and perfect, loud ticking seemed excessive.
STATE CAPITALS
MUSIC

The same boy who was always asking me in a hostile whisper if I wanted a knuckle sandwich put a crayon in the projector. I watched him do it, and he saw me watching and glared back at me, raising briefly his clenched fist. He did scare me, this boy, with his robust appetite for murdering insects and boring scabrous designs into his arms and legs with a ballpoint, but not just because of his deeds. It was also his stealth, his ability to leave no evidence, to deftly roll down his sleeves and pant legs or slip the magnifying glass in his pocket with a magician’s sleight of hand. This time, though, there was the smoking crayon, and him with melted cornflower on his fingers. We had been given a break from singing “Sweet Dreams Are Made Of This” and “This Land Is Your Land,” from learning 4/4 time using various percussive items, and were watching a cartoon chord hop around on the pull-down screen, when we smelled something like smelting, something waxy and wrong, which we acknowledged with our faces and owlish turns of our heads. The treble clef—female, with fringy eyelashes and a red mouth—giggled coquettishly as smoke began obscuring her from view. A sharp symbol (tic-tac-toe board, number sign) was scaling the black lines of the staff, as if climbing to safety, and an unseen chorus was trilling “Don’t (B) sharp; don’t (B) flat; just (B) natural,” the words appearing at the bottom of the screen with a quarter-note bouncing atop each one in turn. We watched with some confusion—the smoke in front of us not real but rather a silhouette, an image of the smoke behind us, which was real, and noxious. We were caught in the force field of image and object, and we were frightened and a bit delighted in our fear. The teacher turned on the lights, his round, shiny head a drum of chagrin. I
looked at him and knew that the milk in his refrigerator, at that precise moment, was turning. I wanted to tell him, to save him from pouring it over his cereal that night, or drinking it straight out of the container, to stop him from feeling its spoil, from spraying it into the rust-ringed sink, from wiping his mouth on an acrylic sweater sleeve. Everyone was covering their noses and filing out of the room, except for the teacher and me and the perpetrator, caught blue-handed, now looking tearful. I felt unable to move. I suppose I wanted to see the boy brought to justice, but I also wanted to be told to join my classmates in the hall, to be found missing and called back. The room was awash in disappointment, the smell of which is very like burnt crayon. We three formed an unlikely triangle—always the instrument picked first for its shininess and recognizability, I knew, but abandoned soon after for its useless, vapid tone. I would not be a triangle. I thought of myself as quieter, more wooden—a güiro unscraped. I left before I was made to leave, not knowing if I would have been made to leave, not knowing if I had been missed at all, but feeling somehow vindicated, and almost—virtuosic.
The City

I was twelve when the last human disappeared into Suicide Lake and left the city to the statues. I had been warned by the statue who had invented gripe water, as well as gripe, that this would happen. My city is nicknamed the city of scientists, inventors, artists, philosophers, and humanists, and on its far end is a park containing Suicide Lake (the bridge on its north side like an arched brow) and a fountain and several shady groves and walkways and plaques and plenty of false-looking trees and a dozen or more statues of scientists, inventors, artists, philosophers, and humanists, all of them local men and women, except for one statue of a prominent historical figure whose name I can’t recall who was erected by a maverick civic group whose name I also can’t recall. The other statues don’t trust him, and excluded him from most major decisions until they finally devitalized him altogether by refusing to return his echoes. The rest of the city had been a bustling nexus of industry, famed for its buildings, diverse food offerings, and what was loosely termed “culture.”

I’m not sure why I alone was spared. A few of the statues tell me some mumbo-jumbo about purity of spirit and cleanliness of hands and what they call a “preternatural aversion to chewing gum and din.” The others say, simply, that they liked me from the start. No one else talked to them, at least not as much as I did, and no one else listened to what they had to say. No one napped among them, curled up at their bases, or put lips to them; tongue, sometimes, to taste the cold, salty hardness. Oh, it was horrible to watch Mum and Dad run to the bridge with the rest, and tie bricks to one another’s feet, and tell me only that they could not explain, but that there were many meat pies in the deep
freeze, and oranges in the larder, and extra sweaters (for it was getting cold) in the chest. I watched Mum stand behind Dad, her white arms around his waist and her face in his neck and her lovely eyes closed, and as Dad turned on me an expression filled with utter utterness, something in my lungs exploded. To this day, whenever I breathe deeply, I have a feeling, not altogether unpleasant, of stark mint. They did not jump or fall so much as glide into the lake, and while I heard intermittent thwongs and splashes come from all along the bridge, the only noise they made was a doleful silence.

Mostly, I remember the sudden spatiality of everything, the amplification. How loud the birds sounded, how hysterical they became. They no longer needed to keep their distance, and so they were everywhere—walking down streets, darting in and out of doorways, sunning themselves on benches. The sky, too, grew bold, unfurling further, lowering itself slightly, until the horizon could be reached and touched even by someone small. In fact, the sky became so ubiquitous that I could not look around without feeling minorly vertiginous, but I still looked around all the time. I said very sternly to the statues, when they reprimanded me for all of my tilting and craning, “This sky deserves the one admirer it has left.” I lay in the park on my back and could hear it rearranging itself, creaks and snaps and sighs, and watch as the afternoon sun sidled over it and through the clouds with the gesture of a fine lady tugging her stole from beneath someone’s foot. It was a brilliant performance, day after day. I clapped my hands, and the noise filled the air, and the pollen filled the air, and I was always terrified, for a split second, because everything, everything had grown violently a beating heart.

The animals moved into the apartments. I shared my room with woodland creatures, mostly, and for a time, an aging, lovelorn grouse. During the late spring and
summer months I slept in the park with the statues, who carried on until long after midnight. The statue of the city’s most famous singer usually provided the evening entertainment. She had a lovely voice and knew every melody for every song that had ever been sung, almost, and she also knew how to compose her own, and frequently she combined the two and added breathtaking descants. They were my favorite, those delicate little lullabies, recasting my life prior to the era of the statues in a terrifically operatic way and setting me thrumming with auto-nostalgia: I missed myself, as though I were someone else, as though I were everyone who was gone, whenever she sang. Her music and my memory combined to invent a past that I longed for desperately, and to place me squarely in it, which is another way of saying that she mothered me, and I daughtered her.

Over time, my features deepened but I did not quite age. The traffic lights continued to blink and shine. The church bells still chimed. I found that I knew exactly what I could depend on, and for exactly how long. One of the humanist statues, when not accusing everyone around him of navel-gazing, wooed the singer nightly, never varying his tactics. I could time his efforts by the church bells. She was, as ever, unmoved. I sat amongst the statues in the falling dusk as routinely as I used to sit in my small, crooked kitchen, eating milk-soaked bread in the near-darkness before going to bed.

I was sitting on a bench adjacent to the park in what used to be the busiest square in the city, listening to the statues bellow, trying my best to concentrate on the census that I was compiling at the behest of the statue who was the originator of counting-by-twos as well as an alternate form of trigonometry, when I felt my left leg change. Harden. I shifted positions, stuck both legs out in front of me, and touched my left thigh, knee, calf.
I picked up a whole walnut from the pile that some squirrels had been sharing with me and struck it against the fleshiest part of the limb. I felt nothing, no impact. The splintered shell scattered me with dust and pieces, and I ate the nut, soft and squeaking, while trying to calm my nerves.

It took a few attempts, but I finally stood up and made my way into the park where the statues congregated. When I stopped, I found that I could lean the rest of my body on the hardened leg. My right leg seemed suddenly useless, flimsy, and I found myself feeling disgust, against all logic, or in keeping with whatever new logic was being put upon me, for the wrong leg. The statues were discussing cured meats, a topic that had been consuming them for months, and they did not hear me approach. I planted myself in their midst and they fell silent, giving each other sidelong glances. “Well,” one of them grunted at last, “what is it?”

I cleared my throat, which felt gravelly. “I would like to know why my leg has seemingly turned to stone.”

The statues burst out laughing.

“Oh, my dear,” the singer cried, hoarse with glee, “nothing turns to stone.”

The others agreed, whooping and rasping. “Go, leave us,” they begged. “That’s enough hilarity for one afternoon!”

Stunned, I turned and shuffled away as quickly as I could, back to where I had been sitting. I flipped absently through the ledger I’d left on the bench, thinking some clue might be found there, but none of my notes made sense. I felt profoundly exhausted. I brushed aside the shards of walnut shell and lay down to take a nap. I heard faintly the phantom sounds of traffic. I dozed uneasily, fretting over whether a city without people
was still a city, or whether it had become simply a place. In the heaviness of waking, an uncertain amount of time later, I sensed an additional heaviness—this time in my arm.

There was no mistaking what was happening, and I went with as much dignity as I could back to the statues. They were listening to the singer sing a sad, funny aria about soap-on-a-rope, and for a moment I simply listened with them, subduing my urge to hurl myself into her cold arms. But between verses I raised my voice: “Can someone please tell me what has happened to my arm and leg?” I braced myself for another round of mirth, but none came. A nearby squirrel fixed me with his beady eyes and spoke, with the command of a stage actor: “My, but she’s a bright one, isn’t she? Amazing to think how happy she must have made her mother, the day she was born.” The statue of the city’s greatest thinker sternly told him to be gone.

Everything became rigorously still.

“We just don’t want you to die like all the rest will,” he said to me. “And we just don’t want you to live like all the rest must, with their fur and their shivers and their hunger.”

The singer sang a long, low note, and all at once I was ensconced, flesh and stone, by every invisible thing: chlorophyll, devotion, weather, molecules. I wish I could say that there was more fanfare, a greater moment of protest, when I gazed around at my city and zealously swore to remain in it as I was, to martyr myself to its memory, to protect its pavement and architecture, its womb emptied of commerce, the ghostly whorls on street corners where crowds used to gather, until death wrenched me away. I wish I could say I felt very cold and very hot, or very leaden, as might be expected, that I tried to fight but could not, tried to run but could not, tried to scream but could not, tried to explain how
combing one’s hair and twiddling one’s thumbs are different than turning to stone. But I cannot wish, and I cannot say. At the base of my throat and across my chest, underneath my feet and between my shoulder blades, just such a report is engraved.
SOCIAL STUDIES

*Clockwise left, front row:* the boy with the scar; the boy with one brown eye and one blue eye; the bow-legged girl; the girl who said “yes Ma’am,” “no, Ma’am”; the girl; the girl; *second row:* the boy; the girl; the knuckle-sandwich boy; the boy who had a patch on his eye; the girl with the soft, cornhusk hair; the boy; *third row:* the girl who taught everyone Piglatin and said her grandfather invented it, then said later she herself invented it, and twice accused me of spying; the girl with sad eyes and dark knees; the very small boy; the boy with the beautiful, unpronounceable name and the crumbs of dirt behind his ear; the boy; the girl; *fourth row:* the girl who loved Abraham Lincoln; the girl; the boy who kept shoelaces and small metal figurines inside his desk; me.

