

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
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THE ROADS TO SHU:
A FEW SHORT SKETCHES ABOUT GUYS

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ABSTRACT

A series of nineteen fictional stories follows. Each story focuses on one or several males and explores aspects of their lives and experiences and how it defines their gender status and role. Several of the stories are brief graphic memoirs. The collection is preceded by an introduction and followed by a commentary, both by the author.

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INTRODUCTION

I find that the hardest part of writing a story is legitimizing the creative drive to myself. Why am I doing this, why is it worth all this time, all this head-scratching, all these endless pots of coffee? These are questions I feel will never really be answered, not to my satisfaction, but in a lot of ways, ambition is driven by dissatisfaction. On top of these constant concerns, I labored over these stories, knowing that they needed to be academically legitimate. These were not just flights of fiction to explain and explore my world to myself, they needed to be proof of my education, of my knowledge and experience as a student and as a careful reader.

Early on in the process I struggled to find (and sometimes force) references into the thesis that would establish my maturity as a student of literature. I treated each characters to a sort of literary physical (turn your head and cough, please) and examined them for symptoms of weak writing and hoped for signs of health and intertextuality and despite my repeated treatments, they did not seem to improve. It was not until I wrote “Squirrel Savers in Space” about a junkie kicking the habit, tripping on psychedelic mushrooms and reveling in the connectedness of the universe that I began to relax. I realized I didn’t have to connect my writing to everything I had ever read in college, legitimize my writing through references to great works, because it already was connected to those works.

I hope, if I’m doing it right, every story I write has a little bit of everything I’ve experienced, heard and read: every bit of the anthologized canon, every bit of bathroom graffiti and everything in between. My work as a writer is not to force the connections that are not already there, but to discover them, know them and allow my reader to feel them, if not see them.

I hope my stories have vivid characters and lively interactions. I hope my narratives take the reader on a small trip with a destination; most of all, though, I hope my stories show connection. I hope they connect characters to characters, readers to characters, themes and word choice to other works of fiction, prose to lyrics and people to people.

Communication is connection and the written word is telecommunication. When we write we connect across distances, across ages. We connect to our reader; readers connect

to one another and are in this way permanently linked to the literature, to the author, to one another. When William Carlos Williams wrote “The Red Wheelbarrow” he created for his readers an instant image, linking their mind’s eye to his. So much depends on that link, that connection.

In brief, I hope these stories are clear and strong in their connections. At the end of this suite of stories, I will offer a commentary and explanation of some of those connections. I hope it will be helpful; I hope it will add some meaning, but mostly I hope I’ll have done my job as a writer to reveal my connections and I hope any explanation will be mostly superfluous. Wish me luck.

“The Red Wheelbarrow”
by William Carlos Williams

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

THE BOY AND HIS DOG

How the Boy Died

The boy was neither homely, nor particularly handsome, but pleasant-faced, agile and not quick to tears. The dog was an Irish Setter, a beautiful creature with a thick glossy red coat and a friendly disposition.

The farmhouse that the boy's family lived in was white, the barn, the chicken coop and the tool shed were red, and cornfields surrounded the house in all directions. About a mile away there was a lake, with ducks and otters and Canadian geese stopping by on their way to warmer climates all throughout the autumn. It was deep enough to dive in some places and narrow enough to swim across in some places, if you were young and had the desire to do so. Tall marsh grass grew up along the banks except in the steep parts where the water was deep even close to the shore.

He loved his Irish Setter as all boys love their dogs. He sneaked mashed potatoes to her under the dinner table and fell asleep with his face buried in the soft fur under her neck. He took her for long walks and camping by the lake on warm Friday nights, taking care to get back early Saturday morning to do the chores. She walked him to school on frosty winter mornings when the woods were dark and his breath would freeze his scarf stiff. It was not such a morning when the boy lost his dog, but it was very cold when he lost that other thing.

It happened on a short walk one Sunday afternoon. It was bright, but not so very warm because fall was coming on. As all boys do when they get home from church on Sunday afternoons, our boy had peeled off his restrictive formal garments and was racing his dog to the lake. His pant-legs were rolled up to his knees showing his tan legs, still hairless and bruised all over from the summer's mischief. They had gotten to the lake and were horsing around by its muddy banks when the dog spied the otter. It was playing in the water with some smaller otters that must have been its pups. The dog loved to chase animals, and it seemed to her that she had not chased the otter in quite some time. Which was true, because the otter had been busy hiding herself and her young from boys, dogs and every other threat. The dog barked, took one glance at the boy and dashed toward the group

of sleek swimmers.

The otter immediately sent her little ones scurrying for the hole to their burrow. Then she darted in after them and listened as the big red animal came careening up to the entrance. It snuffed hard, barked and then the otter heard the two-legged animal run up to the entrance. The otter waited there for a while as the red animal barked and danced around the hole to their home.

Outside the hole the boy laughed at his silly dog. She chuckled happily and pranced around the hole and shoved her nose into it and made happy snorting sounds. Then she lifted her head and barked impatiently and her nose was powdered with dirt, which made the boy laugh even more. He knelt down with her and they started digging together.

The otter panicked when the digging began at the entrance to her home; she crawled up the tunnel towards them and sank her teeth into one of the invading paws.

The boy jumped away with a yell. Blood was flowing quickly from a ragged tear on his finger. The wound was deep. The dog brought her head out of the hole and inspected the injury. She licked the throbbing flesh and barked once with concern. Then she barked once more with anger. Then she turned back to tearing at the ground.

Freshwater otters dig their homes with an underwater entrance. The otter scurried back down the burrow to her children, and pushed the cowering wet animals down the tunnel to the underwater exit. As they had been taught, they swam underwater as long as they could, and then one by one their little noses surfaced to catch a breath, sending little ripples like smoke rings on the surface of the water. They made for the far shore of the lake. The mother otter broke the surface to make sure the red beast wasn't following, and that's when she was spotted.

The dog charged into the water growling, and the boy sat scowling by the hole. He shouted at her, "Get it!" The pain in his finger was subsiding, but blood still dripped steadily like a spigot.

The red animal splashed into the shallow water and barked at the otters. The mother, instinctively, ducked beneath the surface and watched the dog charge from underwater.

The dog was frustrated by her enemy. The cowardly otter had disappeared again, and it was very difficult to chase an animal that kept disappearing. So the dog splashed

around furiously and rather comically. By this time the boy was laughing at his silly dog and it had never really crossed his mind that he ought to go home and let his mother clean his wound. In his mind the dog had already taken care of the matter. She had licked the damaged area clean and was now busy wading after the perpetrator.

What happened next was so sudden that the boy didn't even have time to stop laughing. The otter had swum right underneath the raging dog while she was splashing about. It fixed its sharp teeth into the dog's neck and the dog made a hoarse yelping sound in the back of her throat and tried to shake the beast hanging from its neck or bite its back. The boy was still smiling.

The dog shook hard and the wound tore itself wider. The otter let go and retreated underwater, searching for its pups. The dog had a gaping hole in her esophagus and she was sucking water into her lungs. She stumbled toward the shore and the boy filled the gap; he was no longer laughing.

He pulled her to shore, and he cradled her head and the bright red sap darkened his cheap overalls. The dog made slurping noises in her chest and coughed. He struggled to lift her and got her body over his shoulders; her head slumped by his ear so he felt each warm wet breath of air and heard each gurgle of blood and water in the dog's throat. He started running towards the house, but the dog let out a pathetic yelp and he couldn't have kept the pace long anyway. He settled for trudging.

A violent coughing fit shook the dog and made the boy stumble on his feet. He felt the pink saliva drip down his neck and soak the collar of his shirt. The warm breath became weaker and the slurping became thick with fluid. They struggled together, the boy for home, the dog for life. She coughed again. Dust and summer gnats stuck to the sweet red liquor that covered them.

Her lungs filled with fluid and she stopped breathing about halfway back to the house.

The boy must have known she had died. He must have noticed that there were no more breaths on his neck. He must have noticed how the gurgling got softer and then stopped. He must have felt her body slacken and go limp against his shoulders. The boy felt his Adam's apple like a heavy stone in his throat and he thought he might choke on it. When he grimaced blood trickled into his mouth; it tasted like pennies and made his lips

sticky.

Close your eyes and you can see them: him, dressed in cheap blue overalls with the legs rolled up, and her, a corpse, with her wet, glossy red fur, limp. Close your eyes and you can see both of them looking very small amidst the dry rows of corn that seem to cover the whole world, stalks chattering morbidly to each other in the wind. Close your eyes and you can see them, but you cannot taste the salty sweat and the copper of the blood. The boy was coated with her blood, so they looked as though they were part of the same awkward red beast, making its cumbersome way through the rattle of the endless cornfields, just a boy and his dog.

That autumn the frost came early. It seemed that September skipped October and went straight for November. And every Sunday the boy would go out with his father's rifle and hunt the otter. He walked the same path back to the lake as he had taken home that other day, except it was a rifle he carried across his shoulders. He saw the otter every now and then, but he never took a shot, because he had taken the gun without permission, and he knew he would get caught when he fired it, so he wanted to make sure he would kill the otter.

It was not until the first snow that he had a good shot at it. Everything became white overnight. He was out in a thicket by the lake in a wool stocking cap. He had been squatting for quite some time, the rifle lying across his thighs when then he saw it. The otter was climbing one of the steeper banks of the lake, well within range. He grabbed the stock and settled the rifle on his shoulder. He closed one eye and looked down the barrel of his father's gun. He glimpsed it for a moment through the scope, his heart jumped; he pulled the mitten off of his right hand to shoot but when he looked up the otter was gone. He lowered the gun and swore. He only knew one swear. He had heard it from one of the older boys at school, and he had come to understand that it was a very bad thing to say and was one of the things that people went to hell for. He didn't care, in fact he was very serious when he said it and very prepared to pay the consequences. Tears clouded up his vision and he blinked them away. His hand was getting numb so he reached down for his glove.

Just then he saw the otter again. It climbed up the steep white bank and lay down on

its stomach and slid down into the water and then climbed out and slid down again. It was playing. He could have sworn again, seeing the otter playing, but he was reminded of how his dog would play in the snow, so the stone came back in his throat so he felt he could barely breathe, let alone swear. He picked up the rifle and took aim again. He did not rush. He aimed at the top of the bank and waited for it to come into view. He bit his lip. He fondled the trigger anxiously. The big pink scar along his index finger ached. The otter came into view. He adjusted his aim and pulled the trigger.

The recoil of the blast knocked the boy on his back. He sat up just in time to see the dark form on the bank slip into the water. Little waves went out in rings from the place it had entered. A red trail of blood marked the white snow on the bank.

The boy did not cry. The otter was dead under the surface of the cold lake and he did not cry, even though his shoulder ached and even though he choked on that heavy stone.

It was a long walk back in the snow and the rifle weighed heavy on his shoulders. He could taste blood in his mouth; he had broken the skin when he was biting his lip. He put the rifle on the high place in the shed where his father kept it and then went to his room. At dinner his father remarked that the hunters were out again, that he had heard someone shooting out by the lake. That night the boy lay very still in bed and could not sleep.

VIRGINS

Sinful Thoughts

(age 6)



*"Honey, where's the
Baby Jesus statue?"*



He was in my top drawer.
My mother found him two
days later while putting
my socks away.

She thought it was adorable.



*"He loves Jesus so
much he hides the
statue away, isn't
it adorable?"*

I didn't love the
Baby Jesus at all.

I was trying to
get him out of the
way...



I loved HER.

I didn't know what I loved about her...

...I just knew I loved it very, very much.

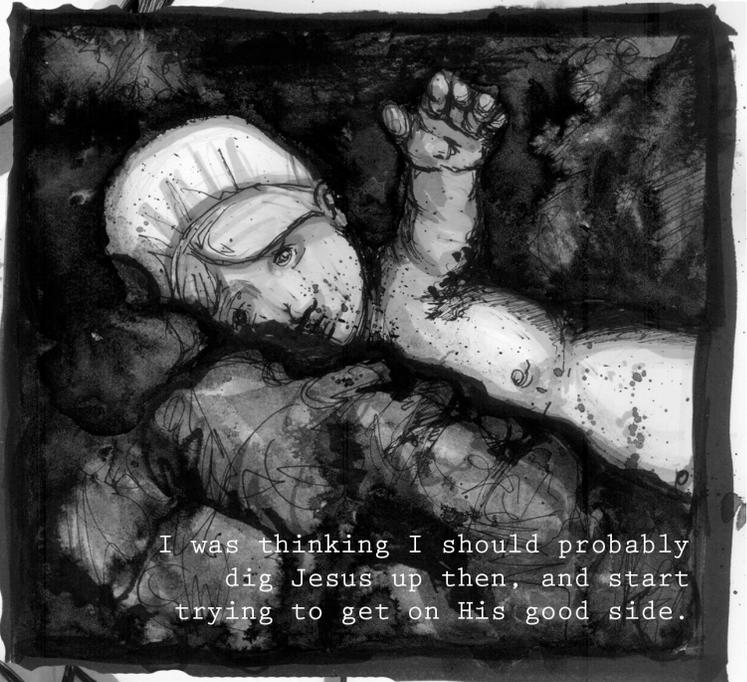


"what are you doing, Honey?"

"..."

"p-praying, Mom."

"that's adorable, Hon, but we don't pray to Mary. Catholics sometimes do, but we believe only Jesus can forgive our sins."



I was thinking I should probably dig Jesus up then, and start trying to get on His good side.

A CUT ABOVE

The Mediocrity Rant

I had a shitty day today. I failed a test. I studied eight hours for it and I failed it. I didn't actually fail it; I failed my standard, but it's the same thing. It's not the end of the world; it's just that I'm a student. I've been a student all my life, and I've been a pretty good one and this is what I do, I take tests. This is my job, my occupation. It's really just been a shitty, shitty day, a shitty week in fact. Hell, I failed a test three weeks ago, so why not just round it up to a shitty month.

I am driving home, flipping through the radio stations, nothing fits the mood; I click past all of them. I tried turning it off, but I can't stand the silence, or the ambient noise, so I just keep pressing the search button. The car in front of me has a political bumper sticker from 1996. I feel like ramming into them from behind, not because of their damn political choices, but because what the hell makes them think I want to know how they voted in nineteen ninety-six? I want to ram their rear-end and watch my little Volkswagen's hood crumple into their minivan's bumper. I want to watch them pull over and get out in order to swap insurance information and yell at me and wait for the police, but instead to speed away as they wonder *what the hell just happened? why didn't things go as planned?*, to see if maybe *they* can figure it out. Instead I idle patiently behind them as they wait to make a left at a light, letting it change to red just as they turn.

A squirrel runs out in front of me and I want to swerve and hit it, and then I want to put the car in reverse and run over it again and smugly ignore the looks of horror in the passerby's faces, but I tap the brakes and watch it cross safely to the other side.

I used to be a cutter in high-school. Nothing big, but I still have a few little scars from it. Take out a pocket-knife and draw a line on my arm, let the blood bead up on the skin and relax, feeling the burn, watch as it dries before it gets to my wrist. I need something like that now; but not something so pathetic. What do people my age do to self-destruct? Do I need to hit up some friends for some drugs and vodka: get hammered, get plastered, get lifted, and get in every other possible way shit-brained? Even that seems pathetic. I want to make some grandiose gesture of self-annihilation, to make myself into the Herculean hero in the little drama of my life. Because right now I am the J. Alfred

Prufrock in the drama of my life. Because there is no drama in my life.

There is a young couple in a Honda in front of me. They are laughing and she touches his arm. He looks like the kind of guy I knew in high school: cool, confident. The kind of guy I aspired to become when puberty finally finished its job. The kind of guy that made me want to cut myself. The kind of guy I might look like to everyone else but never really feel like. He looks like the kind of guy who might run over a squirrel.

I could lie to one of the girls at work, tell her she has a beautiful smile or something, maybe lie for a month, or a week, or just a night, but I won't. It wouldn't be the kind of case-study in desperation that writers write about, that famous writers, that Jack Kerouac writes about; or even the kind of tragi-victorious, backseat-of-a-Chevy Americana experience that Bruce Springsteen sings about, that makes his music worth listening to, it would just be dull. My life has to count for something, has to be worth listening to, worth reading. Not to the world, I won't buy that Miss America dream of *making a difference*: that's a teat I never could suck any milk from. I just want to do something worth remembering in my own life, for myself, something that would mean that all those mighty duels, those tragic deaths, those selfless sacrifices, those beautiful romances played out on my hands and knees with Lego on musty carpet landscapes weren't bullshit, that something like that really happens, can really be made to happen, even in the smallest of possible ways, in real life.

I want to at least do something that deserves this irritation, this dull anger, something to make this depression worthwhile, like run my car into a gas station and get disfiguring burns all over my body. Or die. Have my family drive down and rifle through my belongings, my letters, my pictures and discover all those horrible things about me that were too close to home to let them find out. Or those few wonderful things about myself I was too ashamed to let them find out. Of course I pass the gas station in an orderly fashion, laughing meanly at the pity-party that is my life.

Tomorrow will be a better day, but even that thought makes me mad: I don't want to feel good about mediocrity. So I pull into a grocery store parking lot and I try to write this feeling, anything to preserve this moment, to remind myself of this dissatisfaction the next time the sun is shining, or I ace a test, or she laughs and touches my arm. I don't just write it down so that I can see myself whine, so that I can visualize and preserve how laughable I

am in my mighty wrath; I write it because it is a fuel to propel me... somewhere, anywhere, maybe nowhere just so it's not here, not now. I write to keep myself from growing content with the mediocrity that I despise in myself right now.

I write because it's all I really know how to do. It's not much and I can't do it very well right now, not like I wish I should, but I can do it decently, maybe even just a cut above mediocre: maybe just enough to distinguish myself, if only in my own eyes, from millions of someones in Hondas and Chevys and Volkswagens who look just like me to someone else.

EXPOSURE

The Reflections of a Lady Photographer

She has just returned from a consultation with a psychiatrist. She did not hear what she had hoped to hear.

Opening the door carefully, listening for signs of her partner, she moves not like a burglar, but like a cautious catwalk model, stepping daintily even as she creeps from room to room, checking to make sure he is not there. In many ways, this is not her house. There are pictures on the bureau of a couple, her lover is in them; she is not. She hears a creak and starts, but the house is empty.

She had meant to be there much earlier, but the traffic was terrible. Before she goes to hide herself away, she admires herself in the mirror. She takes out an inexpensive digital camera from her purse. The camera offers very few choices, portrait, landscape and close-up; it has no aperture or exposure controls but it suffices. She has more cameras, worth more by thousands, but this one has a single, secret use. She stands in front of a full-length mirror and takes a picture of herself. The camera makes the softest *snip*. She wishes she could strip to her waist, dress in tight jeans and show off an impossibly thin but still unbearably feminine and unbelievably raw body, like Patti Smith in those Mapplethorpe photographs, but a woman must work with what she has, just as she must work with what she hasn't.

She takes another snapshot. Then she sits on the edge of the bed and unstraps her high-heel shoes. She tugs off her skirt, rolls down her stockings, wiggles out of her underwear: tight, formfitting elastic that keeps everything in place and hidden from view. Everything goes in an empty suitcase. The shoes, the bra, the stockings, the underwear, a purse and a makeup bag filled with fake eyelashes stowed in the ratty old suitcase that no one ever looks in. Before putting the blouse away she notices a dark smudge on the collar. The lipstick stains never really wash out, but her partner will not notice, just like he will not notice the painted press-on fingernails or the make-up removal pads stuffed in the bathroom trash, hidden like discarded sanitary napkins under tissues and empty tubes of toothpaste.