The map, not drawn to scale, rolled noisily down over the blackboard. Here are some important things to remember: in some countries, belching is considered polite, words like *favorite* and *parlor* have u’s. The capital of Maryland is Annapolis (Mary and Anna are friends!) and the capitals of some states are not the obvious cities (Philadelphia, New York City) but the other ones, and the capital of South Dakota is who-cares. Everyone must pull from the box one slip of paper with a president’s name on it and write a report on him. Use the encyclopedia, but change the words. Handwriting counts. Your diorama will be displayed for Parents’ Night and should depict a holiday scene. What do you celebrate in your family? The study of countries, colonies, and cities. The study of people. The study of other people. The study of other, from the point of view of same; the study of few from the point of view of many, all of the wars and famines, hatreds and
stupidities sublimated by the irresistible convenience of the book, so portable, so
organized, so illustrated! The study of civilization, rounded and polished like a piece of
sea glass in a collector’s palm. When it caught the light, it really glinted. And for extra
credit: if all the world’s agonies could be contained in seven continents, what was my
problem? Why couldn’t I make mine fit? Where in the home of the brave was my room?
I left it blank. I felt like Antarctica, like the extra “c” in Antarctica.
JANITOR CLOSET, LAVATORY

It was whispered and occasionally yelled that feces and spiders lived in the janitor closet, at the bottom of the deep paint-splattered sink and in the pail beside it. The one who had the same slicker as I—reversible, yellow on one side and navy blue with small, smiling, spurting whales on the other—got pushed inside one afternoon when Mr. Buddy left the door ajar. The door clicked, locked shut. We had both worn our slickers that day, both on yellow whale side—the implications of this skittered beneath my skin like insects, like spiders. *It could have been me in there.* Maybe it was me in there. Maybe our slickers, in such a moment of duress, had turned us into the same person. I wanted to help but did not know how, and my panic made me hot and, I felt certain, conspicuous. I escaped the hallway, now thick with titters and congratulations, and hid in the bathroom. Also called “laboratory.” No—lavatory. Under the fluorescent light, my raincoat looked ashamed of itself, enfeebled, the whales dribbling on themselves like senior citizens. I turned it inside out, and felt myself cocooned in a terrible humidity. The bathroom had become a classroom, and I was being taught a reversible lesson—on one side, guilt; on the other, impotence. Even with my hood over my ears and the faucet running, I heard the banging, the cry to be let out. It sounded like my voice. I ran from the bathroom to find Mr. Buddy, who wore the key to the closet on his belt.
MNEMONIC DEVICE

It sounded like something sheathed in plastic that was to be used to unlock a lock in the event of a missing key. Something that could only be used once, and then had to be discarded. When we were told that we would be given mnemonic devices, I was enthusiastic. I sat straighter in my chair. Finally: a practical tool. I thought about my diary, a stiff, hardbound little book, where occasionally I recorded my desires, shortcomings, breakfasts, and nightmares. It had a lock whose key I kept in various secret places, moving it from secret place to secret place in order to deter possible snoops and maintain my own interest. The best part of the diary was the lock, and the best part of the lock was the necessity of key. Checking over my shoulder, removing it from its secret place. Wouldn’t it be exciting, I thought, to find it gone.

I could lose the key, drop it in the sewer. Wait a few days for the forgetting to set in, and then attempt to retrieve it from its last known spot. Gasp a bit at its absence, allow myself a few minutes of genuine panic and despair: The key! It’s gone! Then, I could recall the mnemonic device, patient and powerful at the bottom of my bag. No question my relief would be real. I felt it as I sat there waiting for my gift, listening tolerantly to nonsensical words being strung together, anticipation coating my face like honey on a spoon.
A Burial

We slept in a small bed; there was no money for a bigger one. We were small people. We could create space between ourselves, even in small beds. The hairs on our legs mingled; our hipbones touched, and sometimes, those things were more than I could bear. I would turn and hug the sagging edge, listen to your swallowing noises.

(You did not die. You are right here. But the bed, the apartment, everything in the psychic stretch of this page is dead. I have to write it a funeral.)

One night, hugging the edge, I was seized with ambition. The clock said 4:07 am. I slept very fitfully then, and you slept very soundly, and this difference, I felt certain, had daytime implications. I was resentful of your sleep, of the satisfaction it gave you. The bed meant very separate things to us. Feeling seized with ambition, I turned to look at you. Your lips were slightly apart, and for some reason the hair follicles on your face were vivid; I felt I had caught each hair in the act of growing. I got up and put on my glasses and a sweatshirt and my shoes. I went into the yard and it was brightly blue and I felt incredibly happy and there and then I swore that I would forevermore get up at four in the morning. Just standing there, awake, sober, alone, I sensed that I was accomplishing the best work of my life. I felt clean and productive, alert and serene. I wanted terribly to share that blue stillness with you, but it was an insular moment—it would evaporate if you came near it, or worse, become hopelessly “nice.” A nice, made-for-TV clip of two people invigorated by the pre-dawn chill. I will now tell you something else about that moment: it was hell. Actually. Because hell means being in a
perfect moment, alone, and longing to invite into it only the person whose very presence would annihilate it, and knowing this, and longing for it anyway, even more intensely.

I am constantly trying to burrow my way out of solitude, and the moment I do, I am usually devastated, and shocked by how bad I feel. Why couldn’t I have just enjoyed the charming coffee shop, the street fair, the view from the attic window? You are sitting over there and feeling a great affection for me. The cat is under the table that you’re sitting at, shivering because she hates thunder. You say she gets frightened because her mother abandoned her in a boxcar during a terrible storm, so the noise, to her, is a renunciation, a hunger. I like the things that you say.

I wanted to use my body. My mind was pleasantly vacant, like a room with heavy rugs and no furniture. I took the shovel from where it hung between two nails on the side of the house and carried it to the center of the small yard. I leaned on it, and its chipped and rusted tip sank slightly into the ground. I leaned harder, and the ground received it. The ground was a fat, placid baby and the shovel was carrots and I was the firm mother, spooning.

I say this now. I had none of these thoughts, then. I had only a physical impulse.

I put my weight onto the shovel until it was up to the hilt—what is hilt?—in flat, damp dirt. The dirt made a sound, a kind of clinking sigh, and I remember that the type of dirt in the place where we lived was actually called “clay.” Dirt makes no sound. But it makes sense that clay does, because there are shiny bits in clay, tiny noisemakers. Things for the gloaming to settle upon. It was the opposite of gloaming, and the clay where I stood, pushing into it, was the same color as the air which was the same color as the house which was the same color as my legs. We all looked exhumed, covered in the clay.
of the dead. I lifted out the shovel and could just see the frown-shaped slit it left in the ground, a shadow only slightly darker than the shadow that was everything, trees and me and it and shovel. I widened the slit with the tip of the shovel and the shadow darkened, deepened. I could see down the throat of the ground. I started to dig. It is the nature of the hole to demand to be dug.

“This is my nature,” we are so fond of saying to one another. “This is the way that I am.” I said it earlier tonight, when you asked me why I couldn’t just leave it. It’s generally when I ask the same question many times, and then one more time after that, that you look exasperated and in certain cases, hurt (as in the incident with the potatoes). Or when I say something hurtful to make sure I have your attention. I think: you must know that’s what I’m doing. But you don’t. I see myself as transparent, a clean aquarium filled with vibrant fish that sporadically misbehave, but I see you seeing me as murky, like a pond one tiptoes into cautiously. I understand that I consider my words to be a form of entertainment. I think they are mild in demeanor and without consequence at the moment of their utterance. Fundamentally, I don’t perceive the difference between small things and large things, as you do. This, I believe, or make-believe, protects me from the capacity to do harm.

Once I did harm, with the neighborhood girl. You know how fond I am of saying this, it is one of the few stories on my shelf. You are amused, I think, at how often I take it down and dust it. Didn’t I just, one or two nights ago? That’s what you would think if I were saying this aloud now, even though it’s been much longer than that. You are sitting over there, and I feel indulgent: under the influence of the neighborhood girl I put tomato juice-soaked tissues in people’s mailboxes, way in the back. It was not my nature.
(The story continues: years later when I returned home after having been away for some time we saw each other, me and the neighborhood girl, in the neighborhood bar. She told me she was working for the local paper. She asked me how my sex life was going. I was having sex, not with you, but I didn’t consider the having of sex to be a life of sex. She still smelled to me like tomato juice—this is true, I don’t say it to be poetic; she was drinking a bloody mary—and she told me amidst a few hiccups that she had discovered something about sex lives in decline, something like how in the beginning, when it’s good, you shower beforehand, but after a while, you shower right when it’s done, or if you can’t for whatever reason, you want to. She said at first, women are nervous about their smells, and when they are no longer nervous, they stop enjoying themselves as much. “It’s our nature,” she said, “to only feel good when we’re a little scared.” I told you about this one time to make you laugh and you responded exactly right, I think.)

The hole was amazingly easy to dig. Before I knew it I was up to my knees. I waited for my muscles to ache, for the sun to nudge me out of it so that I could, sheepish, return to our small, gurgling bed. I didn’t know how long I had been there, digging, but the blue wasn’t lifting, and my lucidity did not wane. The shovel went in easily, but with just the right amount of resistance so that my arms felt alert. At first I shoveled huge shovelfuls, but lifting them out of the deepening hole became too difficult; it required a force that didn’t fit with the general aura of ease. So I started scooping smaller mounds, which could be flung easily over the shoulder.
I have this idea about myself, that I am a rag doll, easily flung, and therefore, easily pardoned. I had a cousin who called me “Feather” when I was young, and I understood what he meant, but I wasn’t satisfied with the image. He would scoop me up under one arm or toss me over his shoulder. This is something I have been meaning to ask: something about the desire to be scooped. Is this a legitimate desire? Is it about not wanting to touch the floor? Again I remember things about childhood that refuse to make sense, not that they do not just now, sepia-toned against the digital crispness of our age, make sense, but that they did not then, too, make sense. My childhood prepared me well for your puzzling behavior. Games like “Don’t Touch The Floor.” What everybody failed to recognize was that the couch, the countertops, the pink edge of the bathtub, the dining room table, the narrow deacon’s bench—all of it became the new floor. A floor is only what you stand on.

(The story continues still further: not so long ago, we were back home for a niece’s baptism. You had decided to go for a walk, early, very unlike you. I decided to go to Lou’s and sit at the counter, very unlike me. We were in this period, one that included most of that trip home, of transcendence. I think because we were, existentially speaking, wearing one another’s underwear. It made us both very nervous. But the nervousness was working, ferrying us forward, a gleaming piston on the bliss express. I sat at the counter at Lou’s in the stool of a large man who’d just gotten up. I ordered a coffee and toast, and when my coffee came I, as you (since I was already not me by virtue of this strange bliss, and also, by virtue of just being there), whitened it with two creamers and four sugars. The counter was mostly empty. Nobody knew I was not me. Someone had left behind the
local paper, opened to the classifieds. Along the right side was a gray box, and at the top it read “Ask Alice.” That was not the neighborhood girl’s name, the one with whom I had done harm, but there was her moon face, her moony grin. Now she was an advice columnist. This is what happens in towns. My plate of toast came and I put it on top of Alice’s advice. Some crumbs fell on her face as I buttered my toast and ate it quickly, the same way you would have done. I felt confused and anxious, and the confusion and anxiety were my feelings. I sensed that the transformation was occurring, and I knew it was inevitable, but it felt worse than I’d imagined. The toast, your toast, was a heavy ball at the bottom of the stomach that had become mine again, and your sweet, white coffee was making me feel sick. By the time I saw you, later in the morning, the metamorphosis of you back into you and me back into me was complete, and there was nothing to say about it. We talked in our old way. We’d had something extra, and lost it, which is like not losing anything. I didn’t tell you about the column, and still haven’t. That was the last time we went back home. “Too stressful,” I say. You don’t dispute statements like that. “Better to see everyone at the beach.” You are very agreeable. “Home has become an uncomfortable place, a lacuna, inside of which lives only the neighborhood girl, who frightens me.” This last, I do not say aloud.