The woman is naked and she stands, looking at the figure of an equally naked black man. He is handsome, but his form disappoints her. He is not curvy or shapely, but trim and strong, sharp like a knife.

A door opens and a man's voice calls out, "Hey, are you home?"

"Yes, how was work?"

"Ugh, What a fucking day."

She realizes that she is still wearing her wig and stuffs it hurriedly in the suitcase, which he closes and hides in the mess under the bed. Her lover enters the room. "I swear to God, if it's not one thing, it's another. I'm going to kill someone in HR if they don't get they're... Well my day just got better!" He looks at the naked person and grins. "Just what I have always wanted, a naked man to call my own."

Eman smiles and covers his nakedness with mock modesty. "I was going to meet you at the door covered in Saran wrap."

"Ha! Nah, that was getting old, I'm glad you decided to change it up a little."

They come together in a kiss and as he shifts his feet to reach his lover's lips, Eman feels under his bare feet the unmistakable, sharp pressure of a press-on fingernail.

CIGARETTES

Sinful Things

(age 11)

"I just don't want to, Mom."

*"I'm not discussing this
anymore, Honey."*

My mother wanted me to spend time with him because she thought he could use a good Christian influence.

The first time, we were playing WWII soldiers. I was an Italian freedom fighter and he was an American GI who took me for a spy. He tied me up.

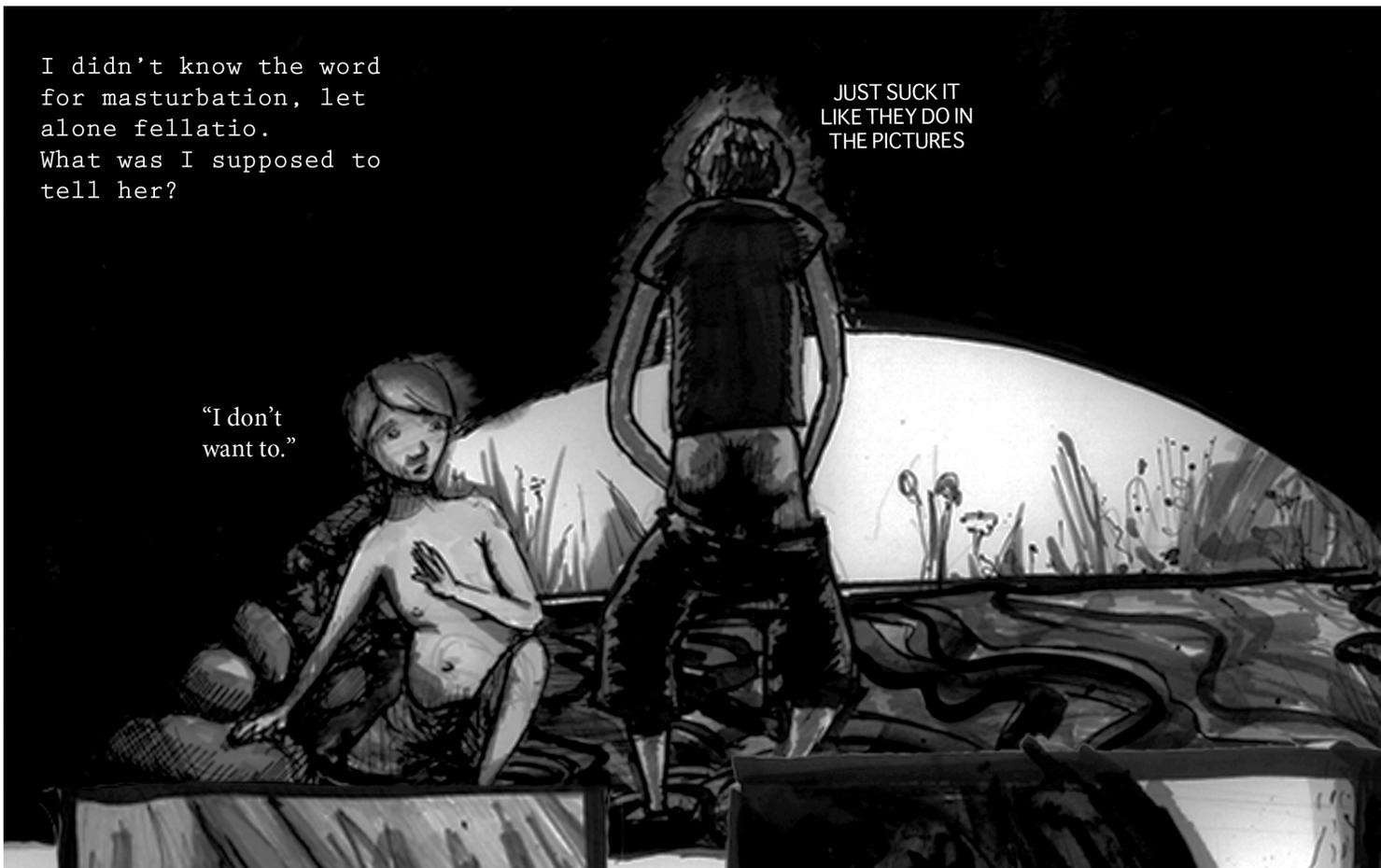
"what does he do?"

I was slippery and untied the knots by the time I realized frottage wasn't part of standard army interrogation.

I didn't know the word for masturbation, let alone fellatio. What was I supposed to tell her?

JUST SUCK IT LIKE THEY DO IN THE PICTURES

"I don't want to."



"C'MON JUST PUT IT IN YOUR MOUTH. I'LL DO YOURS..."



"I DON'T WANT TO."

My parents argued about it. My dad thought making his son play with a troubled older boy was not in God's plan. I guess he was wrong.



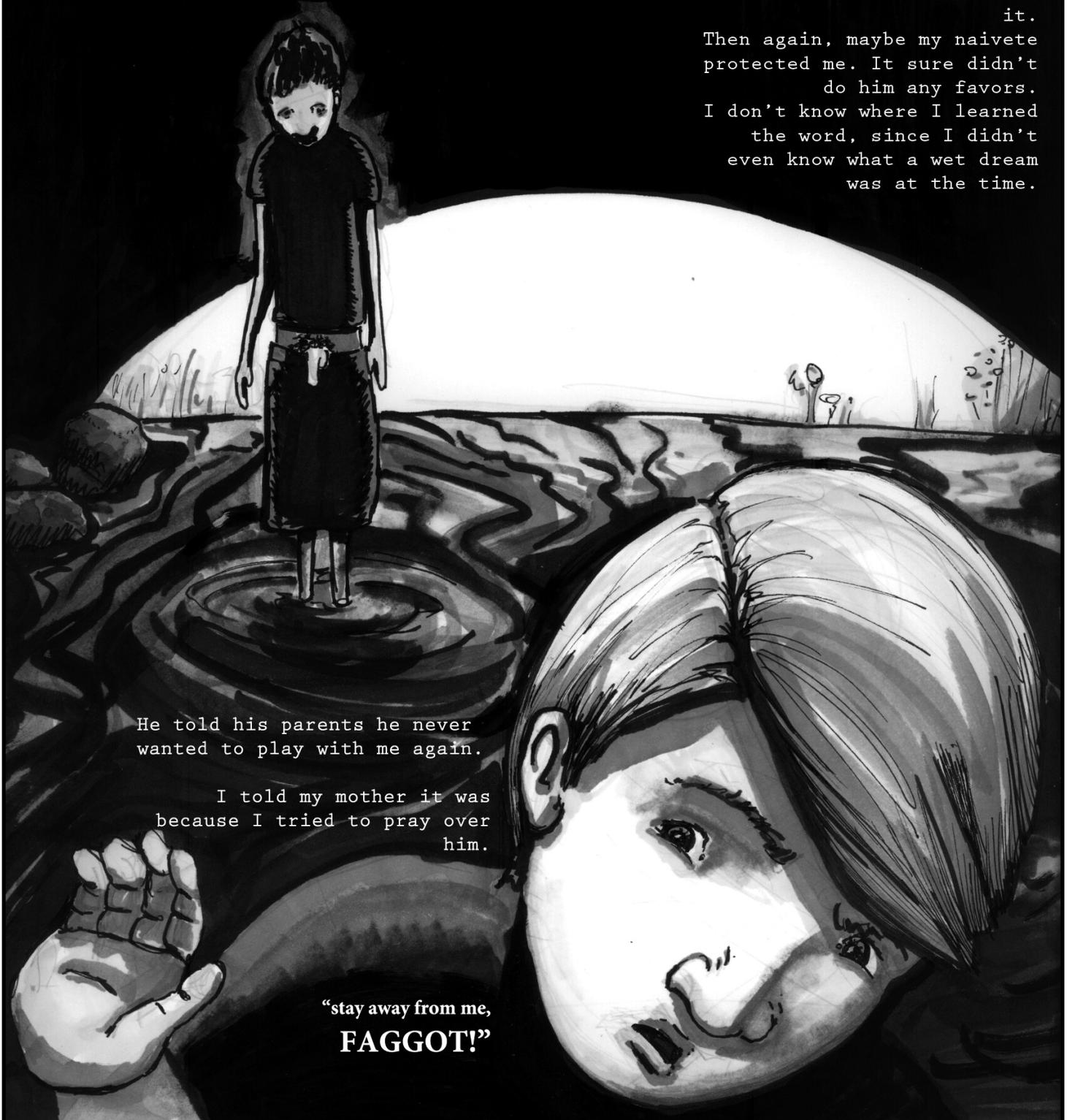
Later I did wonder what it would be like. Mostly, though, I just kept thinking about those pictures.

"what does he do?"

"he smokes cigarettes."

*"cigarettes aren't that bad honey.
Jesus say to love the sinner,
just hate the sin."*

Looking back, the saddest part about it was that he was even more screwed up by what happened than I was. I can't help but wonder how it would have gone down if I had actually known anything about sex, if someone had bothered to talk to me about it. Then again, maybe my naivete protected me. It sure didn't do him any favors. I don't know where I learned the word, since I didn't even know what a wet dream was at the time.



He told his parents he never wanted to play with me again.

I told my mother it was because I tried to pray over him.

*"stay away from me,
FAGGOT!"*

MISS T. EYES

And the Ghost of Tom Joad

((missTeyes)): sry, I got a little tired and dozed off.

((tomjoad)): you were only gone five minutes.

((missTeyes)): That's all?

((tomjoad)): Why don't we stop, you can get some rest.

((missTeyes)): no, I'm fine. I just got some rest. Fifteen whole minutes is pretty good these days. Wher were we?

((tomjoad)): it was only five minutes rest.

((missTeyes)): just go on. Please Tom.

((tomjoad)): 'I believe I was whispering something in your ear' I say, stepping behind you and wrapping my arms around you, one around your waist and one over your shoulder, hand draped gently across your plump breasts

((missTeyes)): can you squeeze my breasts?

((tomjoad)): I squeeze your breasts and whisper into your ear, 'O Misty.'

((missTeyes)): I purr and tilt my head so my ear is pressed to your mouth

((tomjoad)): my lips brush your lobe and you can hear each consonant like the smack of a kiss as I say, 'Do you want to see something swell?'

((missTeyes)): lol stop that, it hurts to laugh.

((tomjoad)): sorry. Your breasts jiggle pleasantly under my arm every time you giggle

((missTeyes)): if you speak a little lower I might hear each consonant like the smack of a good spanking

((missTeyes)): your hand slips down the front of myblouse, the buttons give way

((tomjoad)): Popping, round little o after little round o through the little button slits.

((missTeyes)): your arereally good at this, baby

((tomjoad)): 'O! Misty' I say, and kiss the nape of your neck,

((tomjoad)): I move my mouth over the consonants of your name as though it were a part of you I could taste and feel with my tongue and lips
'Misty' O I inhale it

((tomjoad)): I pull the fabric of your sweater down gently to kiss the center of your back right between the shoulder blades and whisper your name into your spine 'O! Misty'

((tomjoad)): you shiver

((tomjoad)): you don't have to shiver, you could quiver if you prefer...

((tomjoad)): Misty?

((tomjoad)): Karen?

((missTeyes)): i'm sorry I heav to go

These are the last recorded words of my first lover, Karen, known to the ABBA enthusiasts of the Internet as 'missTeyes' and known to me in our online love-making as Misty. I was told by the Super-Troupers that she logged on once more, asked for Tom Joad and was never seen in the Waterloo Cafe again. Toward the end, her spelling got bad, or just less careful, but she wrote me the sexiest words I've ever read and she spoke to me, once, the kindest words I've ever heard.

Usually when a familiar poster and chatter disappears, it is due to vacation, or computer troubles, or life troubles or new interests. Sometimes the person will reappear. Sometimes they will not. Sometimes they may change names entirely and reinvent themselves as somebody new with new problems, new opinions, maybe a new gender or backstory, at least in the world of online fan forums. But for Misty life as we know it is over. Judging by her appearance on the occasion of our only meeting, the real life Karen is probably dead also. I know she had family she left behind, definitely a husband, which was strange to be told, but she also left me behind.

I owe to Misty my second broken heart, my first experience of real loss and pretty much everything I know about sex. She taught me to read the inarticulate touches and secret breaths of a lover, what to ask and how to move. She taught me what to ask a woman, how to listen and how to respond. My embarrassing fondness for a Swedish pop sensation, my knowledge of how to please a woman and how to tell a woman how to please

me, these things I owe to Misty. I owe my chance internet encounter with her to a brief fixation with dirty limericks.

Most days at Kerimax are the same. I load up the shipping software on my desktop and then I have to make the rounds of the empty office. Every morning I check all of the printers and photocopiers and make sure they have paper and aren't low on ink. Sometimes a light bulb is flickering and then I replace it. I stand on the desk and get the cover off. I like the old bulbs, they're long and fragile and you have to be careful not to break them because the mercury inside is poisonous. I carry them carefully out of the office suite and through the halls, down the stairs (never the elevators) and back to the dumpsters, where I smash them to bits.

I'm here before almost everyone else, with the exception of a field-service technician or two, but they generally move quickly and only stop by my desk to drop off a shipping receipt. The field-techs are strange. There are a lot of them I've never even seen. Packages accumulate in their cubicles for weeks and then disappear one morning, often before I even get to work.

Anyways, because I'm the first one here I make the coffee before the office workers arrive. I pour myself a mug and sit at my desk to greet them. This is part of my 'security' function. My company likes to make sure all of our client company's workers feel a personal connection with their service providers.

"Hi, Will."

"Good morning, Ed."

Mr. Roker said to call him Ed on my first day.

"Just don't call me Mr. Ed, ha ha."

Ed is the VP of one of the important departments in the region and the big shot in the office, but he never takes himself too seriously. When he introduces himself he always says, "Roker. Like Al, we're related, you know." The joke is that Ed Roker is a five-foot-four Jersey-Jewish-looking guy and Al Roker is black and famous and does the weather on the Today Show in New York City. This is what kills me about Ed, though: I've heard him introducing himself that way over the phone. People must think he's nuts.

I enjoy talking to Ed. He says my hair reminds him of his buddies in high school and we talk about the Doors and Bruce Springsteen, who he went to school with—a few years behind, actually—in Asbury Park.

“Hey, Billy.”

“Morning, Mr. Boghs.”

Boghs is pronounced like the sound equipment, Bose. I suppose this is ironic because we also have a Mr. Kenwood. Dominic Boghs keeps his hair slicked back and must not own a single white dress shirt: all of his shirts are purple or green or some other obnoxiously bright color. He never told me to call him anything but Mr. Boghs, not ‘Dom’ not ‘Dominic’ not even ‘Mr. B.’, all he did was correct me the first time I called him Mr. *Bogs*, like the swamp.

“It’s Boghs, like the sound equipment.”

“Oh. Sorry, Mr. *Boghs*.”

“What’s your name, kid?”

“Will.”

“Alright, cool. Nice to meet you, Billy.”

So I call him ‘Mr. Boghs,’ and he calls me ‘Billy’ or ‘kid.’

“What’cha reading, Billy?”

“*The Pearl*.”

“Hemingway, right? Don’t’cha read that in high school? Catching up on some back-reading?”

“It’s my second time.”

“Did it all whizz by you in a blur the first time? Just kidding, haha, later Billy.”

“Yeah, later.”

Mr. Boghs should get hit by a bus.

The thing is, and this is what I hate, even if I don’t like the people this is usually the best part of my day. Even Mr. Boghs is better than the low, hostile hum of the photocopy machine. I try to read, but most of the time I just stare at the pages. When Misty was around, when Misty was alive, I used to look forward to the long afternoons of typing, coming up with beautiful things to say to her, to do to her, to have her do to me. I combed

through books: trashy romances at night, respectable books at work, hunting for words to excite her.

This is how it all happened. I began working for Kerimax Technologies in the fall of 2001. My duties left me hours and hours of idle time. I collected rubber bands off of the daily mail deliveries. I read *Walden*. I made a cantaloupe-sized ball out of the rubber bands and bounced it off the floor between my feet. I read *Moby Dick*, chasing sperm whales from my lonely desk and I staged labor protests in California, throwing fruit from behind picket lines of printer paper boxes of color toner when I read *The Grapes of Wrath*, and then *The Winter of Our Discontent*. I started growing my hair out just so I had something to do. It grew down in front of my eyes so that I had to constantly brush it aside, providing my otherwise shiftless fingers with much-needed activity. I read *Walden* again, just to ward off the aggressive crackle of the fluorescent lights and I wrote down every dirty limerick I could think of. I began combing the Internet and my list grew from a few pages to over fifty. My file drawer contained one folder of operating manuals for all of the printers in the office, one medicine-ball composed entirely of rubber bands, and a growing folder of handwritten smut in endless five-line rhyme schemes.

How I got from limericks to ABBA was mostly coincidental, but in retrospect almost unavoidable. Limericks are set up with a very predictable rhyme scheme, like this:

There was a young man from Nantucket (rhyme A)
Who carried his balls in a bucket (rhyme A)
He had no scrotum, you see, (rhyme B)
With which to tote 'em, you see, (rhyme B)
That sorry old man from Nantucket. (rhyme A)

This is not the sort of poetry that generally leads to love affairs. It's a dirty, simple poem about testes, and there's only one true rhyme: 'bucket' to 'Nantucket.' 'Nantucket' is used twice to complete the A rhyme pattern, and 'you see' rhymes redundantly with itself. 'Tote'em' to 'scrotum' is a valid internal rhyme, but not a true rhyme. The point, though, is that when every search engine has been plumbed with every permutation of the words, 'dirty,' 'sexual,' 'scatological,' 'fecal,' 'poem,' 'rhyme' and 'limerick' and anything else that might be associated with limericks, one turns to little tricks like searching rhyme schemes.

And this is how one meets a 60-year-old dying woman online. The rhyme scheme for a limerick, AABBA, is very close to the seventies band, ABBA, which is how I found myself perusing fan blogs and web sites devoted entirely to the Swedish pop sensation. These web sites are nearly overrun with 60-year-olds, some of whom are statistically likely to have, have had or eventually have cancer. One who I met had an encyclopedic knowledge of Bruce Springsteen lyrics and a robust longing for the “healthy pulse of a strong body and a man’s fiery, fiery heart.” Her words, not mine. I have never felt strong or fiery except once, holding her, and not in the way she meant it.

When you chat online, there are a lot people talking back and forth at different times. Sometimes conversations double back on themselves and you answer things out of order. When you want to say something private, you ‘whisper’ and it shows up to them in double parentheses.

((missTeyes)): so is what they say about foot-size true?

((tomjoad)): I don't know. What do they say about foot-size?

((missTeyes)): You know, the bigger the shoe, the bigger the erhm... inseam.

((tomjoad)): Ha. A lady never asks and a gentleman never tells.

((missTeyes)): Of course, I’m sorry. That would be in seamly, that is, unseemly.

We’ll just say it’s a 'for-you-to-know-and-me-to-find-out' type of deal?

((tomjoad)): Exactly.

((missTeyes)): to herself: I wonder if he likes me?

((tomjoad)): ‘Ha.’ To himself: I think I like her.

((missTeyes)): you’re sweet.

((missTeyes)): so what does a girl need to do to find out?

((tomjoad)): If a boy likes her?

((missTeyes)): I was skipping ahead to the foot-size/inseam scenario, but we can take it slow...

((tomjoad)): Usually sweet-talk me with Bruce Springsteen references and obvious interest in my inseam.

((missTeyes)): Well, I imagine that job you got leaves you uninspired. Why don't I come by to take you out to eat?

((tomjoad)): You'll probably find me lyin' all dressed up on the bed, baby, fast asleep.

((tomjoad)): I know a place where the dancing's free, c'mon baby take a ride with me

((missTeyes)): Down the shore every thing's alright, when you got your baby on a Saturday night. It's a beautiful song. I'm a Jersey girl. Well I was, years ago. Bruce is a goddamn poet.

((tomjoad)): Actually Tom Waits wrote 'Jersey Girl', Bruce Springsteen just performs it.

((missTeyes)): no kidding. how did you know that? There's no way you're actually nineteen.

I had mentioned at the Waterloo Café that I didn't really know much about ABBA because of my age. None of the other Super-Troupers seemed to mind. They enjoyed telling me all about the *best* ABBA songs and greatest concerts they'd ever been to. I was a set of fresh ears for a while. The first thing Misty told me in a whisper was that ABBA, for the most part, sucked, except for 'Dancing Queen' and maybe 'Fernando.' I laughed, but I spelled it out, haha, not 'lol' because I don't like those abbreviations. It's okay if other people use them, I just don't like typing them out; it feels silly.

Anyways, Misty told me ABBA sucked, and I asked her why she was at this fan site, I still remember what she said, "Same as you, probably, I'm bored. I'm bored and I'm lonely as hell."

I knew exactly what she meant, or at least I thought I did.

Later on I started saving our conversations, copying and pasting the text into word documents that I still have, but even though I didn't save that exchange, I remember it clearly.

At first, especially after the Tom Waits reference, she didn't believe I was nineteen. She asked me all kinds of questions, as a joke. After a while, they stopped being about my age.

((missTeyes)): who's Patty Hearst?
((tomjoad)): Don't know. A singer?
((missTeyes)): actress/heirress/kidnap victim/domestic terrorist. What about Patti Scialfa?
((tomjoad)): 'Red Headed Woman?' I know it takes a red headed woman to get the job done.
((missTeyes)): they can see every cheap thing you ever done
((tomjoad)): your life's been wasted till you've gotten down on your knees and tasted a red headed woman.
((missTeyes)): And you wonder why I don't believe you're only 19. So. Tell me about your inseam... I mean your new boots.
((tomjoad)): Dark, freshly oiled leather laced tight and snug.
((missTeyes)): mmm, sounds nice, got a vest to match?
((tomjoad)): Heh, just the boots for now.
((missTeyes)): we'll work on it. Size?
((tomjoad)): Ten and a half.
((tomjoad)): Wide.
((missTeyes)): Ha. Nice heel?
((tomjoad)): They give me an extra inch or so.
((missTeyes)): which makes you (fill in the blank) when you're sporting them...
((tomjoad)): 5'11".
((missTeyes)): Ok. That checks out.
((tomjoad)): How does my height prove I'm 19?
((missTeyes)): oh it doesn't. Sometimes a girl just likes to know.
((tomjoad)): Ok then, what about yourself?
((missTeyes)): Well, I'm not 19.
((tomjoad)): Oh no, I'm flirting with jailbait.
((missTeyes)): Vice versa, sugar.
((tomjoad)): Is that a fact? How old are you?

((missTeyes)): a lady never tells. That's for me to know and you to find out. Pick an answer. Old enough to know better.

((tomjoad)): too young to care?

((missTeyes)): you're never too young to care, Tom.

((missTeyes)): but I'm young enough to teach you a few things.

((tomjoad)): Is that a fact, Mrs. Robinson?

((missTeyes)): if you keep throwing me off with these old movies, I'll never believe you're a nineteen year-old.

((tomjoad)): I'm a well-versed exception. What are you wearing? Since you know everything about my shoes.

((missTeyes)): and about your jeans. Everything below the belt, really. Speaking of which, belt?

((tomjoad)): Brown leather, like the boots.

((missTeyes)): Thick, wide leather, like a work belt?

((tomjoad)): you got it. Now back to you, shoes?

((missTeyes)): sweatpants and crocs. everyone on the internet is a 40-yr-old bald man, didn't you know?

((tomjoad)): Even everyone on an ABBA fansite?

((missTeyes)): lol! Especially everyone on an ABBA fansite.

((tomjoad)): That makes me a little disappointed.

((missTeyes)): well, I hope I don't disappoint you by being an exception. I'm all woman, kiddo.

((tomjoad)): How much is 'all'? Is that for me to find out too?

It's exchanges like these that make me cringe now. *How much is all?* I guess I did find out. I remember the flatness of her chest when I held her. It was flatter than a man's chest, like it was hollow. It's strange, knowing what I know about her. Now it seems bitterly ironic. I wonder if she winced when she read it. I hope not.

We flirted a lot the first week, for hours, but we didn't get very far, didn't get intimate. I guess that's a weird word to use about an online romance, I mean it's just information, ones and zeros repeating themselves. But even under the flickering

fluorescents, even spelled out in binary code and double parentheses, it felt intimate. I felt like I knew her. I guess that's the point. In that first week I learned about flirting. I learned that most questions can be answered with a question, I learned that romance is give and take, like dancing, someone is always leading.

When we did start getting intimate—that is, sexual—it felt normal. Misty took lead, she didn't just tell me what she wanted to do to me; she told me what she wanted me to do to her.

((missTeyes)): how's work?

((tomjoad)): Boring.

((missTeyes)): want to liven it up?

((tomjoad)): What do you have in mind?

((missTeyes)): 'What do you have in mind?' you ask. You make the question sound naive, but I have a feeling you just want to hear me say it.

((tomjoad)): Eyebrows cocked. I do want to hear you say it.

((missTeyes)): 'You know, a little of this, a little of that.' My hips sway just the smallest bit, for emphasis.

((tomjoad)): 'Sounds nice.'

((missTeyes)): I look deep into your eyes they are like...

((tomjoad)): my eyes are like?

((missTeyes)): (psst. that's your cue) what color are your eyes?

((tomjoad)): Grayish.

((missTeyes)): ... like a rainy day, darkly overcast, but clear and bright around the edges. Your hair is...

((tomjoad)): long for a man, like John Lennon's.

((missTeyes)): color?

((tomjoad)): dark blond.

((missTeyes)): you run your fingers through your long hair and shoot me a shy look. It suits you, but it's clearly an act, your stare is direct and meaningful and the wry smile at the corner of your mouth is assured.

I had never got what I wanted, not from women, not until after Misty, and when I did, I used every trick she taught me. Especially the fingers through the hair thing, I practiced the smile in the mirror.

((missTeyes)): You seem like the kind of guy who gets what he wants and I kinda hope it's me.

((tomjoad)): I kinda think it is. It's your eyes, they're just so...

((missTeyes)): brown, like dark chocolate.

((tomjoad)): and mischievous, I bet.

((missTeyes)): Very mischievous.

((tomjoad)): And your hair is so...

((tomjoad)): so...

((tomjoad)): (psst, that's your cue, haha)...

((tomjoad)): Misty?

She didn't answer that day. I remember wondering if her Internet connection was down. Now I wonder if she was even able to answer.

I sometimes worry that I was being cruel, without even knowing it, but I think, I mean, I like to think I gave her some relief from herself, from the doctors and the scars and the prognosis. I know she gave me a lot of relief. The days without her seem so long.

It's funny, even though I didn't know her, even though it didn't matter, it didn't even count, I guess I had performance anxiety. I didn't know the first thing about sex. I had made out, of course, and I grinded and did some petting, but I couldn't articulate what I was doing or why, or if I was doing it right. I started looking up romance novels and sites where people write erotic fiction.

It was actually Mr. Roker who pointed me in the right direction.

"Morning, Will." Ed Roker had his usual travel mug.

"Good morning, Ed." His travel mug smelled like gin and orange juice. I don't know if it does every time, but he leaves it in the sink sometimes and I wash it, because I can't stand it when people leave their stuff in the sink. It usually smells like gin and O.J.

"Another day, another dime, eh? Whatcha reading?" He peeked around my desk.

I minimized the chat screen. "Eh, just fooling around on the computer."

“Romance novels, eh?” He saw my Google search at the bottom of the screen. “When I was in college we had to read *Ulysses*. It’s not light reading, but there’s some hot shit in there, boy. Good stuff. There was a woman in the 60’s... famous woman. I forget her name, but she published a book of erotic stuff, I forget what it’s called. What was her name... she fucked Henry Miller. I don't know, look it up, I remember it was steamy. Don't go reading it at work, though. I was a freshman when I read it and I had a boner for a whole week, but *Ulysses* should be alright. Make you look smart, too.” He sipped contemplatively from his coffee mug. "Yeah, save the smutty stuff for home, go to the bathroom in peace and quiet, break open the girlfriend's conditioner. You know the drill, kid."

I did know the drill, but not about the conditioner. Ed was probably drunk, but I had never thought about conditioner, not that I had any, or a girlfriend.

((missTeyes): I wonder if you will make the first move. I so desperately want you to.

((tomjoad): ‘What would you do if I kissed you?’ My thumb brushes your lips.

((missTeyes): they part slightly and you feel the heat of my breath against your chest. ‘I don't know.’ I say, barely whispering. Your hand moves to the back of my neck and you pull my face to yours.

((tomjoad): I hold you there, forehead to forehead, lips almost touching, looking straight into your beautiful eyes...

((missTeyes): big and brown and full of anticipation...

((tomjoad): ‘Well, I'm waiting...’ I can feel your chest against my own as you pant for breath.

((missTeyes): I don’t answer. I can’t. My breasts press against your chest with every breath. ‘I guess, I'll have to find out...’ you say, and pull my mouth into yours.

((tomjoad): It’s part kiss, and part collision. Our teeth click like steel on steel, like knives.

((missTeyes): Like knives?

((tomjoad)): Our lips wrap around each others. It feels as inevitable as a car crash, as electric as a lightning storm. We part, out of breath. 'I guess found out,' I pant, 'the hard way.'

((tomjoad)): not like knives?

((missTeyes)): Lol! The hard way. I press my hips into your pelvis, enjoying the friendly pressure from your cock. 'I guess you did.'

((missTeyes)): 'like knives' is fine. I smile and taste my lips, there's a familiar taste like copper where my lip had been pinched between our colliding teeth. I run my tongue over the small cut.

((tomjoad)): I reach up to touch lip where its cut. Then I kiss it.

((missTeyes)): but not gently, what starts out as an act of tenderness becomes instantly passionate. You bite my lip and pull as you break way.

((missTeyes)): You place a hand on my face, your thumb gently tracing my jawline up to the soft skin behind my ear. Your voice in my ear rumbles like a muscle car, sexy and low, and you say, 'why don't we go somewhere more private?'

((tomjoad)): I run my fingers down your throat, and pull at the neckline of your shirt.

((missTeyes)): a single blouse button comes undone with an inaudible pop under your fingers. 'Where will we go?'

((tomjoad)): I look into your beautiful dark eyes, 'Follow me,'

((missTeyes)): You lead me to a closet. You close the door behind us and push me up against the racks of office supplies. You bury your face in my neck and kiss me, moving up my throat

((tomjoad)): Our lips meet and we press our mouths against each other,

((missTeyes)): I kiss you like your lips are the darkest, richest chocolate in the world.

((tomjoad)): Nice. I kiss you like I want to drink you down. We break away panting and I look at the beautiful woman pressed up against the shelves of paper and staples and toner cartridges.

((missTeyes)): we can't get at each other fast enough. Even as you fumble at the last buttons of my blouse I am reaching down your pants. I can feel you. So hard for me. I get down on my knees.

((missTeyes)):

((missTeyes)):

((missTeyes)):

((missTeyes)):

((missTeyes)):

((missTeyes)):

((tomjoad)):

((missTeyes)):

((tomjoad)):

((missTeyes)):

((tomjoad)):

((tomjoad)):

((tomjoad)):

((tomjoad)): I stare at you, amazed.

((missTeyes)): Mmm. Always tell a woman you're amazed by her. Even if you think you're not, if you tell her she does, she will.

I edited that part out, not in the original, but here. It might seem silly, but some things are personal. Those words Misty's and they're mine.

I copied the chat window text and printed it out. Then I took a long lunch. On the way home that day, I stopped by a Walgreens and picked up some conditioner. I also stopped by a bookstore and bought a copy of Ulysses. The girl who rang me asked me if I was reading it for college. It turns out, Mr. Roker was right about the conditioner too.

((missTeyes)): How are you, sweetie?

((tomjoad)): Exhausted. I've been re-landscaping this lady's pool area after work for extra cash and she's got some boxwoods that needed taking out... they have really awful root systems.

((missTeyes)): Keep telling me about tearing up women's boxwoods and you'll make me jealous, poolboy.

((tomjoad)): Ha. Not as exciting as you might think. My hands are blistered, my shoulders are sunburnt and my back feels like a Mack truck did donuts on it.

((missTeyes)): your poor hands. I'll make them feel better.

((missTeyes)): I squirt a generous dab of lotion into your big palm. It's cool and soothing. I rub your sore blisters, between your fingers, massaging the sensitive clefts where they join

((tomjoad)): That feels nice.

((missTeyes)): I move up, massaging your wrists

((tomjoad)): without thinking, you press my hands against your chest. The firm pressure of your breasts is electric.

((missTeyes)): there. Feel better?

((tomjoad)): I take your hand in mine, my fingers and thumbs passing slowly down to your soft moist palm which you surrender gently. My hands look meaty and rough around your elegant fingers.

((missTeyes)): 'Meaty and rough. Just my taste.' I take your hand and stick a sore finger in my mouth, sucking it slowly and feeling the rough skin with my tongue.

((tomjoad)): Your lips inflame my desire, I grasp your face in my rough hands and pull your face into mine. 'Kiss me.'

((missTeyes)): I pull away, enjoying the sharp tug of your fingers in my hair.

((missTeyes)): 'Kiss me.' You repeat and with one hand on at the back of my head, you pull my mouth into yours.

((missTeyes)): you don't so much kiss me as ravage my mouth with yours. I press my body to yours. Your hands, on my side and in my hair grasp me hard, pulling me closer, so close I can hardly catch my breath.

((tomjoad)): I thrust my tongue into your mouth, penetrating your lips, assaulting your pulpy tongue between my lips and driving driving driving into you.

((missTeyes)): my pulpy tongue?

((tomjoad)): Sorry.

((missTeyes)): It's okay, just a little strange.

((tomjoad)): I don't know. I got it from a book.

((missTeyes)): It's fine, what book?

((tomjoad)): Ulysses

((missTeyes)): by James Joyce?

((tomjoad)): yeah.

((missTeyes)): That's sexy.

((tomjoad)): Joyce?

((missTeyes)): smart boys. Now I believe you were mashing my pulpy tongue, you sexy bookworm.

((tomjoad)): heh. I pull away, startled by the intensity of my own passion. I run my fingers over your lips, the soft pink skin catches on my callouses. 'I forgot to ask,' I say, my lips touching your ear, each heavy breath like a wave crashing against your neck, 'May I kiss you?'

((missTeyes)): I nod, my dark hair tickles your face.

((tomjoad)): I pull my face away from yours and begin to untuck your blouse from your skirt, beginning to unbutton it from the bottom.

((missTeyes)): 'What are you doing? I thought you wanted to kiss me?'

((tomjoad)): I kneel in front of you, my breath against the now exposed stomach. 'I do, can I pick where?'

((missTeyes)): you're a quick study, baby.

((tomjoad)): You're a good teacher.

((missTeyes)): Now I believe you were about to place your lips on the skin just above my waistline and give me kisses?

((tomjoad)): your skin quivers under my lips

((tomjoad)): I pull your skirt down, inch by inch, kissing you, running my lips over every inch as I uncover you.

((missTeyes)): go on. My skirt falls to the floor.

((tomjoad)): I kiss you there

((missTeyes)): where?

((tomjoad)): I kiss your skin, I kiss around you, gently exploring with my tongue the creases where your legs meet on either side of your sex.

((missTeyes)): Tom? You've never done this before, have you?

((tomjoad)): oral?

((missTeyes)): cunnilingus.

((tomjoad)): no.

((missTeyes)): call it a cunny. I like it cause it sounds nice and old-fashioned and it comes from the word for rabbit and besides its called cunny-lingus. Always ask a woman what to call it, don't assume you can call it a cunny when you're with another woman, some think it's too close to cunt.

((tomjoad)): okay.

((missTeyes)): you know someday a very happy woman is going to thank me for this.

((missTeyes)): you kiss my cunny. Gently at first and then with more insistence, exploring me with your mouth, spreading my lips. There's something raised at the top of my cunny, a soft button. You kiss it and I moan.

I still ask women what to call it. She was right; I get a different answer every time.

Over the next couple of weeks we did more and more. I printed our conversations when the office was empty in the mornings or sometimes after five, when everyone was gone. When Misty did not log into the café I would reread our words. On my lunch breaks I went to the library, moving like a sexual convict, a child molester, furtive and guilty as I rummaged through the books, flipping the pages and eyeing the spines of the books for signs of licentiousness.

I walked the library with more confidence, stalking my prey. I could spot a smutty softcover by its spine. Sexy scenes get reread more, maybe bent back, the pages pinned down with a single hand while the other is engaged elsewhere. When I found a likely book

I would hold it up, spine in my palm, fore-edge up in the air, pointed at the ceiling and watch the tail, where the pages part like lips, or legs to reveal their most trafficked leaves.

I learned the words that identify a good sex scene. There are obvious ones, body parts and such. There are also more subtle indicators: ‘tumultuous,’ ‘flesh,’ ‘soft’ and ‘smooth,’ all sensory clues. I started to read more. Joyce crept in, not as awkwardly as he had with his pulpy tongues, but with his rhythm. We climaxed in O so many ways, me on her legs O and she on my O, on my face and O, O, O. Maybe I overdid it with the O’s, but I moved her.

I found so many words for Misty. I eschewed the dicks and pricks and cunnies and cocks. I stole from Anais Nin, used her *Delta of Venus* for my own. I surprised Misty with *tumescence* and *buds* and *folded flesh* and *intensely colored lips*.

I combed the Internet for words. I used online translators. Soon I was writing more and more, and she gave herself over to my words. She would name a country and I would take her there. On the Spanish steps, in front of the students and mopeds I unbuttoned her top and kissed her *seno*, bared and blushing while she stroked her knee against my swelling *cazzo*. In a Finnish steam room I stripped her of her towel and tied her naked to the cedar planks where I rose and fell upon her *kisse* like a savage brute. We met in an Ipanema hotel overlooking the ocean and spoke to each other in bed, she like a songstress crooning into my *ferrao* and I with my hands at her thighs, like I was calling out her name, speaking it into her *dulce bucinha*. In St. Peter’s Cathedral she followed a young priest into his confessional and its dark wooden walls contained our cries, witnessed, with muted grates, our raw *passione*, and heard my hoarse invocation.