You are reading something off of your computer screen, moving your lips. I start to speak and stop myself. I rearrange the sound of the words in my head, decide they are not worthwhile. I say words to remind you that I’m here. I read aloud when I’m alone, and on occasion, I read to us in bed using a nice, soft voice. We can make up the bed with clean sheets and not say anything—fitted sheet, straight sheet, wrong way, corners
tighter, tuck, which pillowcase is for which. For me it’s a fun challenge, now and then excruciating; for you it just simply is. To be poetic, I will say: you are the house where silence lives and words are welcome visitors. I am the auditorium where words live and silence is a guest speaker. There are good and bad guest speakers. Sometimes, I think, you must hate the sound of my voice. I do. But I never hate the sound of yours. That is curious. I think it’s because, I do different voices, but your voice is only always your voice.

I was humming, down in the hole. Typically I hum when I am nervous, but standing inside my excavation, I was self-possessed. I was digging across and down, across and down, widening the hole so that I could continue to deepen it, and also, so that I could clamber out when the time came. The mounds of dug-up earth I left in my wake were forming broad, rough steps. It was still blue outside, a brighter, denim blue, but blue nonetheless, and I wondered where the sunrise was. I seemed to be the only moving thing for miles, me and the dirt that slid. I wished for a glass of milk. I remembered a person’s name that I’d forgotten the previous week. I thought of a great thing to do with chicken. I made a decision about how to handle this year’s holiday travel. I felt solvent and without scorn.

Earlier tonight I asked you a lot of questions about myself, I wanted you to tell me about the way that I am. You said, those conversations never end well. You’ve moved to the green chair and you’re reading a magazine and yawning. We will not go to bed at the same time this night. (Some statements, no matter what you do to make them plain, will always sound dramatic.)
I wondered how many acres down our yard went. It occurred to me: our yard had many yards beneath it. We bought a house with .71 acres, but maybe it was a thousand acres deep. Nobody measured it that way. What a steal, I thought to myself. Across is what you buy, but what you’re also getting is down. It is not more arbitrary than most things, but it is not less. The shovel caught on something fabric, caked with dirt. I wanted to get a better look at it, but I hadn’t stopped shoveling since I started. I worried, suddenly, about stopping. But I stopped. I shook out the thing, which was blue, and I recognized it as one of your old tee-shirts. It said something *Arts Stroll*; there was a hole where more words used to be. Underneath was a smiling banjo. I remembered the shirt from many years ago, many summers. It looked very small, too small to fit you now. That and the banjo’s smiling face made me feel sad and guilty, for loving this shirt that was somehow more you than you. I thought with yearning about your elbows, which the shirt had always made look very nice and pointy and tanned. I was tired suddenly, and I lay down with it, my body leveled awkwardly against the contours of the dig.
CURSIVE, SPELLING

I did both things very, very, very well. Right-slanting, not too fat. I before e except after c. I outsmarted puzzlers like Wednesday, Antarctica, Arkansas; found errors in the reader. Before long, I started ruining things, just enough to be convincing: the cross of the t off-center, the third hump of the lowercase m mish mashed, the capital Q a disaster.

Calendar, cemetery, embarass. It felt necessary.
I sat along the back and thought about my bones. How they moved, and caused other things to move. Subject-object. How my hand could lift and pour—not its own self, but something contained within something else. *I poured the gruel into a bowl.* I did not pour; the hand did not pour; the pot did not pour. The fingers lifted and tipped the pot and the gruel poured, invertebrate and senile. It was confusing, this language, this body. So easy to mistake one action for another; one agent for another. The man with the whistle started screaming: “You! Get in here!” I moved (my body) upright and my ankles cracked (themselves). My feet did not seem to want to move forward, in the direction of the gesticulating man, and I didn’t blame them. I felt a tenderness toward them, a sisterly sort of pride in their desire for autonomy, but I was being compelled by an outside force to make them go. I tugged at my shorts, which looked and felt like fish skin—silvery, clammy. Everyone was made to wear the same shorts in this room. We were a school of fish, haha. The man with the whistle was sneering; everyone else was sneering also. It is possible that I was taking a long time to get to where I was supposed, apparently, to be. A boy with sharp eye teeth threw the ball so hard at my chest that my ribs rattled a little in their cage. I was not afraid and I did not yet know about the foolishness of most everything. I felt a bit like I was snowing, all of the individual parts of me vaporizing and then fluttering back to their approximate places, everything slightly askew, no two parts exactly alike. One eye felt suddenly smaller and lower than the other; one leg felt longer. My arms needed my hands to let go of the ball at the right moment and they did,
perfectly, and the ball, over the heads of the necks that violently craned, poured itself into the net. The net hung like a loose gullet, fleshy.
Pluto, the smallest planet, is not so very different from bedrock, which consists of layers of calcified silt and sediment that over time, erode. Continents drift and tectonics plate and Pangaea and hydrangea. Precipitation and/or atmosphere may or may not create the nimbus clouds and the cumulus clouds and the cumulonimbus clouds which empty their fleecy insides into the oceans, which become the rivers and streams and tributaries and glaciers and eventually, the rain again, which swells the ocean until the moon is crescent-shaped, gibbous, or full. Just put the baking soda in the paper mâché volcano and pour in the vinegar: first prize.
I keep almost getting hit by cars. It happens so much that I think I might be doing it on purpose. Today I am crossing the street while a bus is attempting to turn, and I slow down when I should be speeding up. I feel powerless, kinetically—like a marionette that some deranged kid has gotten a hold of. The front of the bus is so much upon me that I can’t see the bus driver when I look up, only the bus’s vast, flattened face, the glare of the windshield, the underside of the wipers. I want to express facially my surprise, to let the driver know that I am puzzled by this, too, that it isn’t in my nature to be in the way. My need to make a connection with the bus driver, with this bus driver—to create from our dumb happenstance some kind of meaning, to enact, here and now, the legend that will become a defining item within our catalogue of lore, one that our friends will repeat, that we’ll be asked to share at holiday gatherings, that will be the beginning of “us” and then later, “so very us”—temporarily supersedes the more pressing urge to move, and I feel that something irrevocable is about to take place—this is it, I think, something irrevocable is happening at last—but there is only a terrifying honk, and a gust of exhaust, and I realize that crossing this street has become, like everything else, absolutely absurd, and I wish to simply disappear, and reappear in some austere but well-appointed room, one with an afghan folded across a sensible bed, and a wash basin. A place from which, finally, I cannot return or be returned, a place, finally, that is final. I am tired of gravity, of elasticity, of going just to come back, of feeling one way and then eventually feeling another, of quenching only to thirst again. Street-crossing is a perfect example. I want a place where crossing the street is illegal or better yet, impossible—a new route,
there and back, must be found each time. This must be a place, too, where I can enter into
and out of relationships as I please, without any of the accompanying guilt—that enabler
and destroyer of all relationships, the emotional equivalent of the moon-faced, allergy-
ridden, leaky-eared classmate you felt bad for but couldn’t stand, who taught you cruelty
and then punished you for it, repeatedly, throughout your life, whose fault, you suspect,
every ensuing relationship has been—where I can be alone easily and often but with the
option of good company if I so choose. A place of occasional sex that is meaningful and
tender in its occurrence but with no ramifications whatsoever, seen or unseen. A place of
gentle industry, some work that doesn’t think itself more important than it is, that doesn’t
think at all. Something about the almost-cataclysm, the hiss and squeal of brakes, brings
my latent desires into sharp focus, embeds them within a clear and ready narrative: me as
a bookkeeper in Aliceville, Kansas, a quiet and treed community with neat, sedate homes,
a fine church, and one very well-maintained bank. Table tennis with another bookkeeper
on some evenings. Lunches at the drugstore counter. Maybe this is my idea of the
afterlife, and it beckons me close enough to see it plainly, and it makes my shapeless,
lonely existence on the pavement seem all the more pathetic, and if I could just get to it I
could live happily, if dead, ever after.

I reach the other side of the street and resolve to think more about this later. My
mind is filled with such resolutions. There is a resolution overcrowding problem. I
wonder if there will always be space for more, or if, with a soft noiseless noise, like the
bubble-wrap bubbles that won’t pop, the oldest ones just blink out, and leave behind
sprigs of something, forget-me-not or Queen Anne’s lace, to mark their little graves. And
then one day I wake up and find my mind littered with dead flowers. This is good. I wish
I could paint. I would paint this, what I just thought—a tableau of a man’s head congested with half-thoughts, ellipses and to-be-continueds, gradually emptying out, until the last frame depicts the head as white space dotted with withered fronds. I would be such a prolific painter if I could paint, I have so many visions like these. I have the brain of a painter but no rendering capacity. My girlfriend once asked me if I could have any ability, what would it be. I could tell she asked me because she wanted me to ask her what hers would be.

“What would yours be?” I complied.

“Flying, naturally,” she said. “Wouldn’t yours?”

“No,” I said. I pretended to think. “Mine would be painting.”

My girlfriend looked upset. This was not the conversation she’d intended. “But, you could paint,” she said. “It’s not like it’s impossible, patently or empirically. You could try—”

“It is physically and psychically impossible for me to paint,” I said. “This is one-hundred percent a fact.”

“You’re being ridiculous!” My girlfriend loves “ridiculous.” “Maybe you don’t think you’re talented enough or don’t have technique or whatever, but you could dip a brush in paint and make a mark and technically that is painting,” she said, a little out of breath. “So it doesn’t count.”

“I know that certain things are impossible for me, as a human, that aren’t necessarily impossible for other humans,” I said. “Even though I appear healthy and normal and without visible handicaps, I am unable to do things that would seem to be within my range of potential. Painting is one of them.”
We argued for a long time and eventually dropped it, without hostility but without really making up, either. For my birthday that year she got me art supplies—acrylic paints and brushes and some heavy paper. We argued again. I told her I felt disrespected, which wasn’t true, but the point seems to be never what is true, but what is effective in an argument, what will result in the desired goal. My goal was hazy, but in the end, she said I could return the stuff for something I wanted, and I felt, before the onset of familiar guilt, quite happy.

With the money from the returned art supplies I bought a coat from a thrift shop called Second Helpings, which for the longest time I thought was a soup kitchen. I found the coat on a Saturday and the hand of the pretty girl who works there brushed mine as she gave me back my change. The memory brings me pleasure, as does the coat, which I note gratefully, that I am wearing now. This is the first time in a week that I’ve remembered it. I keep leaving it places, especially at work, probably because, as my boss says, I “leave in such a G-D hurry!” He says that, “G-D.” It’s true, though. I'll leave and walk the few blocks to my car and reach my car before I realize that the reason I'm freezing is because I'm not wearing a coat. Then I'll walk back to work, get my coat, and leave again. The first few times I would explain to whomever was around—“too much on my mind!”—but after a while it just became too difficult to say anything. Silently I would retrieve my coat and walk out, stiff and wincing beneath my lack of comment, my inability to shrug or make a sheepish noise. “I'm not here!” I wanted to shout. “Don't look at me! I left already! I walk into moving cars too, inexplicably! There is increasingly no reason for anything I do! Have a good night! I'm nice!” This seizure of desperation lasts as long as I am in the store and then dissipates as soon as I am back outside, my body so
thoroughly chilled from the walk to and fro that the coat becomes useless, nothing but a sleeved and hooded smirk. Today, though, I am warm. And humming a little, something I do, atonally, when I walk and think. Or very quietly, almost inaudibly, when social situations become, as they always do, unbearable. My girlfriend used to find it sweet. I don’t know how she feels about it now.