((tomjoad)): ‘Magnificat anima mea O, et exultavit spiritus meus!’ I blaspheme,
praising your body with holy words and calling your name to the
hosts above.

((missTeyes)): I bury my face in your chest, my teeth around the beads of your
rosary

((missTeyes)): you know Latin?

((tomjoad)): you cling to me, your leg lifted on the bench and pressed against
me. Your face is buried in my collar, your teeth sever the beads and

they bounce on the floor, falling in decades, fifty-nine beads, each a little bouncing o, o, O at our feet.

((missTeyes)): our sweat cools

((tomjoad)): I know Google search.

((tomjoad)): We reassemble ourselves, our slick skin parting, your lips from my throat, my retreating lust from your passera, withdrawing, your legs close

((missTeyes)): my clammy thighs press together, chilly and lonely, but satisfied.

((missTeyes)): I'm married.

((tomjoad)): I try to collect my beads, squeeze against your cooling body as I bend to the floor, my shoulder pressed against your still quaking ventris.

((tomjoad)): I'm sorry

((missTeyes)): I said I'm married.

((tomjoad)): I didn't mean 'beg your pardon.' I meant 'I'm sorry.' I didn't know. I have to go.

((tomjoad)): happily?

((missTeyes)): in a way. He's wonderful to me, especially right now.

((tomjoad)): I should go.

I don't know why it mattered. It's not like anything real was taking place, but when I found out Misty was married I panicked. I felt like a scumball. I thought of some family, some kids who thought their parents were happy. I thought of my own parents. I didn't want any part of it. I stayed away from the Waterloo Café. I stayed offline. I retreated into books, not my sexy books, I read Nick Adams stories and Henry James and started to read Faulkner but he was too much, too sensual. I reread *Walden*. The pages fled before the interminable hours, racing by to the tedious score of an office, the manic hum of the fluorescent lights and dull, stupid drone of the photocopier. I left my rubber-band ball untouched; I read no limericks. I forgot to start the coffee in the morning. Mostly I just stared at my shipping receipts, rechecking the paperwork for misfiled receipts and incorrect dates.

“How’s it going, Will?”

“Hi, Ed.”

“Watcha got there?” Ed Roker leaned over my desk. “Work?”

“Yeah, just double-checking some things for the monthly shipping reports.”

“Will-man, what are they paying you in this job?” I swear he hiccupped.

“Nevermind, it’s none of my business. You feel like you’re getting paid enough to double-check things, this and that and whatnot?”

“I guess so.”

“You’re not. I know it. You’re outsourced, brother. We cut your company the shittiest deal they would stand for and they’re cutting you a shittier one.”

I shrugged.

Mr. Boghs walked in. “Hey Billy, working hard or hardly working, haha. Keep your nose to the grindstone, Billy.”

While he made his photocopies, Mr. Boghs kept up a steady stream of meaningless tripe, talking about women in the office who he thought had nice tits and calling me Billy the entire while.

When Mr. Boghs walked out the door Mr. Roker barely lowered his voice.

“Whadda cocksucker. Listen to me. Take a long lunch, chat up a waitress, chat up a bartender, blow your wad on a couple of long islands, get some phone numbers, kid.”

“I’m nineteen.”

“So what, you got a fake ID, right? Get one. You got the look, you got that long Beatle’s hair, chicks dig that. You’re smart, you read like a motherfucker so work your stuff, man. You hear me?”

“I guess so.”

“And quit sulking. It looked bad on George Harrison and it looks bad on you. Okay?”

“Okay.”

When I left the office that afternoon I noticed a very sad looking woman sitting outside the suite across the hall. I got in the elevator and she followed me. I stared at her covertly in the reflection of the brushed steel doors. Her clothing was not too big, but she looked too small for it, too frail. She wasn’t old, just fragile-looking, worn away. Her head

was covered in a scarf of unassuming pattern. I guessed she was a cancer victim, maybe part of a class-action suit from one of the law offices in the building. I pressed the L button and we descended in silence, the way you do in an elevator.

We walked through the lobby, my long steps outdistancing her, but she was near enough to me when we reached the large glass doors that I held them for her and let her shuffle through first.

“He hasn’t touched me in months.”

I almost didn’t hear what she said, I only paused because I thought she was asking for help, that’s how frail she looked.

“I beg your pardon?”

“I said he hasn’t touched me in months, Tom.”

My heart stopped, then it raced, then it skipped like a dirty CD.

“It’s not because he doesn’t love me, he just worries that I’m too frail. And after... after the first operation I couldn’t stand to have him press against me for so long I guess he just got used to it.”

I must have looked like a fool, a cruel idiot staring blankly at her with my mouth agape and steaming in the cold March air.

“We’re very happy. He loves me very much. I just wanted,” she started to sob, “I just wanted to feel like a woman again. It isn’t cheating, it was only pretend and I wanted to pretend like I was” she put her tiny bony hands over her face, “like I was alive and sexy.”

I still didn’t, I couldn’t speak.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have come here. I didn’t stalk you, I mean I did, but you mentioned Kerimax and there’s only one office close to Philadelphia. I sat in my car forever and I almost didn’t come in. I’m sorry. I just feel so fucking alone. I’m in Yardley; I really didn’t come far. I’m not crazy I’m just fucking tired of being sick and I’m tired of dying and I just wanted to pretend to live a little. I’ll go, I should go. I’m such a fucking idiot.”

Hearing the tiny woman curse brought me around.

“Misty?”

“It’s,” she shook her head, between sobs, “it’s Karen. My name is Karen.”

I walked toward her and I just didn't know how to stop. We didn't crash into each other, not like we did online, when we talked about love. We fumbled into each other. I didn't actually mean to hug her, but I was clumsy and I tripped, almost bowling her over. I scooped her up to keep her from falling.

She clutched at me like a life preserver. We stayed like that for a while, two bodies clinging to one another.

"Thank you," she whispered into my hair just above my ear, "Mr. Joad."

For a horrible moment I almost released her. I almost ran away, escaped. I was like a discovered spy, unarmed in enemy territory, wrapped in the clutches of someone poised to crush me with her enfeebled bones.

Then I tightened my grasp. She felt small and cold in my arms, like hugging a bundle of loosely tied sticks. She ran her hands up my back and pulled tighter. I hardened my muscles under her bony hands, willing myself taller and firmer, my shoulders broader and straighter. I wanted to be everything I had said I was, because she could not be everything she had said she was. The beautiful woman she had described was a pile of bones I could crush against my chest like so many spent fluorescents.

"I'm happy with my husband, you know. He's been an absolute prince through all this."

I nodded and held her closer.

"Not that it matters." She laughed, a low, mean-sounding rattle. "It's not like we're gonna fuck." She reached between us to wipe her eyes.

"You're very strong," she said, returning her hand to my back. I felt myself blush, and willed the blood flow to heat up my skin. "And warm, you're so warm."

"It's what I miss most about young men. You are all so strong and so hot and I am so old and weak and so cold." She turned her face up at me and it was skinny and gaunt. I tried imagining what she had looked like years ago, before the cancer and everything, and then she lifted her dark eyes to mine and they caught the light in that way. I can't explain what way just that it was that way. I've found so many words but none for how someone can look at you when they need something so badly they can't even say it out loud. When she looked at me like that the years, the worries, the radiation, all of it fell off her face like a towel or a bathrobe and she was bared, vulnerable, not embarrassed and ashamed either,

but that naked that comes when you don't really care. Her eyes were just like that, like she was really that beautiful all along despite the doctors and the chemo and the whole fucking mess.

"I don't think you're old at all, or cold, or weak," I blurted, feeling immediately stupid. And then, because her face had that light in it and because I didn't know what else to do, I kissed her. It wasn't like the trashy romance novels describe, it didn't feel like a lifetime, but sometimes I think it was, in a way.

Her lips were dry and chapped, and at first she didn't do anything, then her lips puckered and pressed back against mine, she lifted my hands to the sides of her face and I held her like that for a moment before we stepped away from each other.

"Thank you so much." She smiled at me through shiny, wet eyes then ran off toward her rental car, looking like she might break in half with every step.

I wanted to say "you're welcome," I should have said "thank you" but all I got out was her name.

She stopped and tottered on her frail legs. "Please. I'd rather just be Misty."

The next day, when I logged on to the Waterloo Café, Misty whispered me.

((missTeyes)): now that you saw me, can you still make love to me?

((tomjoad)): Yes.

I waited a long time, listening to the hum of the florescent light bulbs and the damn photocopier and the echoes of doors shutting and feet falling in the other offices.

((missTeyes)): Good, because I just got out of a steamy hot shower, and my youthful skin is flushed red and hot, and my long raven hair is pulled up into the towel above my head

((tomjoad)): Leaving your elegant neck open to my hungry lips. As I kiss the soft skin just behind your ear, I feel you press your terrycloth-covered buttocks.

((missTeyes)): against your lusty manhood. 'Misty,' you say

((tomjoad)): 'Yes?' You whisper, rocking your round hips slowly from side to side, making the towel around your body ride slightly higher up

your waist and leaving more of your steaming thighs accessible to my kneading fingers. ‘Yes?’ you persist, punctuating your impatience with a bump from your derriere

((missTeyes)): I move against your swelling desire. ‘Misty,’ you whisper and I turn around to face you ‘O, yes, Will,’ and you grasp my face in both hands, turning it up toward yours and whisper, just before pressing your mouth onto mine you whisper

((tomjoad)): I love you.

It’s been about six months since I’ve heard from her. It’s not like the first time, I’m not disappointed or guilty about some affair or infidelity. The fluorescent lights and photocopier hum like bees, like hornets, like a choir during an interminable mass, droning on and on until I can’t stand it any more. I’ve waited and waited, but I think Misty is gone. She may not be dead, but she’s gone. She’s in a hospital or a clinic somewhere, holding her husband’s hand. She’s barely holding on to the life she has, let alone the life she had.

A few days ago I was reading Keats at my desk. *She look’d at me as she did love, And made sweet moan.* Misty, Karen, told me once to read some poetry along with all my smutty, sexy stories. She said a woman wants to hear about love as much as lust. I guess we all do, though I think *La Belle Dame Sans Merci* might not be what she had in mind. Still, it suits her: *And there she wept, and sigh’d deep.* Maybe it just suits me. *And there I shut her wild sad eyes—So kiss’d to sleep.*

I listened to the hum of the photocopy machine and the soft, menacing buzz of the fluorescent lights and felt alone, palely loitering where no birds sing, waiting for a woman who didn’t exist, who in a way never existed.

“Watcha reading, Billy? Keats, eh? He’s that English poet who married the other poet, the ugly chick in the wheelchair, right? What did she have, polio?”

I was surprised Dominic Boghs knew anything about Elizabeth Browning.

“It was cancer,” I lied.

“Really, I thought it was polio or something.”

“No. It was cancer, and she was really beautiful.”

I'm not sure why I stayed this long here. I'm twenty now and I should really be in college or technical school. I wonder sometimes, though, when I'm online if I'll see her, sometimes I see a new login name in the Waterloo Café and look for a turn of phrase or a clue that it's her and she's alright, but I think I've loitered long enough.

I put in my two weeks yesterday. I start training my replacement on Monday.

DEAR JAMIE

Or, Why Liver Tastes Like Heart

YOU ARE SO BEAUTIFUL

Or, A *More* Modern Day Prometheus

That a god should sacrifice
himself
for the lukewarm effects
of rubbing
two sticks together
is unthinkable.

Much more likely, the ancient deity
stole *you*,
the spark in your eyes,
the warmth in your words,
the heat of your touch,
the fire in your thighs,
the burning passion you live by
the burning passion you love by.

How cold they must be
on Olympus without you.

Fuck 'em.
Miserable old bastards,
you're mine now.

Have a good day, baby. Love,
Me

PHAT

With a *P-H*, not an *F*

At the time I was working as an outsourced office manager in North Jersey for a chemical company. Quiet job, the kind that takes lots of knowledge when it hits the fan, but not much work in the meantime, just printer maintenance, mailroom work, light security supervision. I gave them three months notice when I wanted to go back to school so they could find and train an adequate replacement. So they sent me Chris. Dumb Chris: spiky black hair, small, round, white teeth like a duck's.

The first day on the job the secretary for one of the higher-ups walked by, cute woman; she's engaged. She was barely out of our reception area when he started. "Will-man, would you look at that ass, I could spank that all night."

"Man, shut it."

"I could spank it all night just thinking about spanking it."

"Ever hear of sexual harassment, dude?"

"I don't worry about that kind of shit man."

I tried to explain to him that not only could such comments cost him his job, but, as we are outsourced by a company, could result in a lawsuit for our employer. I felt like a MS PowerPoint presentation.

"Whatever man, don't even tell me she's not in your spank bank."

I was blessed with a momentary vision of an actual spank bank, a large white building with stately Doric columns and carved mahogany doors that guard the reveries and mental snapshots belonging to millions of men. An automated teller machine would dispense the lurid memories at any hour of the day, and inside, on the plush velvet benches, aged forgetful men smelling faintly of wool socks, would wait impatiently to find out why their account is suddenly empty. The First National Bank of Spank.

The next day he was late. "Sorry Will-dude, I had to take the long way around some cops. See I got my license suspended, and I'm driving this Civic and it's real phat, you know, with the neon around the fucking bottom and shit, and they're sure to pull me over, you know, cause of my phat whip."

I stared at him for a few seconds. “Whatever, no sweat.”

“So I gotta aks you, you think, I mean, I aksed this guy in a shop and he said he could put the fucking doors on it, that swing up, not out, like a... what’s it’s called.”

“Like a DeLorian?”

“A what?”

“The Back to the Future car.”

“Yeah, *fucking* Back to the Future, just like that, but Will-man, the thing is, it’s like six thousand dollars for both doors, and all’s I got is three thousand, so I wanted to aks you if you think it would look stupid if I only had the one door, you know, just for now and shit.”

I thought for a moment and pictured the scene he must have in his head: a Civic pulling up to a *phat* club in the city, the door swings up, just like that *fucking* Back to the Future shit, and out steps my man Chris, black pleather jacket, trendy button-down shirt du-jour, spiky black hair gelled just right, he walks around the car to open up the door for his date, and yeah it swings out, not up, but it doesn't matter because everyone is still mesmerized because of his *fucking phat* driver’s side door.

A little coffee came out my nose but I managed not to laugh.

“No dude, one door would be awesome.” I pictured it again and smiled. “Downright *phat*.”

“*Fucking phat* Will, that’s what I was just thinking.”

That afternoon my boss called me. I said, “Mark, this guy is not our man, but keep him with the company a week or so, we gotta see his ride, it’s gonna be *phat*.”

THE BOUNCER

or, The Ferryman's Fare

Perched like a weather-worn gargoyle, guardian of the selective club at his back, with broad thick shoulders sagging almost imperceptibly under his growing weight, he shrugs slowly as he pulls aside the velvet rope to admit another devoted worshipper.

He yearns to abandon the dark eyed legions of the habitually jaded, who live in bars and clubs like grubs under Rock, where they worship the tortured art of the dead and dying, toasting Bacchus and Pluto with calculated words and world-weary voices. Where future tattoos sketched out on bar napkins are the arcane marks of a religion that consults the twisted entrails of Kurt Cobain, Sid Barrett and John Coltrane for inspection and dissection and far, far too much intoxicating introspection. The smoke of the incense and animals torched for Isis and Osiris cannot match the tormented scents that warm the nostrils of the crucified gods of Cool. Their attendants undertake pilgrimages to the heavens, chasing dragons and riding track marks to Valhalla.

The shiny shell of a scuttling cockroach catches the light and the door-man crushes it absentmindedly under his heavy black boot. He stares past the line of eager congregants to the boathouses and ferries across the river. The lights are reflected in his mirrored shades glaring like copper pennies in the night.

B¹²AD

Vitamin Love

He was nearly sixty and had put on some weight, but it was not the extra pounds that pulled his mouth down at the corners and his eyebrows down in a worried crease above his eyes.

She was younger by barely a year and was losing weight fast. Too fast.

“Did you remember?” Since the procedure he never forgot to remind her.

The small pastel tablets came from the jars on the counter, each displaying a letter of the alphabet that she rearranged in her head, B¹², A, D.

He absentmindedly touched the lids of the plastic bottles from left to right and then back again. He caught himself and stopped, straightening instead a painting of an Irish Setter that was hanging by the cabinet. He had a lot of paintings of Irish Setters.

“Did the doctor’s office call with the results yet?” He was anxious.

“Not yet.”

They called days ago, but she didn’t know how to tell him they were going to remove most of both of them.

“I don’t know what could be taking so long,” he muttered to himself.

“It’ll be alright, honey.”

At night, when they made love, his fingers did not just linger on the surface of her breasts, but aping implements of arousal, secretly examined the sides and bottoms, just like the women on the public service announcements showed.

He gently explored, and her brittle heart cracked in her chest. She disguised the sound with a moan, while he hid his own frown with passionate blue words whispered into the soft hair just above her ear.

THE PEANUT BUTTER INCIDENT

Bad Habits

ACT I:

They toss their wallets on the counter as they enter Nate's apartment. Will is in the middle of a thought. "What am I, the rock? Am I supposed to be the guy she can count on to call nine-one-one every time she hits the wall?" He grabs an apple from a bowl on the counter, then rifles through the cupboards for a minute then asks, "Where's your peanut butter?"

"Top cupboard, left of the sink. Spoons are in the drawer."

"Thanks," he says as he opens a jar and spreads it on an apple, adding a little bit before each bite. "Damn it I can't do that anymore; I can't watch *her* do that anymore. You know it takes a lot out of you, having to put everything back together again when it goes to pieces."

"You look more like one of the king's horses than one of the king's men," Nate mumbles, fumbling with a broken wooden match, trying to get it lit without burning his fingers.

"Huh?" Apple chunks dribble out of Will's mouth as he says this; he picks them off his shirt and mumbles something that sounds like "shit;" another apple chunk falls. "No, I mean, what do I do? I can't... Jesus, she's driving me nuts! *She's* nuts, why should I have to put up with that?"

"Am I my brother's keeper?" A new match is struck and he holds it to his cigarette and lights up, shakes it out and throws it at a trash bin.

"What?"

"It's a line," he says and opens up the window. Sounds of traffic wander in from outside.

"Oh."

"From the Bible; this guy was asking God if he was responsible for his brother."

Will takes another bite of his apple. He chews it a while. "So what happened?"

Nate opens the window and turns on the fan, blowing smoke at it and watching it get sucked out. "I don't remember; he had just killed his brother."

“God?”

“No this guy.”

“So are you saying I’m this guy? I’m killing her? Jeez that’s really gonna make me feel a whole fuck better.”

“Always happy to make you feel better, one whole fuck at a time.”

“Yeah, thanks.” He finishes an apple slice and licks his fingers. “So how exactly is this guy killing his brother relevant to me breaking up with psycho girlfriend?”

“I don’t know. It’s just a line. Sorry.” He ashes into a dinner plate.

“Hmph.” Will dips into the jar with his spoon and licks the peanut butter off in layers. “Nice digs man; isn’t this a non-smoking apartment?”

“That’s what the window is for, and thanks.”