I drive home. It is fully afternoon, not early or late afternoon, just exactly afternoon. In my kitchen, I eat kimchi from the jar. There is always a moment during eating kimchi where I feel I might throw up, when I taste the smell more than the taste. After it passes I am relieved and able to eat more kimchi. I stand as I normally do, by the sink, facing a window that overlooks the “courtyard” of my building, Arcadia Apartments. The courtyard is really a parking lot, in the middle of which is a rectangular curbed-in patch of green, mostly crabgrass. A chipped plaster gnome stands crookedly in one corner. In the summer, the college kids and those recently graduated drag out lawn chairs and radios and coolers, the girls draping their t-shirts and shorts over the gnome's head and sucking in their bare bellies. The gnome endures the PABA-free coconut, the squashed cans of beer pinged at its face, the blaring cock rock, year after year. As far as I can tell, I am the only tenant that finds this unjust. I happen to think it’s easy to care about things that can’t talk or disappoint. I care about people the most when they are thing-like. Books and movies try to make characters—fictitious by their very definition—real. And the greater and more insistent the fallacy, the more believable it is supposed to be. But in books and movies, a desk can really be a desk, and a gnome, a gnome. I aspire to be thing-like, aspirationless. My girlfriend says that I belong on some other continent. “Like Burma,” she says, “whatever continent that’s on.” She’s actually very smart, my
girlfriend, smarter than I am, and more punctual. She’s lovely when she sleeps. And when I see her from maybe fifty yards, standing outside of somewhere, staring blankly and waiting for me—I love her at that distance. The closer I get, the less positive I feel.

From far away, people can be pleasant, interesting things.

Last year, I finally decided to try and protect the gnome from indignity. The building manager’s phone number came with my apartment, on a magnet. I use it to keep my weekly to-do list on the refrigerator. Right now my list says buy batteries, fix blinds, clean bathtub, and buy stamps. At the top is the heading THINGS TO DO AFTER I TAKE OVER THE WORLD. I don’t feel great that it says that. But my girlfriend got me this pad specifically for my lists, so I use it. I had never needed to call the building manager before, and I hoped that this fact might help the gnome.

“It’s vandalism,” I said. “The way it is treated constitutes vandalism, which is illegal.”

“Look, kid, that thing’s been around for years. It’s pretty indestructible. And an eyesore, if you ask me.”

“It’s communal property, though. Some of us enjoy it. Can’t you maybe put up a sign?”

“A sign? Saying what?”

I thought about it. “Just, ‘Please don’t touch the gnome,’ or ‘Do not hang things on the gnome.’ Something simple.” I felt itchy. It was summer. I intensely dislike summer for how it sticks to my upper lip and brings out all the flesh. I could tell this man was fat and loved dairy.
“I don’t think so,” said the manager. “That seems a little, er, extreme. If it’s bothering you so bad, why don’t you tell those kids to back off,” the last few words came out in a milky, wheezy chuckle. “Go out there,” he was really laughing now, “and stand up for your gnome.”

I’d hung up feeling very unsafe. People were dumb and cruel. That night after dark I had gone outside to see if the gnome was portable. I grasped it around the middle and lifted, but it didn’t budge. I grabbed it by the cap and pulled, trying to drag it. It appeared to be cemented to the ground. I picked up a beer can and gum wrapper that were by its feet and threw them in the trash can on the other side of the lot. Walking back to my apartment, I had an urge to enter someone else’s unit and live that person’s life for a little while, have someone else’s worries instead. I went to sleep with a terrible sense of the world, of all of humanity as a chiseled decorative plaster thing cemented to the cement, its options severely limited. I marveled at the realization that if I had been successful in bringing the gnome inside, I would be feeling wholly different. Satisfied, and brave. Maybe happiness is a matter of muscle, being strong enough to move things. Or maybe it is a matter of having a sledgehammer. I had neither. Since then, I can’t look at the gnome without feeling sorry for myself.

I’m looking at it now, through my kitchen window, feeling sorry for myself. My girlfriend calls as I am rinsing my fork. I have caller ID. I don’t have a cell phone, which seems to bother people.

“What are you doing?” she says.

“Not much.”

“How was work?”
“It was okay.” I have the phone between my face and shoulder and, having finished with the fork, am letting warm water run over my hands. “How was work for you?”

“Fine. I think I’m getting that raise. Well, one of us is. It might be Sam. But Sam thinks it’s going to be me, so who knows. Do you want me to come over?” My girlfriend lives in an apartment with what seems like forty-two girls. Girls everywhere, constantly moving around.

“If you want to,” I say. I turn off the water. “That’s great about the raise.”

Her voice sounds louder. “Well, do you want me to?”

These conversations make me want to break up with her. I don’t know how to explain that I don’t care, ultimately, whether she comes over or not. Ultimately, it doesn’t make much difference. It would be nice to have her here, to touch her a little on the couch. But it wouldn’t be not nice to be alone on the couch, touching myself a little. Either way, I would get touched, and the light would keep fading, and then it would be time for sleep.

“Sure,” I say.

“‘Sure’ isn’t the same as wanting me to,” she says.

“I want you to,” I find myself saying. I hear her happiness. It sounds like eyelashes.
LONG DIVISION
PICTURE DAY

I was seated on a small stool in front of a blue background. The man behind the camera told me he was from Harlingen, Texas, and by gum, he was going to make me smile. He had longish wavy hair that was thinning in front. He tilted his head and looked at me and asked me where my “party face” was. His neck kept bobbing, like a duck’s, as he looked through his lens and then at me, and then through his lens and then back at me, repeatedly. He told me to make my “Valentine face.” He told me to pretend that I was going to get to eat a big bowl of marshmallows for dinner. He told me to pretend that tomorrow was my birthday and no school. Finally, his neck stopped bobbing, and he stayed behind his lens, and he told me to remove my glasses and just hold still, please.
Whereby a quarter to four is greater than, less than, or equal to a half past four; whereby you must please excuse my dear aunt Sally; whereby a bushel does not equal a peck but equals a train approaching a stop at how many miles per hour when a train approaching an opposite stop at how many miles per hour equals the number of miles between the two stops minus the number of frightened passengers; whereby division is long with wrong remainders and subtraction means borrowing from the ones, and from the ones with nothing, such that even zeroes must give of themselves, must somehow become nines and tens, like those photographs of hard times that show old people and babies lugging bricks and buckets of water, forcing themselves beyond the limits of what they’re able to do; whereby to multiply means X and also to add very quickly twelve plus twelve plus twelve plus twelve plus twelve plus twelve plus twelve plus twelve plus twelve plus twelve plus twelve plus twelve plus twelve plus twelve plus twelve but beyond that you simply didn’t trespass; whereby the calculator that shut itself off in the cool dark of the desk and blinked awake under the fluorescence was confiscated to the sound of little whimpers; whereby graph paper, compasses, rulers, protractors were dignitaries of the despot who’d caused the suffering in the photograph, the destruction of the tangled happy town that the old people and babies were rebuilding, and had been rebuilding for centuries, brick by brick, degree by degree, exact measurement by exact measurement, one one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand; whereby where bi where try where tri where quadruple where infinity all chomp chalk, perspire, conspire, cough dust, carry the eight.
The Professors

The last time the Professors came to visit, everything in the house was once again wrong. Proving, beyond argument, a pattern. A pattern of my ineptitude in the company of the Professors. Certain things are comforting in their predictability, even if they are not themselves comforting. This is not one of either of those things. It was August when they arrived. The windows had swelled shut and the fans were broken. Every surface, mine and the house’s, seemed to be sweating. The Professors were startled and upset to find me, skirt up, in front of the open refrigerator. I *ahemmed*. They *ahemmed*. It was not a good start to be off to. Miffed, they filed out to the living room, where the olives that I had carefully laid out now looked desiccated, hideous, the kind of thing that could only be eaten on a dare. A double-dare. I imagined little teeth inside of them. I removed the plate quickly before they could cause further harm.

The kitchen was a precious mess. I dawdled there, trying to tidy it and myself before rejoining my guests. I wiped the counters down with potholders and dabbed a little seltzer behind each ear. I straightened my apron and ran sticky fingers through my hair, willing it to behave. It felt as if it were coated in a fine dusting of flour. In the glass of the china cabinet I saw that it was. I tried to arrange my face into an expression of good humor or emanative serenity, something that might have a laxative effect on our circumstances—everything felt so pent in. I wanted to see, in my reflection, some tell-tale sign. But I saw only my disheveled floured self, and the stove clock numbers, crisp and backward. I was, as usual, to have no forecast.
The Professors had brought receipts, wine made from grapes they’d picked themselves—“a stunning vintage,” they scowled, “the best, inarguably”—and pillows from their own bed. They were just soft so as not to be hard. We sat looking at them for a while, occasionally saying descriptive things about them. Everyone was irritable from the heat but putting on a valiant display of graciousness. “One moment,” the Professors said, and left, one by one. They came back with batteries and fans, new fans with no dust on their blades, whose wind was strong enough to blow through my thin walls and resuscitate the chimes that had been hanging lifeless in the dead air, as though they too needed certain conditions to survive. A cooling purr settled over the room and made it comfortable, if a bit terrifying. Silently, disparagingly, the Professors carried my broken fans upstairs to the attic.

I brought out the soup, Provençal, steaming and roiling in a copper tureen, and set it on the table. Three days it had taken to make, many dollars in saffron. At four that morning, I finished trimming the parsnips into mini-Bastilles for garnish. I had learned, over the years, the necessity of appeasing the Professors’ Francophilia: one time, when I was much younger, I had ignored it completely and suffered the consequences of the Basque-influenced stew I had prepared in earnest. I’d held the ladle to my bare leg for eight seconds as punishment. I’d marched out into the vegetable garden and screamed my favorite verse. It had been humiliating for all of us. By now I knew that The Professors never forgot what went with what. They are so skilled at knowing what goes with what that there is never any what left, in case anyone else wants to try. I served my soup fretfully and awaited judgment.
“Do you recall,” they sniffed, catching by its wing a fly that was buzzing over the table, “the October when you ate nothing but peaches for a week and weighed 40 kilos?” The Professors dropped the fly into the half-melted puddle of butter on my plate. The napkin across my thighs suddenly seemed no bigger than a postage stamp.

Everyone was having fun. The lamb was, the Professors said, neither exquisite nor tender, which I took to mean very good. They inspected the cruets for smudges of oil and found only two. I gave up my elbow room and ate willingly from my lap, which seemed to be spreading quietly under scrutiny. I told them about everyone’s health, everyone’s children, my recent going away and returning, notable accolades from friends and the boss. I told them that the best things in life are free. They blinked and nodded, impatient. Over chocolate soufflés, they cleared their throats. “The problem,” they said, “is not that you cannot set a good table or tie a good slipknot. The problem is that first, you do not. The countless opportunities for instruction have made this house unbearable.”

“Was there a time,” I asked, “of no instruction?”

The Professors sat back and looked almost thoughtful. “No,” they concluded.

“But in the beginning—”

“In the beginning were tins of tea and shortbread, impossible to ruin.”

And then it was time to clean up. I hummed something merry as I dunked the Limoges in soapy water. In the curved faucet I could see the Professors looking at me sharply, their faces convexed and ready. They dried deftly, furiously, and put each thing away without a sound. My humming—sur le pont d’Avignon, l’on y danse, l’on y danse—filled the kitchen. When we were finished, and everything was in a high state of polish, I brought them their pillows and asked where they would like to sleep, although I already
knew. “In there,” they said, pointing toward the crooked chamber beneath the stairs. There was no door, and really it was more like storage space than an actual room. Despite never having enough places to put things, I kept it empty. If I couldn’t be reverent all the time, I figured I could at least be prepared.

“It will be a bit of a squeeze,” I said, as I always did.

“Nonsense. It’s the only part of this house that makes any sense.”

I gave them my favorite quilt and bid them good night.

I undressed for bed, throbbing with tiredness, but when I lay down, sleep staunchly refused me. I could hear the Professors *zut alors*-ing over the accommodations. I knew that soon they would be dreaming of solutions, dreaming stenographically, no talking dogs or vanishing houses or giddy transgressions. I imagined the shapes of their dreams until I became very calm, but still I could not sleep. I got up and went to their doorway, intending to make my presence known, wanting to knock. If there were a door I might have knocked. But I was unable to do anything but crouch down and wonder what to do next, a thoroughly vexing posture to assume in the middle of the night. My knees and back hurt. Going back to bed seemed too final, and lingering felt too interminable, too dangerous. There was no way out, and no sound from within but the tiny tick of a gilded pocket watch.

I don’t know how long exactly I stayed there, but it was for many ticks. My thoughts turned more and more fatalistic. Nothing, I felt as I skulked there, could be known or created. I wanted the Professors to wake up and talk to me; I missed their company. I wanted them to leave and never come back. I missed them every moment they were gone or asleep, and every moment they were with me, I was a balloon of cringe
and dread being chased by an insane child with a needle. Awkwardly, I held my face in
my hands. At its nadir, my exhaustion turned into the treasured songs from my childhood
playing over and over in my head, as though part of my brain was being replaced by a
record player, the one I had plastered with scratch-n-sniff stickers and eventually lost
track of. One of the stickers had been in the shape of a pickle and smelled exactly like a
pickle, even years after I stuck it there, even after thousands of scratches. I felt like that
pickle. I felt that I was young and old at the same time, that I had experienced all the
things of my life already but was just now recognizing what those things were, as though
half of me were one of those pads decorated with designs and messages in invisible ink,
and the other half of me were the magic pen revealing them. If the Professors had not
been with me, I would have been sleeping peacefully in my bed. Time between their
visits was on one hand an ebbing, uncalendrical, and on the other hand, a carefully
worked out theorem, a fever of exactitude. I must have been due for a reckoning. The
moon streamed in, and I could see my hands in front of me. They looked sure of
themselves, like the hands of someone else.

*

Unsurprisingly, the Professors woke me at half past five. I had no recollection of going
back to bed, but there I was, the Professors snatching off my covers and pulling up the
blinds noisily.
“Tsk, we’ve not much time,” they said, standing over my bed. They were neatly dressed and combed, aromatic with a gentle eau de toilette. “And there’s still the garden. Sacre bleue.” Each held gardening gloves worriedly.

Even in my groggy state, I had to agree. The weeds had become too much for me to handle. I got up and stretched despite the urgent need they put upon me to hurry. I did this on occasion, deliberately tried the Professors’ patience, because sometimes it elicited a kind of lovers’ exasperation, one sigh away from rue and one syllable away from tenderness. I did not require their affection, but I was a bit mad when it came to knowing if they were devoted to me, and how much.

“Oh! Isn’t that just like you to dilly-dally, when there’s so much to do.” The Professors were making my bed, pulling the sheets taut.

I paused on my way to the sink, enjoying the sight of them there, fussing over the things that were still warm from my body.

Outside, we weeded. The Professors said I’d be lucky to get any tomatoes at all, that crabgrass always should be addressed immediately or it would strangle everything. I told them it didn’t bother me too much.

“It wouldn’t. Why should it, after all, when you have us?” Into the cracked dirt went the trowel, and after that, no one said anything.

It was hot when we quit, and I felt the ache of the day to come, a day that would be relieved of their presence and burdened by their absence. I was weary already of the paradoxes they were sure to leave behind, like stray grains of salt after a big spill, if they had been capable of spilling. In the kitchen, I laid out croissants.

“They are dry and a bit misshapen,” I said.
The Professors said nothing.

“I think the flour had turned, possibly.”

The Professors reached for the butter and jam without comment, without looking at one another or at me.

“You shouldn’t use the same knife for both of those.” It was all coming to a close, I knew, and I felt the need, familiar, to spoil whatever was remaining. Sunlight streamed through the window and my house sparkled, as though retaliating against my instincts. The scene reflected in the glass of the china cabinet showed a gloomy host offset by a dignified breakfast.

The Professors finished chewing and touched the small of my back, which had already begun to go soft with waiting. They collected their pillows and left me the receipts and corks and a bouquet from my own garden, done up in pretty paper. They left me a final look, its grimness after so much charity a slight relief.
It smelled like sawdust. Someone had gotten sick on the way to art. Mr. Buddy missed a spot, uncharacteristically, or maybe on purpose, as a joke: a spray of islands off the mainland, which the boys were pointing and laughing at. I didn’t understand the joke; I never understood it. It would be nice, I thought, to have something of my own to point and laugh at. To author the joke. I was delivering a message to the main office at the time. It was thin and pink, folded and stapled. I could have held it up to the light and read what it said, but at that moment it didn’t seem important. The boys and the vomit had interfered with my feelings and now there were new feelings, new desires, to attend to. I turned the corner and held the pink note out in front of me and pointed to it with my other hand, but I couldn't hold it far enough away not to touch it. The point failed. I let it flutter and land on the floor and pointed again, hard. It was a little funny, but not enough to make me laugh out loud.
CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

October after October, we invoked him, along with his three ships. It all seemed so brave and merry—the supplication to the queen, the dramatic underestimation of the Earth’s circumference, the spices, the rash of imperialism, the Indians with their maize and funny feathers. We associated him with turkey, and our mouths watered to hear of his exploits. We recognized that many things were named after him. We liked him, clung to him, felt ourselves very much in his debt. When it was Christopher Columbus time, I felt an unbridled gladness. We were not learning. We were, all of us, already-knowing.

Christopher Columbus was the Founder of Collective Memory. He came before the alphabet, before the identification of vowels, before the acids and bases, the prime numbers. In him, we were a congregation. We were the same. I held on to Christopher Columbus for as long as I could, because as soon as he stopped sailing the ocean blue, I was alone again with my doubts, with my eyeglasses and unfriendly hair.

But participation always requires a lie, sometimes several. Participation means allowance; permitting the tinny protestations to drown in the gleeful bellows of the crowd. I willingly claimed to believe in the roundness of the earth—we were expected, after all, to chorus our disdain for the very idea that it could be otherwise—but in reality, I did not believe. Roundness, on the whole, eluded me. I knew that if I walked in a straight line away from the school, and kept walking, that even if I walked for thousands and thousands of days, even if I spent my entire life walking, I would not be returned to
it. Which made it all the more essential—like hiding one’s face during a great sobbing—to stay.
It was the aorta of the school. The venae cavae. Two sides glass, narrowing to a back chamber where the principal dwelled. Inside the main cavity of the office sat the white-haired secretary-woman, as familiar and unknowable as a grandmother. She was day to Mr. Buddy’s night. She saw the silhouettes; he saw the innards. Together, they formed an omniscience rivaled only by God’s. They ignored each other by necessity: if they fraternized, each’s authority would be compromised. For example: the secretary, instead of making sure that someone did not get on the bus, since someone was to be picked up at school by someone’s (own) mother and taken to the dentist, would be watching the windows, waiting for Mr. Buddy to make his afternoon sweep of the foyer so that she could beckon him inside for some gossip and matzoh crackers. And then someone, having not received the message from the office to *not get on the bus* but to instead *wait in the foyer*, would board the bus, sending someone’s mother into a panicked rage, since afternoon appointments at the dentist were increasingly difficult to get, and someone had already missed the last two due to someone’s *no-good, delinquent father*. The secretary would be blamed, the father would be blamed, the someone would be blamed but later coddled into a stupor with a new video game or toy soldier set. Meanwhile, someone’s teeth would steadily continue to rot, thanks to the egregious quantities of candy consumed each day on the bus ride home.
The secretary could not take the risk. She had worked too long, too hard. Everything went much more smoothly when everyone did his and her job precisely, when everyone kept a distance from everyone else.

I spent time hovering around the office. I was trusted to go there with messages. And after school, when I was supposed to board the bus but didn’t, for reasons I knew but couldn’t express, the secretary would invite me inside, to a small, secret closet where she kept the matzoh crackers. The school would be darkening, Mr. Buddy working his way from classroom to classroom, thunking light switches off as he left each room, and the secretary would be wearing her beige overcoat and a plastic kerchief tied resolutely around her white curls, in case the rain that had been threatening to come actually came, and she would take down a box of crackers from a high shelf, hand me two of the dry, flat sheets, and sit with me there in the bright office as I ate them. They tasted like mercy, and they stuck in my throat.
Small Acts Of Violence Leading Indirectly To The Wiring Issue That Caused The Duplex To Burn Down

The Mail
I check the mail most every day. On the days that I do not check the mail, you do not check the mail, either. You claim to forget to check the mail, because I always do it. Which makes me feel enormous pressure to check the mail, like if I don’t check it, it won’t get checked.

The Cat
The cat kept coming to the door, mewling piteously. At night it cried and scratched frantically at the doorjamb, leaving marks we’d see in the morning. I felt sorry for the cat, but in a detached way, which is how I regarded most animals. I didn’t want to leave food for it, which I thought would encourage it to keep coming to the door and making a racket. I also did not want it to starve. Each day I spent a little bit of time trying to figure out the best thing to do, but I never came up with a solution. I figured that the cat would give up on us eventually and try its luck at another door, and the only thing we could do in the meantime was be patient. You said that the best thing to do would be to take in the cat and keep it. This seemed extreme to me, and for over two weeks, we argued about it. I thought that the cat was being manipulative, and that you were giving in to its demands. What if other cats found out? I said that we should not negotiate with terrorists. You would shake your head and give me a look that I felt was very condescending.
The Cat Box

Eventually, I conceded. I said, we can have a cat. I started to like the idea of having something that would keep me company during the day, silently and furrily, but that would also leave me alone. But, I said, I won’t clean the litter box. You agreed to be the one who kept the litter box clean. Some days you forget, or claim to be too tired, and while you are at work, I am smelling the cat box, cross. At you and at the cat, who really is an incredibly smug cat. Still, I feel it is better to be cross than to clean the cat box. You say that is childish, and I say, very calmly, I am only honoring our agreement.

Extracurriculars

You are constantly doing many things connected to and outside of your work. I feel I only do a couple of things, and some days, I don’t even do them well. You enjoy having multiple things on which to expend your energy, and on most days I enjoy having one thing, or at the most, two. This difference between us has ramifications: in the evening I say, remember that thing I was telling you about? And you frown and look puzzled, and say you don’t remember. Or, you say you remember, but when I continue talking, it becomes clear that you don’t remember. Either you admit this or you don’t. When you admit it, I accuse you of neglect. When you don’t, I accuse you of lying. In both cases, I feel certain that your memory is overtaxed by people and items inferior to me.