“You don’t mind the AC getting out?” In the other window a bulky air conditioning unit shuts off with a shudder, as if on cue.

“Guess not, by the way help yourself to some of my peanut butter.”

“Yeah.” He licks another spoonful.

They sit in silence for a while, the two guys, one eating the other’s peanut butter and watching him smoke. The sounds of the city float in softly now, without the catarrh of the window unit to silence them.

“Look man, everyone’s always known she was crazy, why’d you hook up with her in the first place?”

The one guy looks at the spoon, “I don’t know,” and twirls the peanut butter jar in his hands a while. “She just looked so delicate, you know, at Jake’s party? She was sitting there looking miserable. So I brought her some tea and we talked some. By the end of the night she was looking at me like I was a prince. And that’s what gets me, you know? She looks at me like I’m a prince, like I’m her knight in shining armor. It’s that I can’t stand, I can’t stand the idea of letting her down, of having a bad day myself one time and fucking something up when she needs me.”

“So you’re ditching her ‘cause you’re afraid you won’t be there when she needs you.” He nods sagely. “That makes sense.”

“No, it’s just that I can’t handle her any more.”

“She doesn’t need anyone to *handle* her, you know, she’s not a horse.”

“Would you stop making this so fucking hard, you know what I meant. I just can't deal with her problems.”

The smoker shrugs. “Well then that's it then. You know what you're gonna do, you just want me to make you feel better about it, so dump her. She's a big girl, she can take care of herself, she did fine before you came along and she'll do fine when you leave.”

“Don't you get it, man? She wasn't doing fine! She was taking a knife to her thighs every time her mood went south. One bad day at work and I'd find bloody sheets the next day.”

“Bloody sheets or blood-spotted?”

“What's the difference?”

Another shrug. “I don't know.”

“Blood-spotted I guess. The point is she's a mess.”

He goes back to his peanut butter. Brakes screech outside the window. Nate lights a match and lets the wood burn up toward his fingers a while; then he holds the burnt end and lets it gutter out at the end of itself. “So she's a mess.” The now shriveled, burnt stick of charcoal makes a soft chime when he drops in the ash-plate. “Well goddamnit man, who isn't a mess? Look around you: everybody's a mess. She's a mess, Luke's a drunk, Jake's got more chemicals in him than... than a bottle of freaking ammonia! I'm a mess. I go through vodka like its fucking Poland Spring. I only drink it so I can fall asleep.”

“Aren't you drunk now?”

“I'm buzzed now.”

“I thought you only drink to go to sleep.”

“I only drink vodka to fall asleep. I'm buzzed on rum and coke now, why would I drink coke to fall asleep? Anyways, fuck you; the point is we're all a mess: everybody's screwed up. Are you going to quit on everyone else too?” He takes out another cigarette and lights it.

“They're not all screwed up.”

“No, *they* aren't all screwed up; *they* are all fucking perfect; *we* are all screwed up. Her, me, you, we all need something from someone else, we all need that fairy godmother or that knight in shining armor to come along and make it all better, man.”

“Jesus, you're just brilliant.”

“Thanks.”

“So you're so goddamn smart, what do I need? How is it that I always end up being needed instead of needing?”

“Yeah, you're a real fucking martyr.”

“Well come on, tell me one thing I need from her? I spent the five months I've been with her cleaning up her shitty apartment, doing her dishes after she passed out, being as loving and attentive as I knew how to be while she cried her eyes out, washing those bloody fucking sheets over and over again every time she cut....” He pauses. “What the hell could I have possibly gotten out of that?”

Nate leans against the wall and looks at the ceiling. “You've got to be that fairy godmother; you got someone to need you. Why didn't you stop seeing her as soon as you found out she was cutting, you must have noticed it early on, right? What about the first time you saw the cuts, why did you let it go so long? Why did you ask her out in the first place, you knew she was miserable, you knew she was messed, man; why didn't you just try to *cheer* her up instead of hooking up?”

“I'll tell you why, it's because you need to be the knight to every fucked up damsel in distress, that's how *you're* screwed up, you have to be Jesus Christ to everyone instead of being fucked up like everyone else! And when you find someone to give you what you need, to need you like you need to be needed, it kills you, but that's what you want: you need her to need you even if it kills you.

“So do it: dump her, man, she's drowning, she's dead-weight, and she'll take you down with her if she can. Quit trying to be a prince and dump her and learn to be fucked up just like everyone else.” There is a soft, prolonged hiss as he takes a long drag on his cigarette and then puts it out, half-smoked. He exhales, watching the smoke dissipate; almost none of it gets sucked out of the window. He starts to fidget before deciding to light another one.

They listen to the solid angry hum of rush hour traffic with its petulant horns for a long while, like a flock of geese migrating opposite directions along the Vine Expressway every evening. The sounds are distant, coming through almost as white noise.

“A bottle of ammonia doesn't have any chemicals in it other than ammonia.”

Will takes a drag and looks at him intently. “How about Lysol?”

“Lysol probably works.” The peanut butter spoon twirls thoughtfully in his fingers. “For that matter a jar of peanut butter works these days, have you ever looked at the ingredients, can you pronounce this shit?” He holds up the plastic jar.

“Jesus.”

“Mono and dycsigli... dyglycedi... dig, diglyshits.”

“Look out man, those diglyshits’ll kill you.”

“My diglyshits are going to kill me a lot slower than those death sticks you smoke; besides it’s your peanut butter.”

“You actually called them death sticks. God, you’re a pansy. Do you still buy that organic crap?”

“Yup, and my peanut butter’s ingredients list says ‘peanuts’ and that’s it.” He takes a big spoonful.

“Whoop-dee-flippin’-do.”

He swallows hurriedly and responds, “Whoop-dee-freekin’-dee.” Holding the spoon in his mouth, he puts the lid back on the jar.

“I know you’re not putting that slobbery-ass peanut butter back in my cupboard after you’ve been in and out of it with that slobbery-ass spoon.”

“I wasn’t planning on taking it with me. Do you want me to buy you a new jar?”

“Go to hell.” He smiles at the window and taps his cigarette onto a plate.

Will gets up and puts the jar back in the cupboard, and then he sits down at the kitchen table.

The smoker looks at him and then looks away, blows a cloud of smoke at the ceiling. “Do you love her?”

“I don’t know.” He stares at the table. Even with the traffic, the silence is deafening.

“Did you say love her?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s a big promise to go back on.”

“It’s not a promise. And I’m not going back on it, it’s just; she’s making me miserable, man, you know that.”

“I didn’t say you shouldn’t do it; just that it’s a sort of promise, and it’s going to be a pretty big deal to her.”

“Of course it's going to be a big deal to her. It's going to be a really big fucking deal to her.”

“What about you?”

He pauses. “It's pretty obvious it's a pretty big fucking deal to me too, isn't it?”

“I guess so.”

“Listen, I need to think about this for a while so could you... I dunno....”

“Fuck off?”

“Yeah.”

“Sure, no problem. I'm gonna go down to Hoot's, see if I can stir up some trouble. Help yourself to the peanut butter.”

“Look, I'm not asking you to leave your own apartment, just to drop it for a little while.”

“I know you're not asking, you wouldn't ask; I'm going down to Hoot's. I'll be back later. Just lock up when you leave.” He grabs his wallet and his cigarettes.

Will is alone in the apartment. The apartment is deafeningly silent, except for the distant angst of traffic, until the window unit mercifully shudders on again. Then he gets up and shuts the window.

INTERMISSION:

Outside, the afternoon has turned into evening, a sticky summer evening. The low apartment buildings perspire, the bricks themselves seem to condense the sweat of the city, sweat that is gritty with the dust and exhaust that clings to everything, to the listless leaves of apathetic trees, to the seats of chained bicycles, to door handles, to briny necks and flushed faces and restless, clammy hands. The humidity mutes the roar of traffic to an orchestral hum, punctuated by jackhammers finishing up their shifts as they try to make themselves heard through the fog of city noises, and cram in the last few staccato riffs before the light dims and all the performers leave and the bandstand is the domain of lone Yamaha tenors and throaty Chevy back-up singers or the occasional wailing siren solos of squad cars, fire engines and ambulances.

ACT II:

Nate is sitting at the kitchen table, drinking his vodka and burning his matches, the ash-plate has several crushed butts in it. The window is open again, and the lament of an ambulance wafts in on the cooling air. He is not startled by a knock at the door.

He opens the door for his friend and settles back into his chair.

“Did you do it?”

The other guy nods.

Nate drops another shriveled black matchstick in the plate before grabbing a glass and filling it with the clear liquid right to the rim and nudging it across the table. “Want to talk?”

“Nope.” Will takes a sip, and sits down. He notices that the frosty condensation on the outside of the bottle is considerably above the level of the vodka inside. Nate shrugs and takes his glass as if to leave the room when his friend says, “Hey.”

“Yeah?” He stops.

“You totally stole that needing-to-be-needed shit from the Cheap Trick song.”

He tries to smirk at the floor. “I guess so.” He keeps looking at Will to see if he is going to say something; he shifts his feet, about to leave the room again.

“Do you mind if I crash here tonight?”

“Oh yeah. No problem, totally. Yeah, I kinda figured you might want to, it's a hike and all and you can't stay with... uh, and there's some sheets in the closet.” He stares at the floor for a minute. Then he leaves to go into the bathroom and comes out with a small red-transparent bottle of pills. He sets them on the table without looking at them. “It's just anxiety and sleeping stuff; if you finish that glass, one or two should do it for the night.” He looks caught for a moment, sways to leave but hesitates, “Hey...she's gonna be alright, man; she's been through some serious shit; she can handle this.”

“How many does it take to do it for you?” He taps the bottle with his glass.

A block or two away, over the low sounds of engines clearing their throats, there is a dog barking.

“Three, four, sometimes five.”

“Sounds like a pretty stupid habit.”

Somebody yells and the dog is quiet.

“It's not a habit... I guess, I guess I just need it.” He glances at him and looks back at the floor, “sometimes, you know?” Then he shrugs and leaves for his bedroom.

His friend finishes the glass and makes a face, then pours himself another; he shakes some pills out of the bottle, gets up and lies down on the couch, setting the glass and the pills on the coffee table. He stares at the lights reflected in the vodka for a while; he listens as the cars cough by, to the distant siren call of either an ambulance or a fire engine.

“Nate?”

“Yeah?”

“Thanks.”

“Yeah. Anytime, Will.”

DEAREST JAMIE

Or, Why Heart Tastes Like Liver

I know how you get when you're angry, so I know you don't want to talk right now, I just wanted to say that I am sorry. Every time I wake up like this you are the first thing on my mind, never the apartment, or myself. I just want you to know that I could wake up pantsless on Mars and my first thought would be of you.

Well, I wrote this for you a while ago, and never gave it to you, I guess I knew I would need it when I fucked up the most, ha-ha. Just kidding. I love you,

Love,

Me

I NEVER TOLD YOU THIS

the aliens came the night I spent with you:

large things, ugly things, old things,

they silently filled the room

and stretched in a queue

down the stairs and into the street.

cosmic anticipation filled the room like space dust.

when I followed their gaze, when I saw what the aliens saw,

then I realized: the messed up hair, the zodiac freckles aligned

on plush ivory skin, there was no flaw.

one by one the starry eyed tourists filed by,

they stared but a moment, to be fair to the next in line,

but their aged eyes watered up and their old mouths smiled.

so I sat up, staring too,

not awed by martian magi,

ugly, ancient, strange and wise,

but like them

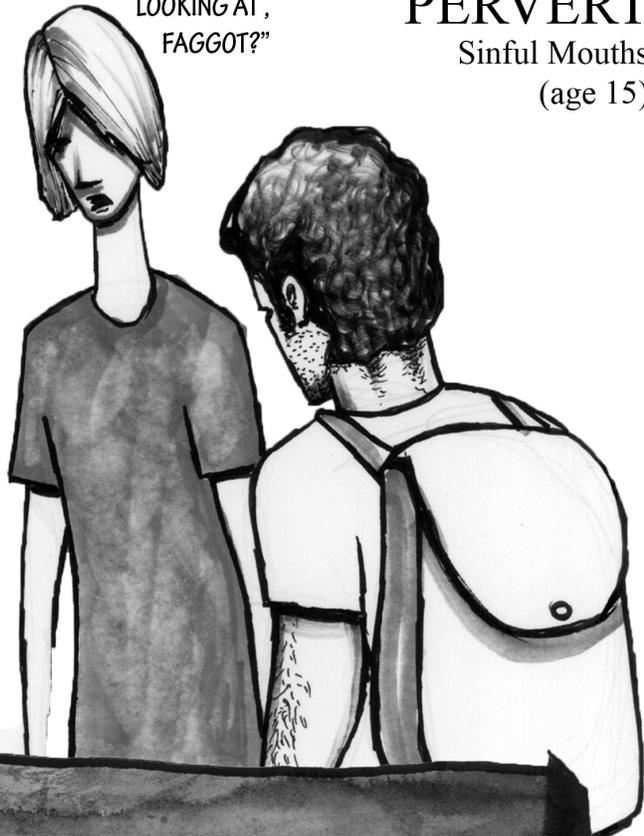
awed by you.



“WHAT ARE YOU
LOOKING AT,
FAGGOT?”

PERVERT

Sinful Mouths
(age 15)



“are there any
nice kids at
school, Hon?”

“sure, Mom.”

“don’t wear
your purple
shirt, the boys
will think
you’re gay.”

“okay, Mom.”



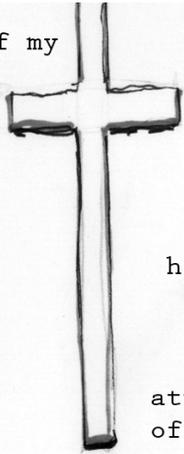
“Trueman’s dick just
twitched looking
at you, bro.”

“FAG.”

“ew gro-oss., pervert.”

I don’t know why he was
looking at my dick.

I spent all of my teenage years feeling like a pervert.



fundamentalist Christians aren't supposed to be heterosexual, we're supposed to be monosexual. Heterosexuals are attracted to members of the opposite sex, monosexuals, well...



"Husbands love your wives, even as Christ loves the church. Now gals and fellas, God has a very special plan for all of you. Gents, there is a woman HANDPICKED by God out there for you, just like Christ handpicked His bride, the body of believers."

I wanted God to handpick ALL the women for me. I was a pervert.

And the other kids weren't helping.



"are there any cute girls?"

"sure, Mom."

so many.

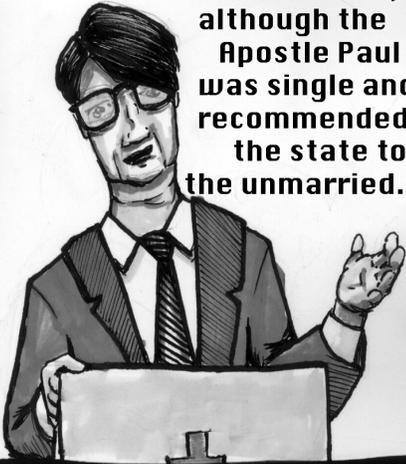
"any in particular?"

of course
there was.

"no."



"Same is true for the ladies,
although the
Apostle Paul
was single and
recommended
the state to
the unmarried..."



...unless you are "burning
with a passion," heh,
that will lead you to sin..."

I was burning with SO MUCH passion.

Her name was unique
and beautiful,
but it didn't
hold a candle
to the rest
of her.

“what if it was just a little one?”

“I don't think we should.”

“it'll be just like
the others, only
on the mouth.”

“I don't want to.”

she didn't let me just
then, but...





when I got home she called me
to say that next time, if I was
very good...

...she would let me kiss
her on the mouth.



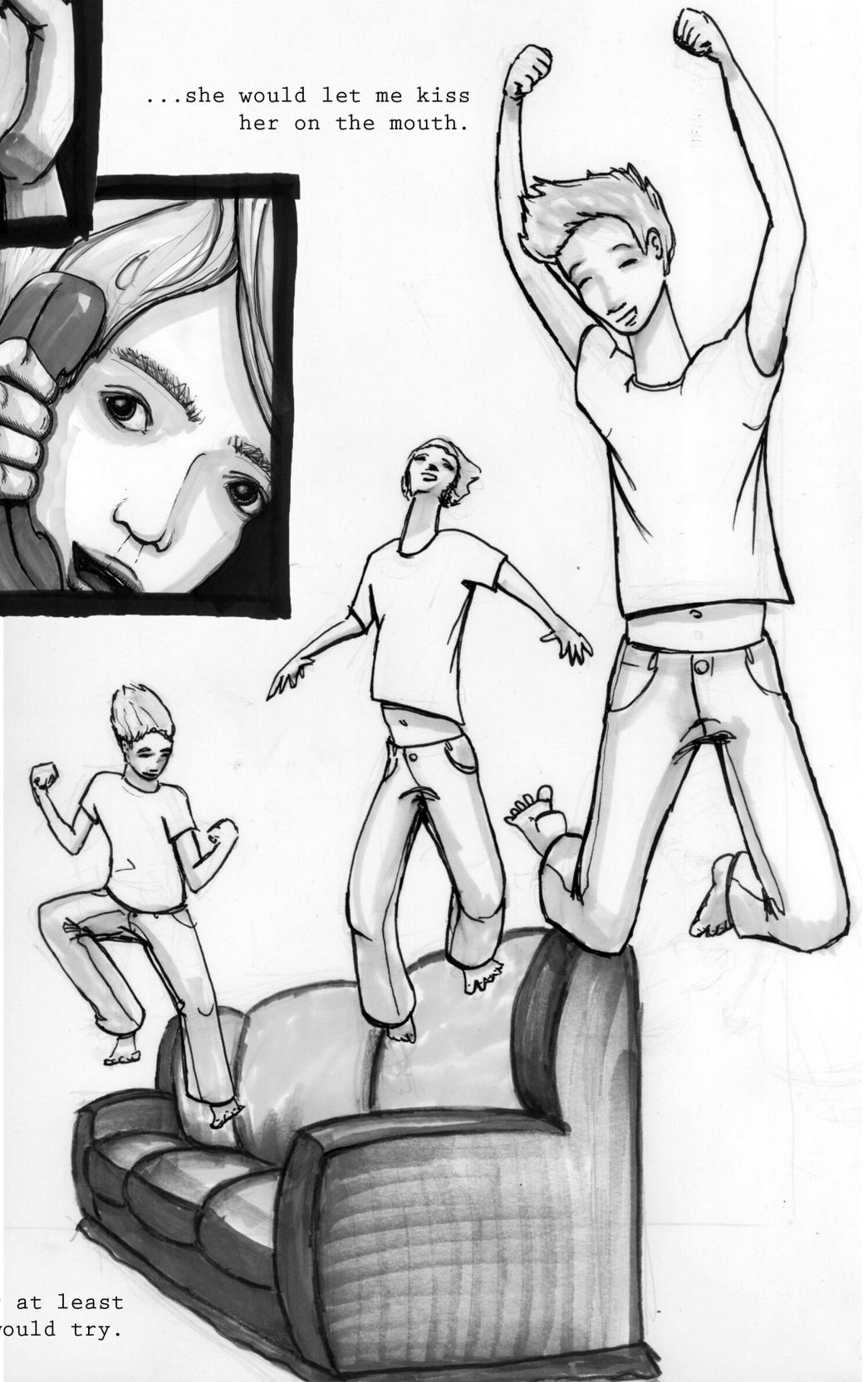
And then
no one could
call me faggot.

I hoped we could
get married.

And do ALL
the blessed things
you get to do
when you're married.