I Don’t Like Anyone

You say that I don’t like anyone you work with. This is not completely true. You say you do not like talking about your work, because you know I am making secret judgments. I
complain that you don’t talk to me about your day, about what is happening at work. I deny making secret judgments, even when I do make them.

*I Analyze You to Death*

You say that I analyze you to death. I tell you that I can’t stand that expression. It’s so imprecise.

*Figures of Speech*

I criticize many figures of speech and consciously avoid clichés. You use certain idioms and clichés without reservation, and while I respectfully listen to the point you are making, afterward I generally remark on my distaste for the idiom you employed. When I use an imprecise figure of speech, I perform a cogent argument about why imprecision is necessary for the scenario at hand.

*Hard, Soft*

You say I am too hard on people. I say you are too soft on people. But on occasion I become tearful, deeming something you have said too cruel. You say, but you have been much, much crueler. And I say, but not in a case like this.

*Dates and Times and Places*

On the whole, you are better than me at remembering when things happened, and where. But you confuse details about the things themselves, and how they happened. Between us, we can paint an accurate picture of a past event, but our memories work in different
directions: you say, it was April 2003, because you were living on Fountain Street, and the Arts Stroll had just happened; and I say, but it couldn’t have been, because I wasn’t angry then.

*Promptness*

It used to be that I was never prompt, and you were always prompt. I would arrive and the next ten minutes would be spent discussing why I had not arrived earlier. I thought it a silly way to spend the time that had already been diminished. You would say, you always think you have more time than you do. I would say that I either had too much time, or not enough, which created in me profuse anxiety whenever I was faced with the task of leaving the house, and that you should feel lucky that you don’t have this problem. You would say that it was inconsiderate and disrespectful to keep people waiting, and I would respond with sort of a whimpering plea, like, you think this is easy for me? But now I am more prompt, and because of this, I value promptness more. You have never said, see, I told you so, but I think you would like to say it, just once. I wish that you would, because your restraint can be deafening.

*Estimation of Duration*

Although you are prompt when it comes to meeting people in certain places at certain times, your estimations of time in terms of duration are usually incorrect. I say, how long will the thing last, and you say, oh, maybe an hour. But it will last for three hours.
I Don't Know

When you don’t know a thing exactly, you say “I don’t know.” I never say “I don’t know.” When I don’t know, I generally guess, and occasionally lie. Or I find ways to make “I don’t know” seem less conclusive, like “I’m not sure, but…” followed by a guess or a lie. You are okay with not knowing, and I am less okay with not knowing, and absolutely not okay with appearing as though I don’t know. I associate “I don’t know” with stupidity, although there are plenty of things I don’t know, and I don’t consider myself stupid. I don’t consider you stupid, either, but I can’t help judging you when you say it. I know that this is unfair, and that it is better, probably, to be honest than to be prideful, but I still wish you wouldn’t say it.

Describing a Person’s Looks

When I ask about a person’s looks, you often offer figurative, inefficient descriptions: “He looked like a potato chip” or “He had a garbage can mouth.” Such accounts make me feel impatient, like we are playing a guessing game. I just want: brown hair, six foot one.

Making the Bed

Things are pulled less tightly, when you make the bed. During the week, I make the bed. On weekends, you make the bed. I might be in the adjoining bathroom, fixing my hair, or standing at my closet, trying to figure out what clothes to put on, and I will sneak glances at you as you make the bed. I realize that I should not comment on your method of making the bed, but usually I can’t help it, so I say something. I think, if you only would receive the comment gladly, and heed it, then we would both feel good, and the bed
would be made in the best way possible. But usually you do not receive the comment well, and respond by saying something like “Why don’t you just make the bed, then”—a question turned into a statement for rhetorical effect: you are irritated. I say nothing in reply, and feel regret for having commented. But I also feel like, it would take such a small effort, and would have such good results, to just pull the thing tighter.

**Proportionality**

You think that my reactions are not in proportion to the things that provoke them. You call this “overreacting.” I think that your reactions are not in proportion to the things that provoke them. I call this “underreacting.” But then, there are instances when we rely on one another to overreact or underreact, and each of us does the opposite. We have been momentarily confused, as when you take a nap too late in the day, and wake up to darkness.
BEATING

It was a privilege. I was privileged. To stand in the courtyard and clap, furiously, the two gray bricks together. Others sneezed, coughed; I clapped harder, accepting the dust on clothes and hair, enjoying how it aged me. In the window was an old person clapping erasers. I understood it not as reflection, but projection. We stopped applauding ourselves with them—thank you! Thank you very much!—and instead extended our arms outward, embracing one another, beating now against the stone wall on either side of the glass. Without rain, there would be markings, white rectangles whose crosshatch would announce the violence that was happening here. Our faces were close together, almost touching. Briefly, I pressed my forehead against the glass, making my aged self disappear. In its place I could see rows of empty desks and a blackboard wiped extra clean, as though in renunciation of what they had carried.
A way of standing, a way of moving. Form and function. For water, for the bathroom, for food, parallel with walls down corridors and intersecting grass across the schoolyard. By height, so I stood at the end, though was not usually last. The last in line threatens the line, the integrity of the line. With nothing behind, last in line could fall off, pour out, get left. I liked to be firmly in the vessel of the line, enclosed, ballasted. Behind me, body; before me, body. We stood close, too close. If we were at the ATM we would know each other's pin numbers. As it was, we knew other things of value. We knew things for one another, we knew things about one another that we did not know about ourselves. Our backs, the unseen parts of us. Never was I more aware of what I looked like from behind. I felt the one behind me holding me in, absorbing me, imagined the tag of my shirt, the small plank of unbrushed hair. In front of me hung the hair I wanted. Straight and fine, falling from the perfectly spool-shaped head, I wanted to thread it through a needle, embroider myself with it.

The line was a system, a philosophy. Its purpose was to manage and control. We wrote and read in lines, sat in lines, called "rows"; learned and understood in lines. Our paper was lined, called "ruled." The line was a mode of learning, an indoctrination. Without it, the school, though it contained so many shapes, would collapse. The line was its fundamental unit, the ruler its indispensable tool. Occasionally, the line would waver. Some would walk faster, or more slowly, and it would break into half or thirds. Whisperers or flirts sometimes created outgrowths, little berms against the line, until they
were hushed or corralled back into place. Then heads would turn or hang. I kept mine straight, loathing the line, fearing it, needing it.

Those who demanded the line were exempt from it but still beholden to it, responsible for its welfare; everyone else was subject and practitioner. Only Mr. Buddy was free to choose, and he did diligently. With his long, wide broom, he pushed in perfect alignment with the tile of the foyer and hallways, shaking our dirt and hair and threads from the bristles before starting again down each symmetrical expanse. I noticed the thin lines of dust that remained when he was done, and once or twice, in the long quiet after the last bell, swirling tracks made by a veering mop.
The Geology

I began to turn mineral last year, the year my mother left. Really, it probably started much earlier, this fossilizing, at birth or before, and had to work its way through so many striations of body to be seen and felt. My first and only visible cue were my feet, about two months after she’d gone: tiny cracks, like in playground dirt, spreading across my soles and refusing to close despite nightly administrations of thick lotion. They don’t hurt, but I can feel them there, razor-thin perforations running every which way, such that each step I take feels like the effort of many feet in close succession. Not unlike, you might say, the movement of a centipede. The process is happening, in order, from the feet up, and is happening slowly. In fact it will probably take my whole life, “take” my life as in snatch or usurp or possess it, and take “my life,” which I imagine myself illustrating by extending my arms, two or three yardsticks wide, to denote length, distance, a measure of time. But I have no sense of “how long” in terms of the calendar. Only a very few people in the world know exactly how long they will live, and fewer still know exactly when they will die. I still have my hair, abundant and thick. It seems to move when I am still, like seaweed in a tidepool. An unseemly crown atop such a calcifying body, it feels less to me like hair than some kind of murmuring, loamy clock.

North of my feet, there is no discernible evidence that my composition has changed. My limbs look like ordinary limbs, small and wiry as is my build, and my trunk too is unremarkable. But I am unable to trust them as body parts. Their inner content has solidified—veins like unraveled paper clips, tissue liked baked clay—and as such they are no longer responsive, decipherable matter. I have to learn my body consciously as I
once knew it unconsciously, how it bends and straightens, how it deals with stimuli, how it goes through doorways. I have not mastered these operations, but I have mastered appearing as though I have mastered them. Much of my effort goes toward seeming at ease. And in place of pain, pure and straightforward as I once knew it—its onslaught, its management after, say, a burn or a stub or a sprain—or pleasure, with its ebbs and swells, its smoothness or stickiness—I now feel a stunning neutrality, constant estrangement from my own person, from my sensory potential. I have lost my ability to feel, but my memory of feeling and my vocabulary for it seems to grow sharper and more vivid each day. What I feel the most is the continuous vexation of remembering everything, every moment with its inky trace and flattened chronology. I remember the specific pain of paper cuts, of loneliness. I remember the sartorial things—my mother’s yellow plastic belt, the angles of hats. I remember delighting in another’s touch, in my own touch, in the goodness of things. The million flapping wings inside have been stilled, but they are still there. I can see them, as through a display case. I have become museum.

*  

My mother was a gypsy of mixed origin who lived much of her life in the Dordogne, roving in and around the caves of Lascaux, guiding hikers and tourists through the Lateral Passage, the Shaft of the Dead Man, and the Chamber of Felines. She picked their pockets and charged a nominal fee. To her shabby linen vest she pinned a badge she’d swiped from a smitten traveler, some kind of merit or forest ranger thing, and in time, she
acquired a battery-operated lantern—she used both, she said, to appear more official and generate more business. My mother was nothing if not business.

What did you do when the batteries ran out?

I find a traveler—the weary, over-prepared ones are best—with a bulging backpack. Those silly bags with many small pockets, some of them mesh, pockets lined with pockets. Always I can find batteries in those backpacks, in just the place you imagine batteries to be.

How did you stay warm in the winter?

I find a traveler—the weary, over-prepared ones are best.

I had many such questions, which I asked over and over the way some children ask for the same bedtime story. Except I suspect that bedtime stories are meant to be comforting. My mother, whose version of English excluded all but the present tense (I cannot be sure of anything that is not right now, she would say, nobody can be behind himself or in front of himself), had answers for almost all of them, but she knew very little of comfort—what it meant, how to create it. The very idea, used as she was to stone and weather, seemed to confound her.

On the subject of my father—his name, what he looked like, sounded like, where he was from, what she felt for him if only momentarily—she was stubbornly mum. At first I thought she was withholding in order to protect some enchanted, exquisite romance. But in time I came to understand that where he was concerned, she had nothing but silence, and that her silence was a kind of information, one I was ill equipped to read. It remains, as a memory, encoded, inscrutable.
When she became pregnant with me, my mother decided she’d had enough of the caves.

I am becoming cave, she said. I grow terribly sloppy, unfocused. Each time I go inside it is like invading my own body, dark and damp, like siphoning myself through my organs.