And I wouldn't
be a pervert.

Or at least
I would try.



An EX-MAS CAROL

December 25th, 2005

My shitty apartment looks nice for once, with the lights and the tree and the candy-cane crepe paper. I didn't even get the ribbon on the tree until last night, so this is the first night it actually looks right. The couch groans softly when I grab the remote and sit down.

On channel six, Bill Murray is throwing a champagne bucket full of ice onto a flaming waiter. I press the power button again and they disappear, while I listen to the soft static fireworks of the vacuum tube shutting down. This is when my own ghosts begin to arrive.

Rick looks good: early fifties, healthy, merry eyes and a sad smile.

“You know, I'm really looking forward to meeting my Redeemer, I just hate to have left those kids, those kids without, those... without a...” This is where he chokes up, where he always chokes up, in the audio loop I replay in my head. The words are just so much church tripe without seeing his eyes. I don't mean that redemption is tripe, just that it sounds empty without seeing his glassy, calm, blue irises framed by the bloody, tear-worn whites. He knows how much he will be missed, and he worries so much about that little girl of his, the older four will be alright, he thinks, but at ten years old she's just a little girl.

“The Shepherd can take better care of His flock than the sheep can, Stephen. I know better than to worry.” Then he adds, as though to excuse his mistrust, “she's just so little.”

It's hard to add to Rick's memory; it's hard to make him come alive. He was always such a static, steady, dependable person; it's hard to see the world through his particular prescription Jesus-glasses. Now and then I do, but I guess I don't own that pair, I just borrow them from him.

God, I miss him. I barely saw him since I moved out and over the year he was sick, but knowing that he's gone makes the world a less dependable place. It's like losing a tooth, not something you think much about having until you have to go without. In the map of sanity, of wholeness, he's one more missing reference point now.

Neil wanders in with that familiar bearish grin, somehow mid-sentence in a brief but graphic description of my neighbor-lady with the four kids two doors down, which is odd, because he'd never been to this house.

“It's really an awkward age, twenty-four, I'm too immature to be a father to her next one, and too damn old to nurse her tits.”

Rick politely excuses himself—without reproach, for which I love him. He gracefully slips away, almost unnoticed. It's much easier to see things through Neil's glasses; they're almost my prescription.

I am laughing with Neil about the time he announced my twenty-first birthday at a bar we had been drinking at for over six months. “Do you know how many twenty dollar tips I left Angie before she would even talk to me again?”

We laugh about that, and about that Richie kid who puked right back into his pint glass, filled it to the rim and barely spilled a drop. Then he tells me about the threesome again, with Goth waiter-chick and her friend. He always focuses on the awkwardness, and repeats his sage advice against any such situations, but never seems convinced of his own words. There's a satisfied, accomplished pride in the way he summarizes the moral of the story this time, the same way he always has, the same way he always did. “Never bite off more than you can screw, Steve.” I'd heard it a dozen times before he died, and have heard it a thousand times since.

Mostly, during these visits, he goes off on his dying rant. Treating it as a laughing matter makes him feel tough, I think, and it *is* funny. I like to think he likes to make me laugh; I've been kind of down lately. He always was good at taking my mind off things.

“If I had known I was going to die at twenty-four, I would have never quit smoking.”

“You didn't quit, Neil.”

“Not a puff since the accident. Seriously though, I would have O.D.'ed or done something a little more rock-star than a patch of black ice. Who the fuck dies in Perkasio anyways? Where is that shit hole? If they had bothered to put it near any of the major roads I was looking for I would still be smoking. If I had been drinking everyone could at least use me as a moral example, now I'm just a fucking patch of bad timing. Shit! I need a cigarette. Can you believe there's no smoking in hell?”

“You're not in hell, Neil.”

“I might as well be if I can't even light a fucking smoke.”

Neil's an easy guy to miss.

The last spirit of Christmas Eve doesn't show herself, and her voice is shrouded in static.

“Merry Christmas, Stephen.”

“Is it Christmas already?” I look up at the clock on the wall, several minutes into it, as a matter of fact. My voice sounds ridiculously casual to my ears.

“How are you?”

Since she asked, I answer, and she listens well. Rick and Neil come up; talking to her feels like waking up from a nap to those flawless honey sunrays that get combed through Venetian blinds on perfect afternoons. I don't tell her that. I didn't tell her that. I don't think it would have mattered.

I miss her like coffee.

“She was that good of a lay, huh?” Neil interrupts, so I ask him to leave. He grins that bearish grin of his and steps into the bathroom; I open the door to tell him that's not the way out, but he's gone.

She's talking again. “I kinda didn't want to call you, in case you were more at ease sitting loose of me for a while.”

“That's funny I didn't want to pester you in case you were glad to be rid of me. That could have gone on a while, avoiding each other out of courtesy.”

“Thank God for Christmas, then.”

The lights on the tree become large blurry Japanese lanterns. In my head, I don't just thank God for Christmas, I sing the *Hallelujah Chorus* to Her. “Yeah. Well listen, since neither of us wanted to avoid each other, let's not be strangers again.”

“No,” she says, “I wouldn't like that at all.”

“Then it's settled.”

“I'll see you soon; merry Christmas, Stephen.”

It's funny how just hearing your name out loud from a certain voice can skip your heart like a scratched CD.

Merry Christmas, lady.

PORTRAITS OF DICK

And Other Photographs

The night before his meeting with the doctors, Eman was in a hotel room, flipping through the channels. He paused on a commercial featuring a tall, beautiful, bare-breasted model pranced in slow motion on a Caribbean beach. He didn't recognize the brand of tanning lotion that was being advertised, but made a note of it for Dick, for the next time they go to the shore.

He thought about his lover for a moment and then stopped himself. He tried to forget the name of the tanning lotion, and was pleased that he could barely remember the first syllable. *Bil-something, it doesn't matter*; he turned away from the television and flipped through the information he had printed from the clinic's website. He stared at the pages, explaining the procedure in Dutch, French, German and English, the italicized English words almost as incomprehensible as their foreign counterparts.

Frustrated, Eman got up and took his camera out of its case, turned off the overhead light and threw a towel over the nightstand lamp, allowing just a little light to reflect off the walls. He took off his pants, and aimed the camera down his stomach, adjusting the aperture, until the shadows fell just so. In the glow of the television his ebony skin was almost blue. His body, refracted as it was in the lenses of the camera, did not seem like his own; his eye traced the lines of his stomach as though they were a stranger's. The lines and shadows traveled down his thighs and over the dark patch around his... *Dick would like this picture*, he thought as he pushed the button down and listened to the shutter's soft *snip*. He winced.

In the foyer of their house, facing Richard and Emanuel's front door is a large framed black and white photograph of the two men lying on gray sheets. Richard has a large black dot painted on the side of his pale left buttock, Eman, an equally large white one on the back of his head, which is resting on Richard's chest. They are wrapped around each other, each body, black and white, wound around the other, coiled in the complementary embrace of a Yin Yang symbol.

In the bedroom, Richard lay alone staring at the ceiling, trying to will himself back to sleep. *Six o' clock is way too early to be up on a Sunday morning*, he thought, and the gray light somehow confirmed it. Daylight didn't normally reach the house until nine or ten in autumn. Then the light would reflect on the white eggshell walls and ivory curtains, the alabaster sheets and creamy comforter as though the room were enclosed inside a cloud. But in the early grey hours it looked pale and inert, like a hospital room, or a morgue. In the months before Emanuel left, Richard would lie there and think of it as exactly that: side by side, not touching, they must've looked every bit like corpses, before the coroners come with their toe tags and the morticians with their garish make-up. Eman might look a lot like that soon, maybe even now, motionless under the chaste fluorescent lights and pasty hospital walls in some Dutch operating room.

Richard got out of bed quickly, banishing any thoughts of his lover. He was doing very well at not thinking of the way the smaller man's shiny, dark head looked on the white pillow, pink tongue barely poking out, as though sleeping required effort, or concentration. He made coffee, then stood very close to the window, still doing very well at not thinking about what it felt like to stand in this very spot, facing the cold window, so close that he could feel the chilly presence of the glass half an inch away from his bare chest, with a very warm and sleepish Eman pressed against his back, wrapped around his stomach, the whiskered cheek on his shoulder, and against his buttocks the familiar friendly pressure of his lover. His nipples puckered. *It's the cold*; he said to himself, and hurried back into the kitchen for the coffee.

Richard filled his mug with hot water, waiting for it to warm before emptying it and filling it with dark bitter liquid. He emptied the coffee grounds out onto the garden. That was Eman's idea: the garden.

He showered in a hurry; finishing before the water had fully warmed or his coffee had fully cooled, and threw on a pair of jeans and a hooded U PENN sweatshirt.

Emanuel's flight was arriving at seven, and the R5 took a while. Besides, it was a brisk walk to the train station even with his long legs. He took the stairs two at a time and stepped out into the gray morning. He turned and locked the door behind him, ignoring the black and white photograph that faced the entryway.

One of Emanuel's commercial shots, one of a series for some French cologne, features a man and a woman bumping into each other on the crowded steps of a subway station. Both are in sharp focus, while everyone else is blurry, and the man's coffee, digitally added, is in mid-air, about to splash all over the woman's casually unbuttoned blouse and blazer. The man is staring in surprise at his coffee (and, if you follow the trajectory of his gaze, also at the cleavage created by her peek-a-boo bra). The woman is completely oblivious, her eyes are closed and her head tilts back so her hair falls over her shoulder (exposing the perfect skin of her neck, upper chest and the downy area just behind the ear) as her mouth parts in an enigmatic Gioconda-like smile of silent rapture. "BONHEUR" read the caption for the unfortunately named (and ultimately unsuccessful) cologne, "Because a chance encounter should not be left to chance."

Trannies milled around the club like stewardesses, politely touching shoulders and tossing their hair. In the dim light a few of them looked attractive as women, but most of them wore their make-up and skimpy skirts like cheap Halloween costumes: vulgar satires of femininity. Several seemed unused to their own shoes, toddling around in their stilettos and leopard print mini-skirts like six-year-olds in a beauty pageant. Their lips, painted into bright red sale-stickers, were constantly on the move, dancing for animated exchanges, puckering, being licked then spreading thin and long for inviting smiles and cylinder filters of slender cigarettes. *Attention shoppers, blue-light special at the bar on all fishnet drag-queens, true love at the low, low price of a couple of vodka tonics: an unforgettable evening you'll never remember.*

Richard was startled from his thoughts by the sudden shout in his ear, "THEY LOOK KIND OF LIKE CORPSES WITH ALL THAT MAKE-UP ON." A petite man with a shiny black head was smiling up at him.

"ALAS, POOR YORIK." Richard had to shout over the music. It occurred to him that the man had the prettiest eyes he had ever seen. Later he would describe them to a friend as rum-and-coke eyes. He smiled.

"A FELLOW OF INFINITE JEST AND MOST EXCELLENT FANCY." The man smiled back. "WHAT'S YOUR POISON?"

"WHAT?"

“WHAT ARE YOU DRINKING?”

Richard turned his bottle. “MGD.”

“REALLY? WE’LL HAVE TO CHANGE THAT. WHERE ARE YOU FROM?”

“WISCONSIN.”

The handsome man nodded his head as if a great mystery had been solved. He threw some bills onto the bar and yelled an order at the bartender. They waited for the drinks, staring mutely at each other. The club pulsed around them. Eman reached over when the bartender returned and handed Richard a green bottle and a shot for each of them. They tilted their heads back and downed the dark liquid. Richard tasted cinnamon and chocolate. Eman started to weave through the crowd, then turned back to make sure the tall boy with the Jesus hair was following. He stopped and whirled suddenly when they reached the hallway to the bathroom and Richard almost walked into him. He put his hand behind Richard’s head and they kissed. They savored the flavors of the shots on each other’s tongues for a moment and then pulled apart. Eman had spilled most of his cocktail and it occurred to Richard that the petite man was probably drunk. He took a sip of his beer and a little went down his chin. They were both probably drunk.

“What am I drinking?” Richard asked.

“Snakebite,” Eman leaned forward and answered, brushing the blonde man’s hair away from his ear.

“I meant the beer,” Richard said.

“Oh, it’s Lager. Yuengling, for you Wisconsin boys.”

“It’s good,” Richard replied, relishing the feeling of the prickly shaved skin above the man’s ear on his lips.

After kissing more, they stumbled onto the city streets, and hailed a cab. The driver sulked and muttered middle-eastern curses under his breath as they laughed and kissed in the back seat, shouting out turns suddenly and unexpectedly, and giggling like infatuated middle-schoolers. Finally the frustrated cab driver said, “What address?”

“I don’t remember?” Richard held his hand over his mouth to keep from laughing.

“Where do you live?”

“DuBois College House.”

“Hh-O.K. U-Penn’s a good school,” the driver said, his voice simultaneously

carrying parental approval and admonition, perhaps expecting better from two students of such a prestigious university.

Richard slipped out of the car with a final kiss and some twenties left on the seat.

“Youmyfriend?” The driver pronounced it as one word. Eman stared blankly.

“Andyoumyfriendwheret?”

Eman remained confused.

“Where. To.”

“Oh. Just around the block. Rodin House.”

It was over a year before Richard and Eman met again.

Another of Emanuel’s commercial shots (purchased but never published) features a close-up of ‘The Thinker’. Above the stone man’s thickly furrowed brow, atop his bowed, pensive head is an unopened bottle of a popular domestic beer.

Eman once said that Richard had a build as American as a bottle of Bud. Even now Richard wondered if that was a compliment. Like a mirage, his reflection in the window faded and reappeared as the objects behind it shifted from light to dark. The charcoal gray sky made him virtually invisible; dusky recesses on stone retaining walls allowed him to see the outline of his face, and the black shadows of underpasses afforded him complete clarity. Between the flickering images of himself and the hypnotic *ch-chunk ch-chunk ch-chunk* of the train’s progress, Richard began to feel stoned. He drifted.

The speeding slide show flashed in time with the contractions of the train. His breath steaming above the scope of his father’s rifle under the bleak November sun.

His baptism: Pastor Ted’s tie seen from underwater, green paisley fish at the water’s surface. Sex for the first time. Love for the first time. Dog licking his face while fireflies lit up the cornfields like Christmas lights. Varsity basket-ball and the winning lay-up. First day of kindergarten, junior high, college. Summer job. Masturbating in a port-a-john during the lunch break. That was a big one. At the time he saw it as incontrovertible proof that his sexual proclivity was sick and twisted. This is what desiring men led to: victimization fantasies involving a burly construction worker named Hank set to the sounds of jackhammers and belched curse words and the pungent stench

of ammonia and fecal matter. That his sexual perversion would surface and grow into even sicker, more deviant fetishes, validating what he always suspected about himself, was a secret fear long after Richard came out as homosexual. It was not until he pried Eman's most private fantasies loose that he began to feel secure, and by comparison even normal. Of course, Eman had chosen not to reveal the fantasy that had suddenly become so life-altering for both of them.

Ch-chunk, Richard was at 30th Street Station, about to switch to the R1 to meet his confused boyfriend(?) fiancée(?) ex-boyfriend(?) ex-girlfriend(?) (*idiot, asshole, jerk*) at the airport. Richard descended the stairs and stood in line and bought the ticket and climbed the stairs and was waiting for the train when the absurdity of the situation finally caught up with him. Here he was, almost thirty, about to meet his now transgendered lover, or ex-lover at the airport and... *What? Help Eman carry his (her?) bags? What does one say? How was Amsterdam, you look great; oh my god, how's your new cooter?* He abruptly turned away from the platform and descended the stairs again, crossed the vast hall, passed the giant shadow of great bronze wings and exited into the grey daylight.

There is a snapshot Eman stuck in his suitcase before he left. Richard is waiting for him just to the side of the great angel, tiny beside the giant statue yet looking every bit as strong and patient, ready to catch the bronze body should the heavenly messenger falter.

Richard sipped his coffee staring at the people milling about outside. He and his roommate were waiting for a friend of Nate's, some photography student who needed male subjects with long hair for a commercial arts project. Whatever, it was something to do on a Sunday, maybe he would meet some other cute guys. After all, he liked long hair.

It occurred to Richard then that people walk differently on a Sunday morning. The entire city moved with the casual grace of vacationers at the French Riviera. Maybe the Sunday sun is too bright for Philadelphians, so they turn into linen-clad Saudi princes ogling Italian supermodels and American starlets on *le* boardwalk instead of ham-fisted, retired Septa workers leering at over-pierced, gum-snapping baristas and hung-over co-eds groggily abandoning the scene of their latest one-night stand. Maybe he was just

feeling the effects of his first cup of coffee and morning joint. Either way Richard felt pretty good and, come to think of it, as he stared at his bed-head in the reflection of the glass: he looked pretty good. Or so he thought until a certain petite black man with a shaved head and rum-and-coke eyes walked through the café door.

In the tight heat of the little café, the pulsating proximity of the club came back to him like someone had set up an amplifier where the espresso machine had been. Nate waved to the man.

Suddenly Richard felt sweaty and disheveled and puffy-eyed and really, really stoned.

“Who’s this?”

“This is Richard. He’s the son of a preacher man.”

“Mm. Hi Dick. I’m Emanuel. My friends call me Eman, but you can just call me Dusty Springfield.”

Richard giggled.

Emanuel smiled, already aware of his effect on the blond boy. “When I become a woman, men are going to call me a cock-teasing whore.”

Richard hesitated, unsure of how to phrase the question. “You wanna become a woman...”

“No, Dickie, it’s just a privates joke of mine.”

The pun was lost on Richard.

They left Nate at the café and went back to Eman’s dorm. The smaller man led Richard to the bathroom, where several large lights were aimed at a shower stall.

“Okay, so you’re in the shower, just rinsing off the best shampoo in the world. I mean, it was like your hair just got laid. You feel hot, steamy, relaxed, predatory, give me all of it. You did bring a change of clothes, right?”

Richard giggled. “What for?”

“Well, you’re going to be in the shower, with the water running. Oh, no, I thought I told Nate.”

“Wait, no, I think he did mention something about it last night, but we were really drunk.”

Eman stopped a moment and looked carefully at Richard. He had overlooked the taller man's pale blue eyes, blood-shot with pink like marbled confectionaries, "Oh, sweetie, you're high, aren't you?"

"A bit."

"Shit. Oh well, we're going to have to wait, I need those pretty eyes of yours clear and sparkly."

"I'm sorry, you'll have to give me a little while."

"That's just perfect," Eman tried to be annoyed at the tall blond man, but quickly wavered, "Come on, I'll buy you lunch."

Eman had entire albums dedicated to Richard's eyes. Images upon images of pale blue irises in various lighting, angles and expressions stared out from glossy pages. Some of the pictures were shot in a hurry, without allowing their subject time to compose himself. These pictures were often blurry, but charming in the wide candid expression of Richard's surprise. The pictures from the year leading up to Eman's trip to Amsterdam had no pale irises. The eyes were always closed, the pictures were taken in secret while Richard slept.

Richard stared at the traffic coming and going from the station. He spotted a smoker mostly hidden behind a marble column, looking very suspicious. It occurred to Richard that the man was probably smoking weed. He tried to remember pot and instead remembered the rest of the day that he and Eman had been introduced. They had eaten at the Blue Dog, White Horse, Black Cock? Some colored animal. Eman had lectured about light and shadow and color, using forks and water glasses to illustrate his art. He divided the light; he combed and parted it, coaxed and split it. He rearranged the chicken salad on his plate and condiments around it and showed how the chopped cucumbers seemed to glow from within and the walnuts shrouded their dimples in dark secrecy.

Eman's face lit up with the conversation; the whites of his eyes flashed and his bright teeth winked at Richard from behind his smile like a can-can dancer's powdered legs playing gleefully in her pink skirts. The sexy, flirtatious vamp was revealed as the dissembling of a passionate man who culled beauty from the world around him with the

genuine and profound reverence of a theologian. The man's brassy confidence was gone, replaced with a simple sincerity that captivated Richard. *Perhaps*, Richard thought, *perhaps I am just really, really high, but I think this man is the most fascinating human being I have ever met.*

Eman, despite himself, was quite taken by the foolish young man in front of him. He found words for images and concepts that had previously been blurry ideas, out-of-focus snapshots in his mind. This beautiful pot-head was a muse.

Richard became a constant subject of Eman's work. Over the course of a semester and a half, Richard's eyes, his shoulder blades, his faint stubble, even his knees and his toes were explored and defined in Eman's sublime language of light and shadow. Richard had never felt so handsome.

As he listened to the faint rumble of the trains underneath his feet he tried to banish that little black man from his memory. Eman was dead, floating in some jar in Amsterdam, along with the testicles they had removed. What awaited Richard at the airport was a castrated imitation, neither male, nor female, but a surgical approximation of a woman that Richard did not want to see, let alone love.

He suddenly hated Eman.

One of Emanuel's college projects, hanging above the television at his aunt's house like a grim challenge to any visitors, features an image of a black hand (his aunt's) holding a newspaper from the day of the Emmett Till killing. In the background is the looming dark shape of the cracked Liberty Bell. Its companion piece, which hangs just below it, is of a hand holding a newspaper page with an article about Matthew Shepard. In the blurred background is the large LOVE monument across from City Hall; the hand is Richard's.

"You're barking up the wrong tree. I'm not you're type." They were studying for an astronomy exam. Richard had just reached for Eman's hand.

"I think I'm old enough to know what my type is."

The orbit of the planets was diagramed between them like a series of concentric

ruts: inexorable destinies the heavenly bodies dutifully pursue. Eman shuddered.

“Fine then, you’re not my type.”

The innocent flirtations, casual touches and awkwardly direct stares the two men had shared finally reached the critical mass required for the platonic to become suddenly and explosively cupidinous.

“I was your type last year when we made out in that club and in the taxi cab.”

Richard sounded petulant even to himself.

“Oh my god, I thought that was you.” Eman did not notice his friend wince. “I was drunk; it could have been anybody cute that night.”

“If I’m so cute why aren’t I your type?”

Eman tried to think of a decent excuse. “I don’t date pot-heads.”

Richard was never high around Eman again, and eventually he would quit smoking altogether.

Perhaps Eman noticed the sobriety and yielded to feelings he was already aware of in order to requite what had been unrequited, or perhaps nature, proximity and chemistry finally took their course, but either way it was only two and a half weeks later when Eman casually took Richard’s hand. They were in front of a Klimt painting in a New York City museum and Richard tried to suppress an erection as Eman’s pinky tenderly stroked his palm.

Richard, sitting on the steps of 30th Street Station, tried to banish the fond memory of that day, the interminable ride back to Philadelphia, the shy fumbling touches on the train, the unbearable yearning to jump into the other’s arms mitigated by the fear of being so public with a passion they had only just acknowledged.

From behind the station, Richard could hear the heavy wheels rumble and the brakes squeal and hiss as the trains halted; he smiled at the memories they conjured. He remembered how held hands became kissing lips and secretly stroking fingers, which led to silently stripping each other and slipping naked into Eman’s bed, into each other. In retrospect it seemed inevitable. The men found themselves fully nude even before they were fully erect, if only by a few seconds. Their tongues searched each other’s mouths briefly in the nakedness of the moment and then Eman darted across the room to click off

the light.

“Leave it on,” Richard said.

“I can’t. I can’t stop looking at you and I don’t want to look at you, I want to feel you. I want to touch you; I want to hear you. I don’t want to look at you. What do you sound like when you fuck, Dickie?” Eman said and stumbled back through the dark to launch himself into bed.

Richard blushed in the blackness as Eman pressed that quicksilver pink tongue between his lips.

In an utero-like chaos of pillows and sheets, the men explored each other’s bodies like inside-out labyrinths. Two latter-day Theseus’, they searched the dips and curves, pursuing gasps and sighs, then backtracking from each cul-de-sac in favor of louder moans, or softer breaths. From the unsounded spiral depths of the cochlear canals, down the dorsal expanses to the dimples above the glutei and coccyx, in the moist recesses behind each knee and all the way to Achilles’ tendon and the metatarsals, restless lips and fingertips measured, surveyed, abandoned and then revisited every goose-bump by the darkness of the night.

The landscape was endless, each twist and squirm a seismic shift that reshaped now-familiar provinces into uncharted territory. Muscle, sinew and bone quaked like tectonic plates and new continental shelves; mountain ranges thrust forward for investigation. Columbus knew nothing of discovery. The Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria landed on dirt; these were the shores of Eros.

That summer, they found an apartment together near Fairmount.

Emanuel took a picture of a protest and the corresponding counter-protest. In it, a very angry looking woman is screaming at a man, also livid with rage. The one-by-two inch wooden stake in her bony clutch and the white plastic tubing in his meaty fists both lead up to placards that have been cropped out of the photograph. It is impossible to tell which side of what contentious issue they are each so furiously protesting, but the anger, and hurt and virulent hatred of the moment is unmistakable.

Their first real argument did not happen until Richard was interviewing for a

high-paying position in a graphic design company. What began as a childish recitation of perceived slights raged into an alcohol-fueled shouting match that quickly descended into simple blasphemy-laced call-and-response, like a Baptist gospel choir gone profanely awry.

Richard re-entered the train station and stared at the angelic statue. He wondered how they had even got to arguing. They were celebrating something. No, not quite. Suddenly the whole day came into focus. It was another Sunday and Eman had dragged him to some rally or parade. Richard refused to participate so they had tagged along the periphery of the various events. This is how they wound up listening to the counter-rally.

They could not quite see the speaker for all of the cardboard signs being waved around him, a curious collage of rainbows and dire prophecies. The man's voice, however, echoed clearly above the shouts of the crowd.

"We are a nation, deprived of its center." His voice sounded frighteningly close, amplified as it was by speakers sitting atop a rusty old van. "We have lost our footing and slipped into the... the kind of abominable behavior that the Lord hates with a passionate heart. When He looks down and sees the bodies He has created engaged in these lewd and unnatural acts, acts of depravation, degradation and deception towards Nature and biology, how could He not care? Would Michelangelo care if Mona Lisa took breath and stepped into the hills behind her and started having sexual relations with a goat? He would be outraged!

"How much more so then, does the Artist who created these living, breathing, thinking, loving beings care when they turn His artistry against itself? The world wants us to call this sickening behavior healthy, but God's children will not be silent as this moral pestilence ravages our nation.

"I saw a sign today that said, pardon the vulgarity..." the speaker hesitated as though the words were too disgusting to even speak: "'God does not care who I fuck.' But I am here to tell you this: He does care very much!"

Taking advantage of the significant pause in the orator's speech, someone close to the couple started screaming back, "He does *not* care. He does not! The only fucking He cares about is the fucking you are doing to everyone right now. You are fucking us all; everybody who wants to live a normal life is fucked because of your awful bullshit! And

if He does care about fucking; He doesn't care who you fuck; He cares why you fuck them! You fuck!"

Richard felt himself go red in the face, part of him wanted to applaud and part of him wanted to quietly slink away from this weak-chinned fountain of soprano obscenities. He stood frowning as the heat in his face subsided; he hoped he looked thoughtful, but not particularly committed.

"Come on, let's go." Eman grabbed his hand and Richard was grateful that no one could see their locked fingers in the thick crowd. Then he felt ashamed, but he was unsure of what.

That night, after dinner and a magnum of pinot noir, the fight began. It started with Richard asking Eman what to wear to the second interview. Eman picked out a lavender shirt with a gold-flecked cobalt tie.

"I can't wear that."

"Why not?"

"It's too..."

"Too... what?"

Richard just shrugged, "I don't know..."

"Too... gay? Hel-lo!" Eman prolonged the vowels ironically, "Every graphic design company needs a token flamer." He illustrated his point with a tender kiss on the lips.

"It's not queer eye for the graphics department, you know. It's CPA eye for the fucked up books," Richard said, breaking away.

"Come on, what do you care? You'll look great and that's going to count with a design company. Besides you're a fucking amazing accountant."

"It just doesn't look professional, it's too..."

"...gay."

"No. Stop saying that. It's too edgy."

"Have you told them you're... edgy?"

"You're an asshole. I only had one interview; what was I supposed to say? I can restructure your purchasing, billing and receiving for twenty percent more efficiency, also, I love cock. I'm sorry it hasn't come up."

“Will it?”

“I don’t know. It really doesn’t matter, does it?”

“Obviously not.” Eman stormed off to the living room. “You can dress yourself if I’m too gay for the job!”

A few cocktails later the argument started again in earnest. They shouted at each other, or rather Eman shouted, while Richard kept his cool, sullen retorts to an infuriating minimum, until he could no longer be heard above Eman’s profanity-laced barrage, then he also resorted to volume. It was nearly an hour before they went to sleep, Eman slamming the bedroom door with the inimitable panache of the inebriated, while Richard crammed his tall frame onto the couch.

For the next couple of days the two men stalked silently around the apartment, speaking to each other as little as possible, until Richard heard back from the company and the fight was forgotten, drowned in celebratory sex and champagne.

Emanuel had just received payment for a couple of high end jobs, (all commercial, except for the Yin Yang picture, which eventually sold privately for well over a grand) and they had a down payment for a house in the suburbs and Richard’s dependable income for a mortgage. Two months later they closed on a cute little Cape Cod in Melrose Park near the railway station; they could finish the basement, get a tenant and have it paid off before they were fat and sixty.

Richard briefly thought about the squirrels he had heard in the attic. He had replaced insulation, a fair amount of the accessible electric, drywall and plumbing, but the squirrels would not leave his house alone. It felt like the house was being pulled apart from the inside out. Richard patched holes in the siding, set traps and repellent sprays and homemade Tabasco concoctions, but the squirrels kept getting in, chewing holes in the exterior and nesting in the walls like large furry termites. Richard fumed. How is a man to keep a house whole when even the goddamn denizens of Disney conspire against him?

It occurred to Richard (while patching some drywall) that arguments are like squirrels. Some drunken words never really fade with the hangover; they slip in between the floorboards and in the walls, nesting and reproducing between the studs. Eventually, they will tear your home apart.

He sat on a bench and stared at all of the people finding their way onto their platform, onto their next train, onto their next life, into each other's arms, away from each other's words. He watched a couple kiss goodbye and found himself remembering the kiss they had shared on the day Emanuel left. It was warm and passionate and he had left for work thinking the dreadful distance between them was shrinking.

That was the day Eman did not come home. The next night Richard received a phone call from Denmark: *last minute commercial trip, yadda yadda, be home soon, don't know when.*

Richard suspected an affair and searched the computer for e-mails and appointments for secret trysts and instead found information about operations and a clinic in Amsterdam and an itinerary, planned, much to Richard's growing humiliation, months in advance, in Eman's inbox.

He tripped on the way to the bathroom, dry-heaving into the toilet, each parched contraction yielding silent, still-born sobs. When he was done he wiped his eyes and returned to the computer. He wrote down the arrival date and then waited in a numb haze for days, until this morning, which found him staring blankly at the floor of the station at nothing in particular.

Richard was startled by a vibration in his pants.

He read the text and slipped his phone back in his pocket, becoming aware of the tears cooling on his cheeks. He wiped them away as one would wipe away sweat, with an irritated gesture that, had Eman been watching, would have brought to mind Richard's father.

"Do you remember the story of Jesus and the adulteress woman?" The old deacon had asked him on their last visit.

"The Pharisees wanted Jesus to stone her. The Gospel of John, chapter nine."

"You're rusty."

"Eight?"

"Yup. Jesus could hold no truck with those rock-throwing Pharisees. Now he sent her away and said, 'go sin no more' but I betcha if she was brought back before him a hundred times she'd still find him squatting down there, writing in the sand, not throwing any stones. Love's got no free hands for rock throwing."

“Thanks, Dad.” Richard felt a knot in his throat like a heavy stone. “I love you too.”

The old man sighed, unable to admit that it was not his own love he had been talking about.

From across the crowded hall, Eman descended the stairs from his platform, and looked for the R5 line and that is when he saw Richard slip the phone into his pocket and wipe his tears with a gesture that did indeed remind Eman of the man’s father.

Eman took a portrait of Richard’s father and mother for their fortieth wedding anniversary. They are in their yard, several hundred feet in front of their house, she on the right, and he on the left. Unconsciously, at least for the couple, the photograph is reminiscent of the painting, “American Gothic.” The house is old and weather-worn, but impeccably maintained, and the couple, though smiling, does so in a way that seems archaic to the modern eye, accustomed as it is to snapshots and candid moments. The most notable difference from the painting though, is that in this photograph the couple is not standing perfectly straight. Their shoulders slope toward each other, her left and his right both slightly lower than its partner, and their heads also tilt toward one another almost imperceptibly, as though bound by gravitational or magnetic forces that are personal and private, exclusive to the couple and unquantifiable, but no less immediate and strong than the forces that keep the planets spinning safely in their orbits. With those forces in mind Eman named the photograph “Celestial Bodies, or Newtonian Physiques.”

The reunion was cosmically awkward. Eman did not look particularly altered, but Richard did not yet care to find out the specifics of the man’s genital situation. Richard did not even care, so great was his indignation and hurt toward his erstwhile lover.

Eman asked, “What are you doing here?”

It was not the question of a partner returning from a business trip, it was the question of a guilty man. Richard felt like slugging him. “I came to meet you at the airport.”

“This isn’t the airport.”

“I got too mad to switch trains.”

“How did you know when I was coming back?”

“I found your emails.”

“So you know where I was?”

“Yes.”

The two men sat beside each other in silence, the suitcases between them like a barricade as the train chugged along. They had not said more than five words since seeing each other at the station; they looked as unfamiliar with each other as any of the other travelers in the car. Neither man really knew what was to come of this sullen reunion; both presumed they were returning to their home, *house*, to sort out the details of the break-up.

The train tracks beat that slow heavy rhythm so particular to rail travel. *Ch-chunk*.

“I didn’t mean for you to find out like that.”

The silence that greeted Eman’s statement reminded him of a boy he saw once throwing a brick against an abandoned storefront window. Instead of breaking the glass, the brick bounced off and hit the child in the shin.

“Remember the train ride back from New York that time we went to MoMA? God we were trying so hard not to fuck right there.”

Ch-chunk. The train sounded like a monumental metronome or an enormous knife against a chopping block, slicing the silence into measures and beats, counting it out cut by cut.

“Shouldn’t you have tits or something?” Richard finally spoke.

“It was just a consultation. They do all kinds of interviews and psych evaluations to see... if you're ready.”

“Are you?”

“I don't think... no.”

“Why not?”

“I'm scared.”

“I figured you’d chicken out.”

Eman ignored the spiteful comment. “I realized I didn’t want to change anything yet.”

“Yet,” Richard snorted.

Ch-chunk.

He stared at the passing scenery, the houses, and the telephone and power lines rising and falling like the outline of waves. When he was a child Richard would pretend each wooden pole was the mast of a sunken ship, now they just looked like severed members.

Ch-chunk.

The memory seemed to mock him. He remained quiet until the train ground to a halt and the two former lovers moved to the doors.

They were over a block from the station when Richard finally spoke.

“Why didn't you tell me you're so unhappy?”

“I'm not unhappy.”

“Not with us, with yourself. If you want, if you need to be...” Richard knew a few transsexuals and was well-versed in the lexicon, but he could not seem to use the correct words. “I love you but if you need to change, we can't be together.”

Eman shook his head. “I don't want to change.”

“What happens if you change your mind?”

“I don't expect to but if... I'd tell you. I mean, I should've told you.”

“That would have been nice.”

“No, it wouldn't have, but I should have done it anyways,” Eman answered, once more ignoring the spite in Richard's sarcasm. They walked in silence toward their home, each of them carrying a heavy suitcase, neither entirely sure what would become of them when they arrived, but with each step closer to home, Eman felt they were a step closer to the life he had almost given up.

They were just two blocks away when Eman spoke. “Do you know what I don't want you to change about yourself?”

Richard shifted the baggage to his left hand with an irritated sigh, “What?”

“The way you tuck your head down when you're thinking and you get a double chin.” Eman stepped in front of the taller man and stopped, blocking his path. “Want to know what else?”

“Not really.”

“The way you insist you don't have love-handles.”

“I don’t have...”

“Want to know what else?”

“No.”

“The way you smell,” Eman was looking directly at Richards’ face, “the way you fuck. The faces you make in the mirror when you brush your teeth: you look like an orangutan.”

“If I look like an orangutan brushing my teeth, you look like a chimpanzee!”

“And that. That fucking laugh, the way you throw your whole head back and hold your belly, that’s going to be irresistible when you’re fat and sixty.”

Richard’s long arm hooked around Eman’s neck; he was trying for a chokehold, but the smaller man was quite agile and ducked behind Richard, attempting to get a full nelson on him. He tried to shake Eman off and wound up tumbling both of them over a trashcan. They rolled onto the lawn and continued wrestling, Eman’s suitcases momentarily forgotten on the sidewalk.

The first real blow was purely accidental. Eman’s elbow caught Richard on the chin, snapping the taller man’s head back with considerable force and causing him to bite his tongue. Richard lashed out in dazed pain and connected with a backhand to Eman’s dark cheekbone. The kicks and chokeholds that followed, though not intended for real damage, did inflict a certain amount of real pain. They grasped and squeezed, searching out each other’s weaknesses. Their fingers instinctively hunted for the familiar aches and pains they had once rubbed with tenderness.

Richard finally subdued the smaller man, straddling the kneeling Eman from behind and choking the man’s neck in the crook of his elbow.

“Get off,” Eman gasped.

“Do you want to be a woman?” Richard tightened his grip.

Eman reached under himself, in the process losing his balance and planting his face firmly in the grass, and grabbed the blonde man’s testicles. “Get. Off.” He squeezed.

“Fuck!” Richard let his quarry go and flopped onto his back.

The two men lay next to each other, one gasping for air and the other tenderly cupping his aching manhood.

“This is ridiculous,” Richard said.

It really was.

Eman was the first to laugh and the sound, like raspy barks escaping his sore throat, set Richard off. The laughter was as inexplicable as it was irresistible. It burst out of them like sobs and left them heaving for air, choking on their hysterics, igniting each other's hilarity in a continuing cycle that left them more exhausted than the fight itself.

Richard felt at ease beside his lover. The silence which had stood like a wall between them for months, crumbled amid their fading chuckles. He reached over and squeezed Eman's hand. Eman squeezed back, then tickled his palm with his pinky.

"Hi, Dickey." Eman smiled.

Richard hesitated, for more reasons than a lack of air, then asked, "Are you sure you don't want to be a woman?"

Eman looked at the blonde fool gasping beside him on the grass. *Only every day.* He admired the strong brow and long forehead, more handsome and distinguished now with a receding hairline than when he first met the man. He did not want to lie to this man. *But I want to be with you more, jackass.* The words caught in his throat.

By way of an answer, Eman kicked Richard in the shin. The kick was slightly harder than he had intended, and Richard's returning blow was more than a jocular retort, but it carried the grudging weight of a reply to the statement Eman had not spoken.