We used to sit on the red carpet of the living room drinking tea. My mother liked hers scalding, and her tongue was little more than a wedge of scar tissue as a result. She took great pride in it. At night, as we stood in front of the mirror brushing our teeth, she’d stick it out as far as it would go, and then back in, repeatedly. Exercises, she would say. Keeps it strong. Otherwise it rots and comes unhooked and your mouth fills with saliva every time you want to speak. People have to learn to read the puddles you leave on the floor. She sees it happen, she said. She’d grip my chin with her fingers and order me to do it. Like this, she said. Out, and in, taut like the strings of a viola. Every night, you do this, whether I’m here or I’m not here. On some matters she was downright pedantic. Compared to hers, my tongue seems flimsy, inconsequential like the filler in a bouquet, the saggy petal of some flower no one knows the name of. I continue to obey, vigorously, and I drink my tea hotter now. Against all logic, I very much admire a sturdy tongue.

So many days we sat on the floor with our cups, mine tepid and sweet and white, hers a steaming black, saying the same words as if we had never before said them. I, daughter, was the consummate conductor of an infinitely circular interview. I seem to have been born for this purpose: to ask. And my mother seemed to have been born to live her life, to create a means for recording certain parts of it, and then to disappear. My feet and legs would fall asleep, first in a fizzing of pins and needles, and then solidly, as
though encased in concrete. Prophetic, I now understand; some kind of foretelling of this change now ensnaring my body.

When you got pregnant, did anyone know? Did you tell anyone?

Nobody knows. I barely know. It’s not a thing to “know.” I feel it. It is a feeling, all feeling, the entire world turning to a blade of feeling and lancing my heart. The tourists are restless and displeased, correcting me when I point to a horse and call it a stag. Suddenly I am everything’s mother. I can’t take money. I cry over all of it—insect, bird, Paleolithic man—all the dead, and then all the living, knowing they will die. All of us are weary. We are entering the rainy months. Everyone wants to leave. I need to leave. I leave.

The “we,” this “everyone,” was always unclear to me. No one had names in my mother’s world. I never knew if she was referring to comrades, other Romani; or the travelers, the men; or the caves themselves, the drawings and secrets therein—as in some elemental “we.”

* *

What I have learned, I have learned empirically. I was born in a now-defunct hospital in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and raised here in the suburb of Ashland Hills, in this same house. For this to have happened, my mother must have indeed left the Dordogne and, pregnant, landed in America. By way of Canada, from what I can gather. In between there were, briefly, Portugal and Sweden. Or Germany and Norway. Or Belgium. It changed in the telling.
Ashland Hills really only has one hill, and my mother and I lived on it, until she went away and left me to live on it alone. This house, our house which is now my house, like the others on our narrow, steep street, is narrow and steep. A very vertical house attached to two other very vertical houses, one on each side. The front and back yards are identical—small squares of grass surrounded by the kind of metal fencing you see everywhere in this neighborhood, enclosing playgrounds and parking lots and the public pool. Non-angry fences, keeping you out or in politely, as if by mere suggestion, and graciously lending access if the demand is made. As a child I found them irresistible—the fat teardrop holes interconnected by elegant twists, the camouflage of the entrance gate, the medieval-looking lever that made it open and close, even the heavy padlock that usually hung open like a dropped jaw. I liked the way the toe of my sneakers fit neatly into each space; the honesty of being suspended and parallel, supported only by metal; how instinctively my fingers curled around the cold lattice; how like fingers it felt; how natural it was to climb this shaking, rattling, kindly beast, and how the final, echoing clank as I reached the top and jumped over sounded like applause—you did it, you’re IN.

So much gravity in the world, and I had defied some of it. The fence was the whole point. Siobhan and I would arrange to meet at one of them at dusk or after dark, and whether the gate was locked or wide open, we climbed. Once over, we were aimless: drawing on the asphalt with some chalk, smoking cigarettes (which we could have done at either of our
homes), sprawling out on the diving board. It didn’t matter. Whatever locale we chose, it
didn’t make a difference. All of them were simply places with fences, places to get into.

I asked my mother maybe a dozen times, maybe two dozen, Why here?

Why not here, she responded an equal number of times. There are the caves, and
then there is everywhere else. Everywhere else is one place. One place with many
different names. You can convince yourself that you are somewhere different, but you are
in the same place as every other place, unless you are in the caves.

I could never totally comprehend my mother when she spoke. But something
inside me could predict and believe every word.

Do you miss them?

What?
The caves.
What is “miss”?
When you want a thing that you had once but don’t anymore.
My mother’s eyes were soft and wet and moving, like larvae about to hatch.
I don’t want. I don’t have. And I don’t once-but-not-anymore.

* 

We owned two records. One was the soundtrack from *The Sound of Music*. The other was
*Born in the U.S.A*. She loved Bruce Springsteen with an abiding, inexplicable love. Also,
Slim Jims. Listening to “Born in the U.S.A.” while eating a Slim Jim was to her a near-
perfect happiness, improved only by Siobhan’s and my presence. She liked having an
audience, and we were an appreciative one. She would sway and munch and sing along, unsure of most of the lyrics and chewing through the rest. Sometimes, when the video came on television, she’d rush to find the song on the record and play it at the same time, loud. Of course she could never sync it just right. But she loved the resulting effect—Bruce in the living room in two places, competing with himself, before and after himself, Bruce everywhere, and my mother at the controls.

*

My mother ate Campbell’s condensed soup straight from the can, but still insisted that many things were beneath her. Cleaning was one. Year to year I saw our living room carpet turn from deep red to dusty rose to a sort of dingy purple, until I realized that it was dust and dirt and dinginess that caused the color change, and not some mysterious opalescence brought back with my her from the caves. Siobhan brought us a vacuum cleaner one day, sheepishly, and when I showed it to my mother, she shook her head.

I am not using such a thing as that machine is.

Can I try it?

My mother shrugged. Let it walk you around like a dog all the day. You can drink water from a bowl, too.

That is one way that my mother and I differed. I saw the vacuum as the dog. She saw me as the dog. From then on, I vacuumed the house every week. My mother hated the noise and would sit on the couch with her knees to her chest and her hands covering her ears, or she would leave angrily, slamming the door, and go for a walk. When
Siobhan needed her vacuum back, I saved enough money from washing cars to buy one at the second-hand store near the entrance to the highway, where we did a lot of shopping for housewares and clothing. I still have it: a chartreuse Hoover with a plaid vinyl bag. I love the stripes it makes in the carpet, love creating precise designs, which my mother used to ruin by rolling across the floor. Why do you do this, she would ask. You know I hate these lines. Why do you torture me with vertigo in my own house when I take good care of you? Now the patterns stay intact between vacuumings, so that I always wonder, as I’m plugging it in, if it’s necessary to vacuum this week. And then I always do it anyway, painstakingly, making each track sharp like a crease, careful not to veer. Some kind of retaliation, I suspect—lame like my body, and belated like everything else.

*

Once, Siobhan asked me, Does your mom have a crystal ball?

*

Another thing my mother refused to do was laundry. She knew how, because she showed me, but it became my job as soon as I learned. We would walk up the hill to the laundromat, which was called The Sudsetteria, me pushing the wire cart and her swinging a leg of nude pantyhose that was heavy with quarters. She liked hitting things with it as she walked—parking meters, the railings along front stoops. Each clang seemed to fill her with glee. It made me nervous, that spastic, elastic appendage, flailing within inches
of kids on tricycles and dogs on leashes. I asked her several times if I could hold the quarters, but she said no, that was the only part of this she enjoyed, why do I want to take it away from her if she enjoys it? The Sudseteria had a green couch, a pay phone, a vending machine, and a few signs, mostly about not taking other people’s things and what to do if your quarters got eaten, and also one that said “Suds Your Duds Here!” New vandalism appeared on the sign almost every week—“Suds my dick homo,” “Rocco Rules,” etc.—but was always scrubbed off by the following week. The stuff written with permanent ink has by now nearly covered the original message completely, but someone still makes the effort to preserve the sign’s dignity by hanging it higher and higher up on the wall. The top of it is now mere inches below the ceiling, a fact that comes closer than many things these days to making me feel sad.

Other than the walk there, I loved everything about doing laundry. My first playthings were balls of lint from the dryer. I liked emptying the lint drawers of all the dryers and saving the contents in my coat pockets. My mother said it was stealing, but she never tried to stop me. I loved how they felt and smelled, how they were mostly whitish or grey or dark grey, but occasionally blue or pink. I collected the lint with reverence, somberly, enjoying how it peeled back from the still-hot mesh, and feeling very profoundly that this was the cast-off matter from other people’s clothes, and thus from their lives. I had pieces of their robes and sheets and shirts and underwear, and nobody wanted them back. At home, I created lint families, big and medium and small sized balls, tied in their middles with thread. Their personalities were little pieces of my personality, the lint of my personality. The first time Siobhan came over, I showed them to her, and she looked at me for a long time as though trying to decide whether or not to
say something. In the end she said nothing, but picked up each ball and examined it thoroughly, and once picked up two, one in each hand, and brought them together in a kiss. We were friends after that.

*

I used to miss everything, things I’d never even had but heard about or saw on television and wanted. It’s becoming harder for me to miss; it is as though the objects of my missing have been placed in cages and are only handled and fed by someone who is not me, a zookeeper with a key and a bucket of meat. I stand outside the cage, safe and alone. But one time, years ago, my mother squeezed my face so hard I felt my cheekbones do something, which cheekbones typically don’t do. Typically they just lay there, inside your face, doing nothing. I am still able to miss what they did, that day.

*

With time I have come to recognize the symptoms, telltale signs that this turning, this hardening, is advancing. None of it hurts; it simply happens, passes through me as though I am an empty corridor connecting the before to its after. First, terrible laughter overtakes me, a laughter that is not my own. It bursts forth violently and at unpredictable intervals, long and loud before turning into persistent hiccups that shake my ribcage. Then comes a debilitating languor that pins me down in the bath or the tattered armchair, wherever I happen to be. When I finally am able to move, and with the precision of a
record needle touching down, skimming gently against my cortex, the song begins. It plays from anywhere between two days and a week, punctuated by brief periods of static while it resets, a bit like driving under a tunnel during a rainstorm: the relief of the momentary silence burdened by an unbearable anticipation. Usually it is a song from *The Sound of Music*, often “The Lonely Goatherd,” its yodeled refrains a gleeful opiate hovering around a nightmare that never comes. If it only came, I’d think later, surveying myself in the mirror, wishing for proof, some little scar to substantiate what I’d just been through, I would be able to wake up from it. Interrupt the cycle, as with a washing machine: lift the door and the churning stops. But it is only ever me in the mirror, intact, if somewhat remote.

* 

The television was always on. Now it is always off.

* 

Siobhan lived across the street. Her mother was dead and her father was a janitor at our school whom everyone called Mr. Buddy, although his real name was something like Phillip. At night he washed dishes at La Divina, the only restaurant in Ashland Hills, down the only hill from our houses: a tiny, brick, semi-Italian, overpriced place with a legal occupancy of fifty people which the owner routinely ignores in order to cram in more business. The dining area has so many tables that it’s almost impossible to cut one’s
meat or get up to use the restroom without upsetting a glass or bumping another customer. Siobhan and I overlapped in three different areas: we were neighbors, classmates, and wards of La Divina. Both of us ate the lasagna special out of take-out containers several nights a week and brought other surplus restaurant food to school for lunch, its grease leaking out of the foil and onto the workbooks and pencil cases in our bags. My mother worked there, in the kitchen, for as many years as she lived here. She started as a hostess—the owner found her beautiful and charming, with an alluring accent that seemed to him vaguely Italian—but her manner of speaking ultimately created too many problems for both patrons and waitstaff. Her work schedule was ambiguous. She seemed to be the one who determined when she would work and for how long. Some days she was there from morning until well past midnight, some days she worked for a few hours in the late afternoon or evening, and many days she didn’t go in at all. Like most things in my mother’s life, her job was a subject of her whim, but she was more than able to make ends meet through some combination of magic and math aptitude. We never went without, although the things we went with were arguably peculiar. We had a hot tub and cable television but a junked-up car and no working freezer. I have since sold the hot tub and gotten rid of the cable and I now own a new refrigerator. The car is the same and miraculously still runs.

*
Mr. Buddy left La Divina shortly before my mother did and started spending more time at the track. She used to drive him there or to Atlantic City and come home late at night with wads of money, strange smells rolling off of her.

It is because I know maths, she would say. Mr. Buddy says no one bets like me. I never lose a dime. I always win a lot of dimes. When he has none and I have a lot, I give some to him. When he has some and I have a lot, I give some to him. When we both have a lot, we go to the diner for the cherry Dane. We divide it exactly even.

Math was very important to her. She let me miss a lot of school, but insisted on seeing my math homework every night. She didn’t care about any of the other subjects.

If you don’t know math, you are never happy. All of life is math. Canceling out. Dividing. Making things smaller. Borrowing. Finding the zero.

She had been told by the school nurse that I had hypergraphia, after my teacher discovered the insides of my math books saturated with my handwriting. The diagnosis didn’t mean much to either of us. I liked the way it looked was all, small and pressed together and covering whole pages, burying the numbers and instructions and exercises. My mother thanked her. Then she told me to be better at math. I told her I did not like numbers because I could not make words out of them.

She would yell, Words are not important because they are not math! Words wrap around and around like boa constrictor, pushing out all of the air! Lying and cheating you! Do your math and learn some quiet!

Math is depressing! I would yell back. It doesn’t say anything! It doesn’t mean anything!
Nothing is depressing! Nothing means anything! Math is only math! Stop describing it!

Sometimes I changed my tone and tried apathy instead. What’s the point, I would say. I have a calculator.

Which made her furious.

You let the machine think for you, you slap all of nature in the face, she would say. You slap me in the face.

And she would slap me in the face. Eventually she hurled my calculator at the window, shattering the glass. She assumed she broke the calculator, too. I acted as though she had, throwing it away and appearing appropriately cowed. But later, I took it from the garbage, wrapped it in toilet paper, and hid it in my bag. The mark from her hand would be gone by the next day, but I always felt a curious coldness emanating from the site of impact. The kind of cold that had once been warmth, like stone after the sun goes down.

*

On weekends, Mr. Buddy didn’t go anywhere. His weekdays started before dawn at the school and were spent mopping up mud and vomit, changing impossibly high light bulbs, scraping gum from the undersides of small desks. Nighttime found him elbow-deep in greasy bleach-water, after which he would spend a few hours at the track or the tables, where he lost more than he won but broke even, probably, with my mother’s help. He spent Saturdays and Sundays lying in bed reading periodicals like Popular Science and thick books like Finnegans Wake. Late in the day he would emerge to make pancakes or
sandwiches and tousle Siobhan’s head before going back upstairs. When she wasn’t at our house, Siobhan spent most of her time sitting on the floor of her living room, her head perched perfectly still and straight-ahead on her shoulders, as if it was a screen and the television, a projector. If you sat facing her, you could watch television in her eyes. She liked singing theme songs and mouthing the words to commercials. It was serious, her viewing, a task that seemed to require concentration and intelligence. I sat beside her, watching her profile more than whatever was on and feeling idle, fluffy. After a while we’d walk down to the gas station and buy candy and potato chips and Slim Jims for my mother, and then return to one of our rooms and do what we did in front of the television, only in front of the radio. I guess we did a lot of sitting on floors back then. It seems impractical to me now. My thighs and hips are brittle, and I’m still feeling the aftereffects of a recently yodeled chorus. But back then, sitting in a chair meant being far away—from one another, from the waves of sound and light.

My mother seemed to like Siobhan, and never objected to how much time she spent at our house, or I at hers. I became used to seeing Mr. Buddy in his pajamas on the weekend, walking stiffly and noiselessly through the house as though he were pushing the world’s heaviest mop. A few times, on his way back upstairs, he tousled my head instead of Siobhan’s, but I don’t think he ever noticed the difference. I liked how it felt, that brief heat. But when I saw him at school, I felt embarrassed. The intimacy of the home seemed like a liability in the hallway. Not to Siobhan, though. She was always looking straight ahead, no matter where she was. At school when she saw her father she’d nod almost imperceptibly, and he would do the same back.
There was a rumor that he had killed a man by cleaning him to death, pouring ammonia down his throat and following it with a toilet brush. Like most rumors, it wasn’t true. But everyone agreed, tacitly, on the importance of it. As a town, we needed the myth—the horror, the gruesomeness, the way it could slip from mouth to mouth like an eager, adolescent kiss—the same way we needed La Divina. To put on the map, as it were, ourselves. To make us feel as though we were capable of being fancy, being dangerous. I still like picturing Mr. Buddy in the school basement, kneeling near the incinerator where he might have shoveled the cleaned-to-death man, if he had really cleaned him to death. Or laying on some dirty cot down there, tears of remorse darkening his work clothes. I picture him often, more than I actually see him. From what I can gather, he spends more time at school than at home these days. I’m pretty sure he sleeps there at least once in a while. We wave to each other when we happen to be outside at the same time, checking our mail. He never looks at me or says anything, but I feel his thoughts as palpably as my own. They are of invisibility, and cleanliness, and soreness, and at least a little, missing my mother. I feel that I must miss her, when I see him, but my doing so is met with a flinty resistance, some kind of refusal that seems to reflect my mother’s love of math: one person misses, the other does not, a certain balance is achieved. Siobhan used to visit more, during the first few years after she’d moved to Cincinnati with an older woman she’d met at a white elephant party—the only detail about the woman that I’ve ever retained—but eventually her visits became shorter and more occasional until they finally stopped altogether. Like me, Mr. Buddy is alone. I think about Mr. Buddy on Saturdays and Sundays as I lie in bed reading cookbooks until I’m ravenous. I wonder if he still reads serious literature.
Increasingly, I think about rock formations in this country, and what my mother would say about them. I fantasize that maybe she left to go look at them; maybe she is building a tiny home at the base of Mount Rushmore or in some corner of the Grand Canyon or deep in the bowels of Luray Caverns, and when it’s finished I’ll get a letter and an invitation to come. But I don’t think she went in search of familiar terrain. My mother loved America precisely because of its strip malls and highways. She loved the yard and the fence and the gas station. She delighted in all of it as though it were engineered just for her, as though it were the present she saved until last to open. Sometimes, dizzy and numb after an episode, I feel keenly that she is communicating with me, though the communication offers no currency that I can use to learn where and why and how. It is pure feeling, untranslatable, informationless, much like the silence she kept about my father. But I understand it better, somehow, and I feel her presence like a vapor. I think she exists in millions of tiny particles around me and across every inch of this town. It’s why, I suppose, I can’t seem to leave.

Evenings, I like to walk. It helps ease the tension in my legs and makes my feet feel less breakable. I walk a good distance, down to La Divina and the gas station, up past Mr. Buddy’s and the Sudseteria and the community center, all the way to the school. Tonight I decide to hop the fence, although the gate on the far side of the playground is open. I approach the school apprehensively, as though I have something difficult that I must say to it, but there’s nothing, really, no reason to feel the way I do. I remember how
I felt each morning when I went into the building, and each afternoon as I left. Some combination of good and bad, apart and a part of. I wonder if Mr. Buddy is inside, down below the classrooms in the fabled basement, stretched out on the imaginary cot, wiping away tears for the rumored dead, tears for his supposed losses. I enter one of the small courtyards that adjoins every classroom on the schoolyard side. One wall of each quad features a plaster tile depicting a scene from a nursery rhyme. I find myself facing Little Jack Horner cradling his Christmas pie, oblivious to the chips and cracks that speckle his body, his prized plum. I lean against the wall, pressing my cheek against the cold stone and feeling like a daughter.
GLOSSARY

ABSENCE: after everything I’ve done for you

ACCESS: whereby division is long with wrong remainders

ANTARCTICA: the loneliest, most baffling place in the world

APART: by some strange turn we are there, singly, arms waving, each of us jumping up and down on the shoreline as the sound of the last helicopter dies away

APPARENT: a cool, shallow cistern where one sees one’s own reflection for the first time

ATMOSPHERE: my girlfriend lives in an apartment with what seems like forty-two girls

BABY: if you could bring only one thing to a desert island

BANANA: portable, nutritionally-dense source of chastisement

BLANK: rows of empty desks and a blackboard wiped extra clean, as though in renunciation of what they had carried
CONFISCATION: the fever breaking in the middle of the night

COUNTER: lewd elbow behavior

CREDENZA: the secretary could not take the risk

DARING: she delighted in all of it as though it were engineered just for her, as though it were the present she saved until last to open

DECORATION: feeble attempts at allaying discomfort, often involving doilies and lighting

DRAIN: a souvenir; a rescued object worthy of mythologizing

ECHO: the sound of things remembering themselves

EDGE: the last half-hour of a tolerable party when one weighs the pros and cons of leaving

FORMER: having to go back and being unable to go back

FUN: use the encyclopedia, but change the words
IMPLICATIONS: the scene reflected in the glass of the china cabinet showed a gloomy host offset by a dignified breakfast

INNARDS: I only wanted to learn what I do

JOKE: lower your head and try not to cry

LAUNDROMAT: there are good and bad guest speakers

LUCKY: just put the baking soda in the paper mâché volcano and pour in the vinegar: first prize

MACHINE: participation always requires a lie, sometimes several

MAILBOX: its purpose was to manage and control

MAJORITY: a robust greeting accented by the click-click of a retractable ballpoint

MAP: next to the ambrosia at buffet of the church social

MINERAL: a cooling purr settled over the room and made it comfortable, if a bit terrifying
NADJA: it is not more arbitrary than most things, but it is not less

NECESSITY: matzoh crackers

OFTEN: momentarily confused, as when you take a nap too late in the day and wake up to darkness

ORPHAN: when the library is your mother; also, the school at night

PAINTING: everything became rigorously still

PARAGRAPH: obstacle course composed of cinder blocks and old tires, commonly used in military training

PERFECT: I concentrated on looking hapless; I felt hapless and I wanted my face to look hapless, also

POTENTIAL: everyone was made to wear the same shorts in this room

RUIN: the ceiling wept in long fluttering strands that effectively obscured us from one another
SANDWICH: medicinal herb used to alleviate symptoms of homesickness and regret; can be dissolved in water or eaten whole

SCRUTINY: how it felt, that brief heat

SPOUT: the phase right before rusting; pre-rust

SQUASH: at night it cried and scratched frantically at the doorjamb, leaving marks we’d see in the morning

SURPRISE: the best part of the diary was the lock, and the best part of the lock was the necessity of key

TAXONOMY: ball gown and stole for the party doll

TELL: little senseless spokes jutting from the removable panels

THICK: a rare disease in which hat grows from the scalp instead of hair

UNCERTAIN: there will be nothing left if I finish this jar of pickles; on the other hand, I’m hungry now

UNDERLINE: to execute a perfect somersault but receive no applause
VERB: an uncontrollable urge to doodle if pen and paper were at hand

WHISPER: a voice one uses when speaking privately to one’s belongings