From the house whose lawn they had been rolling on came a shouted "Hey!"

Both men jumped up laughing and darted down the sidewalk, fumbling with their luggage as they dodged out of sight.

From a neighboring house a man with a mug of coffee heard the ruckus and peered out at them. He watched Eman and Richard sprinting awkwardly with their suitcases tripping their legs; through his bathrobe he placed a hand on his stomach and chuckled. He was fat and sixty.

"What was that, Honey?" his wife asked.

"Just a couple of boys wrestling in the Landis' yard. Knocked over their recycling bin."

"Hmph, boys." She grumbled and turned back to the Sunday crossword, and as he crossed the room he stood behind her and draped his arm over her shoulder. He kissed the soft gray hair just above her ear before heading back to the coffee pot in the kitchen.

There is a picture on Eman's bedstand, a snapshot a tourist took. Richard is smiling, but he looks uncomfortable, perhaps because he is visibly sunburnt. Richard's long red arm draped gingerly over his lover's shoulders. Eman is smiling and his white teeth shine against his black skin and painted red lips. His eye makeup is perfect and his wig almost looks real. Richard hates the picture, and recalls that sunburn as the most painful of his life, but he thinks it's a nice enough picture of Eman.

LUKE

He steps into his apartment and pours himself some whiskey from a large, green-glass jug. He sits and stares at the pictures of her on the fridge; there are so many. He has taken so many pictures of her.

Jamie. He sips and thinks of her as he sips, and as though she has been summoned, Jamie sits down in the chair opposite him. Her hair is careless and messy and perfect as usual; her skin is flushed as always, red from exercise, from loving, from living; her shirt is loose and as she leans forward he can see the tops of her small breasts reaching elegantly toward the table surface.

He pours more whiskey.

It is a routine; it's all he has and no one can take it away from him. He pours the whiskey and Jamie stretches her body forward like a cat and kisses him like she did, like his lips were the darkest, richest chocolate in the world. He kisses back like he always did, like he wants to get drunk and she is an endless bottle of...

Jamie. He kisses right through her. He is sitting alone again at his kitchen table again, with the empty glass and the full jug, so he pours himself more whiskey and she is there again, on the couch again, in her underwear. He goes to her and kneels beside her and when he touches her she is gone, but when he closes his eyes he can feel her breathing. So he shuts his eyes very hard and puts his head on her chest and moves his lips around on her skin, searching like a baby to find that perfect nipple and he kisses her long and deep, and she burns all the way down his throat and into his stomach and they are lying on the floor but she is fading, so he pours himself more, more Jamie wherever he wants her to be: straddling his chest and smiling down at him playfully, more Jamie behind him with her lips on the downy area behind his ear, more Jamie at the computer, her blue eyes trapped on the screen, rapt in his words and she says *you're wonderful, you're amazing*, and more Jamie on the floor, on the couch again, and then...

And then more Jamie with her scarf and gloves and coat on, at the door crying and saying *good-bye*, and *I'm-sorry* and *I-love-you*, and more *Jamie-don't-go*, and more *you're-drunk-please-let-go-of-me*, and more *don't-you-go* and the glass in his fist shatters

against the wall and rains to the floor, and then...

...and then, and then, and then...

...more Jamie slipping and falling into the refrigerator and down on the floor with the glass all over again, then on her side crying all over again, holding the bump on the side of her head and crying a perfect river of golden tears on the linoleum again, and more *Jamie, -I'm-sorry, I'm-so-sorry*, more *Jamie-don't-cry, Jamie-shh, -don't-cry* again as he drops to his knees to hold her and hits his chin on the kitchen table, and *look-Jamie*, to show her how his tongue is bleeding where he just bit it and this time she giggles a little, and this time there's no teary eyed, fuck-you door slamming, this time it's all *oh-my-god-look at-your-hand, it's-bleeding* tenderness as she wipes the glass out with her glove, and now she's laughing and they laugh until they cry again, and they cry until they are empty, all liter-and-a-half empty, all coats and scarves and gallons-of-their-insides with the broken glass on the kitchen floor, empty. The green jug is lying on its side beside him on the crystal-dotted linoleum floor, empty. Jamie is lying on her side beside him, naked, empty.

Jamie is lying on her side with him and she is beautiful, and he is empty.

SQUIRREL SAVERS IN SPACE

Jigs for Lazarus, Om

I'm kicking. I'm all out and I've licked the inside of every little plastic baggie in this place. I stumble around the misplaced furniture of my basement apartment knocking into all of the out-of-place shit. I've pulled the couch away from the wall and the cushions are lying everywhere and I can't find a fucking stash anywhere. Not a half gram.

This place stinks. I roll a joint to try to mask the odor and just add to the peculiar aroma, a mélange of death, rubbing alcohol and now pot.

For days the squirrels have been falling and I can't stand to leave them in the yard. Most of them die on impact but tonight I found one still breathing in short, sharp, poisoned little breaths. Rich from upstairs, one of the faggots who owns the place, must've done it. Most days I wouldn't call them faggots; they're just two mostly decent guys who try to love each other; I'm no homophobe. But the fuckers must have put poison in the attic and the squirrels are leaving the house like rats fleeing a sinking ship, falling like fuzzy meteors into the yard. I'm out of fucking smack and I'm itching like a motherfucker both from withdrawal and my fucking psoriasis, and I have a dying squirrel gasping for air in a pair of old briefs on my kitchen table so tonight they're definitely faggots, fudge-packers, mother-fuckers. Jerks.

I found the first squirrel a couple of days ago, almost on my doorstep. I wasn't particularly bothered. I didn't have shit to do, so I wrapped it in an old pair of tighty-whiteys and poked around for a shovel. Of course they didn't have one. The one guy mows the lawn and I suppose that's all the yard work you can ask from a couple of fairies. I couldn't just leave it there in the yard, especially not wrapped in my old underwear like a mummy, or somebody would think I was a weirdo, so I took it inside and put it in a box. Then I thought it might get maggots so I walked to the store and got some rubbing alcohol and when I came back there was another one, so I squirted it down and stuck it in a gym sock and put it with the other one.

That was three days ago and my underwear and sock drawer is almost empty and I would pass out from all the fumes except I'm so fucking itchy. The shits haven't been

that bad and as soon as the nausea passes I'm going to hop the bus and see if Nate or his bouncer friend can hook me up. They fucking owe me. But for now all I got is some weed, so I just lie down on the green carpet and try not to smoke. I like the carpet, it's from the seventies or something and the landlords offered to pull it up but it looks like grass where it's not matted down.

My dad took me hunting once. He showed me the matted down grass where the deer had slept and I thought it was weird, hunting for them in their home like that. They sleep there and all and it didn't seem right and I wasn't disappointed at all that we never saw anything. I don't think he was into it either, because he just kept talking, pointing out different trees and birds and edible mushrooms and stuff.

Which reminds me; I got some mushrooms somewhere that Nate left. He kept saying they were "fierce, man, fierce," but I know he just came over to shoot, so we never took them. I'd 'shroom right now to take my mind off the goddamn itching. I remember seeing them in an economy sized Tylenol PM bottle when I was looting the place for some scag. They're still there. I scratch my shins and my neck and run my head under the faucet then pop them in my mouth, one at a time. They taste like shit, literally, 'cause I guess mushrooms grow best in cow manure, but mostly they taste like me not itching for a hit so much. I chew them up and wash them down with a gulp of water right from the faucet, but one still manages to stick in my throat. I cough and I cough until I throw up a little in my mouth, but I swallow it, 'cause it's mostly 'shrooms. When I go for the water again, it tastes sweet by comparison. Now I wait.

On TV they're showing this nature documentary about the Portuguese man-of-war. The camera is weird and jerky because they lowered it into the water from the boat on a series of poles since the jellyfish are so poisonous. The camera keeps jerking and pointing up and the sunlight flashes on the surface of the water like a mirror ball and passes through the tentacles and tendrils and the body of the jellyfish so it's lit up from inside. The British announcer is talking and there are tentacles everywhere, reaching and drawing lazy nourishment from plankton in the surrounding water. There are hundreds of jellyfish and millions of tentacles all reaching out like so many umbilical cords tied to the sea. God, that would be nice. I imagine being so connected to my surroundings that the air, the asphalt, the water from the faucet I run my head under again, the matted shag

carpet, the trees, all provide me with life and energy at the merest languid touch. *Woah. These 'shrooms are fierce, goddamn, Nate-man. Goddamn. Thank you.* Fierce man, fierce.

Nate's a good kid. He's solid, through and through. I met him in AP English my last year of high school and we've been tight ever since. He's a good kid. I read this crappy essay I had written about psoriasis when we had to read out loud and, for what seemed like forever, nobody said anything; they just snorted and one girl kind of snickered. So I just sat there for a while, trying really hard not to scratch, itching in silence until out of nowhere, without even raising his hand, Nate just started talking. He said that I should pursue the shedding imagery, lots of animals shed, like snakes and cicadas, and maybe it was my body trying to shed itself and become renewed. He rambled on for at least five minutes or so along these lines talking about oriental cockroaches and cocoons, then he mentioned the Shroud of Turin and everyone started talking and arguing and completely forgot about me. He was baked as all getout, but I thought that it was pretty solid of him to save my ass like that. Also I can't shake the idea of shedding. I still think of it sometimes when I scratch the dry, flaky skin, that maybe I'm getting out of this rotten body, this mess of a life, not like a butterfly or something gay like that, but maybe like a cicada, still ugly, but glossy and winged, bright and new and capable.

I open the window because it's so hot. I can hear the cicadas outside and I try to listen to them but I can also hear the little gasps of the squirrel, each jerky breath a tiny little exertion of life. I want to hear the cicadas and it's too hot in here. I take the squirrel with me so he won't die alone and I go out the door to sit with my back to the old stone foundation of the house. It's already so dark you can see all the stars, not the ones over the city though, there's too much light, but if you look straight up its like a field of sparkling diamonds.

I reach out to touch them, and catch myself about to jump for them. *I'm tripping*, I snicker. Then I think of the jellyfish and sit back down, letting the tentacles of my consciousness float out lazily, one by one, like power lines to heaven. I wonder if I could just let my mind float like this indefinitely like a man-of-war at sea in the universe, drawing nourishment and ideas from the stars. For a second I feel it. I feel all currents

and flows of the universe with the tendrils of my mind and I grab them until I am strung out, like Bowie said, “strung out on heaven’s high” like a rope course stretching the electric miles of space.

Then I suddenly remember that I’m not connected to the cosmos at all; I’m tripping. Besides I couldn’t stay attached to the stars, half of them aren’t even there anymore, having long since expired, and their glow is only an epitaph to remember them by. The ones that are there are moving much too fast to catch, even with my mind; they’re all orbiting and spinning and stretching away from each other in an ever-expanding dance. Some say stars and planets and the entire system will stretch away into infinity until the space between the heavenly bodies, between our own bodies, within our own bodies and between our atoms, the space becomes so much that we just dissipate, the gravity of each star and planet, the polar forces of each proton and electron, all matter and all energy become too distant to interact. Others think, I think, that it is just temporary, that it is all part of the dance the universe does and it is expanding for now but some day it will begin to contract like a rubber band and eventually we will all crash into each other in the center of the universe like drunken salsa dancers on a listing ship. All of us will collide, rich people, poor people, the President, the Pope, penguins, all the planets, Pluto, polar bears, fucking everything, that’s just the p’s. All squished together like Play-Doh, just like that. Squirrels too.

I look down at the little body, my little buddy, trying so hard to live. I close my eyes and I listen to him. *I cannot connect to the stars, little buddy, I cannot draw life from the skies any more than you can. Heaven is too far off for me and far too close for you.*

I went to a wake once. My father took me to see Ireland and we stayed with some distant relatives and a great uncle or someone died. I was very young, but I remember the night pretty well. They hired a band and everybody stomped their feet as the fiddle player whirled around in dizzy circles until he fell back onto his ass laughing and crying.

The night sky spreads out like a diamond-studded funeral pall. I listen to the warm velvet blackness of it. The crickets and cicadas cock their bows and play their wild jigs as the bats squeal hoarsely at the darkness. I look at the tiny squirrel and begin to tap my toe and then stomp my feet. Do the crickets fiddle ‘cause they know they are at a wake, or the wailing bats, or the altar boy fireflies with their asses like flickering candles?

They don't, but I do, and I sing "Danny Boy" and then, because the cicadas are so quick with their chirp, the livelier "Rocky Road to Dublin," all five verses and dance a jig for the squirrel, around and around in dizzy circles, orbiting the squirrel and singing until I crash into the wall laughing. I don't know what else to sing at a wake, so as I rub my itchy back on the stone foundation of the house I sing the first thing that pops into my head.

It starts out with just the guitar riff, and then, without even realizing it, I'm screaming it out, *I get up around seven. Get outta bed around nine, Guns N'Roses at the top of my lungs. And I don't worry about nothin' no, 'cause worrin's a waste of my... time.* Its just me and a dying squirrel out here and some dog barking backup and I'm lying on my back and pounding my feet against the side of the house, *We been dancin' with Mr. Brownstone. He's been knockin', he won't leave me alone. No, no, no, he won't leave me alone.*

I'm feeling it; I'm really feeling it. I'm screaming if I'm whispering, cause God-fucking-damnit I want some fucking smack. I want it so bad I can hardly stand being in my own skin; so I'm screaming my fucking lungs out. *I used ta do a little but a little wouldn't do, so the little got more and more. 'I just keep tryin' ta get a little better,' said the little better than before.*

I'm lying on the grass and staring the squirrel in the eye and the dog won't shut up and the lyric hits my brain like it's a top hat. *'I just keep tryin' ta get a little better', said the little better than before.* Fucking aye. The neighbor's dog is still barking his dumb-as-shit head off and I am suddenly aware of my little buddy on the grass, and I don't feel like singing anymore. We are face to face, both breathing hard, and his little eye is rolling and pitching around in his skull and I feel sick so I crawl to the flower bed.

When I recover I go back to the squirrel and touch him and he is very hot. He's burning up. I can't do much for him but I can cool him off and that'll be a little better than before. I run around the house and turn on the faucet and I fumble around in the dark following the hose until I find it attached to the sprinkler, which is spraying me with its cool jets, and take it over to the squirrel and try to aim the water at him. I'm getting most of it on myself so I unscrew the sprinkler and I let the water splash directly from the hose over his little body, my little hairy buddy.

I get lost for a second staring at the moonlight reflecting off the water as it passes from my hands to the squirrel's body. For a few seconds we are all connected, the moon, the squirrel, the water and I, strung up once more on those high tension wires, those beautiful jellyfish tendrils that string us all together. Then the squirrel stirs. I don't even notice it's moved until it leaps up, darts between my legs and through the doorway into the apartment.

I'm startled, really startled, but too stoned to move. Then I hear it in there chattering little squirrely obscenities, probably flipping shit because of the death smell, I know horses and other animals hate that. I guess it didn't ingest much poison or something; I've heard that some poisons are neurotoxins and I guess they're probably mostly fatal, but some are mostly just insanely dehydrating. Actually I don't know what the fuck happened, but suddenly I got a live squirrel in my apartment and I do know that I'm way too tired and stoned and tripping to go chasing revived rodents at god-knows-what time in the morning, and there's no way in hell I'm sleeping in the same house as a scared, wet, Lazarus squirrel. If I were that squirrel, sitting in there with the alcohol-soaked bodies of my friends and family, gratitude would not dominate my behavior. I know squirrels probably just bite when cornered or rabid, but I don't feel like testing the mental state of what I can only imagine must be a very unbalanced little buddy.

So I take my wet clothes off and I curl up in the mulch behind the rhododendron.

As I look up through the waxy leaves, shiny with moonlight, I spot the flaky husk of a cicada clinging to the underside of a twig. *Images of broken light which dance before me like a million eyes*, I sing, as I scratch my neck and arms, rubbing the cool dirt and mulch against my naked skin. *They call me on and on across the universe*. We do not fall to sleep; we rise to it. *Thoughts meander like the restless wind inside a letter box. They tumble blindly as they make their way across the universe.*

THE ROAD TO SHU

The 'rhoid to Shu?

Redemption is a funny thing. It is the turning point upon which the quality of a life see-saws from bad to better. In what usually becomes the absolute nadir of an already degraded life, there lies the holy fulcrum that turns a shitty day into the first step of the difficult journey towards salvation.

For many years a congenital heart disorder forced Luke to avoid caffeine and other stimulants. Taking the doctor's orders with a grain of salt, Luke decided that if he eliminated the coffee and kept his blood thin with plenty of aspirin and alcohol, he could probably keep his cigarette habit.

After his trip to the emergency room and his subsequent week-long stay at the Friend's Mental Health Clinic, Luke decided a possible death by heart failure was preferable to almost certain death by alcohol-poisoning. He hopped on the wagon, gave up the smokes along with the sauce, bought five pounds of coffee, a brand-new German bean grinder and swapped out his alcoholism for a more temperate addiction.

The problem with allowing coffee to stand in for such potent addictions as booze and cigarettes is that one drinks entirely more than is salubrious. The quantities in which Luke consumed the acidic, caffeinated diuretic wreaked holy havoc on his digestive system. Six weeks of mild diarrhea was not the worst consequence either. What finally got to Luke was the hemorrhoid. It occurred to him that it must have been growing—if indeed hemorrhoids grow—for some time before the explosive intestinal activity he was suffering from finally pushed it out. By the time it started bothering him it was the size and shape of the fleshy pad of his thumb.

It was at work, table forty-two to be exact, that Luke's anus had suddenly started burning.

“Calamari fritti.”

“Absolutely, madam.” Luke confirmed. ‘Madam’ because he hates distinguishing a Mrs. from a miss, from a Mrs. who wants to be mistaken for a miss. As for ms., well ms. just sounds like you do not care, which is the last thing you can afford to do in the service industry.

“But not fritti; that’s fried, right? Yeah, not fritti. Can you sauté them with some lemon and olive oil and just a little bit of garlic?”

“We’d love to.” He was suddenly aware of an unbearable burning in his nether regions.

“And no tentacles, just the rings. I hate the tentacles.” She indicated both with her manicured hands, first the rings: a perverse ‘OK’ signal, then the squirming tentacles: her long elegant nails scraping the air. It was only a moment, but it seemed to Luke like an eternity, during which he was condemned to the unbearable hell of being restrained from scratching the most terrible itch in the world while painted fingernails taunted him like the devil’s own spades and pitchforks.

“And some fresh basil and, oh, some cherry tomatoes!”

Luke suddenly dashed off, muttering, “Of course, madam.” before disappearing into the kitchen, where he delivered the appetizer order to the cooks before violently addressing the problem through his wrinkle-resistant Dockers in the cool privacy of the walk-in refrigerator. When he emerged to check on another table and get a drink order from a party who had been seated in his brief absence, he returned to the kitchen to find he had neglected, of course, the cherry tomatoes. That mistake might have normally irked Luke, except for the relentless gnawing in his pants.

After many more escapes to the walk-in and three hastily delivered wine glasses, Luke managed to clean up his station, count his money standing up and leave the restaurant.

At home he examined his itchy anus and determined that it did, in fact, look like it had a hemorrhoid, or what he imagined a hemorrhoid to look like. Unfortunately the drug store was already closed so he went to the grocery store, where his odd schedule had made him familiar with the late-night cashiers. One would think a recovering alcoholic, someone who has embarrassed himself publicly on more occasions than he would ever remember, would find it easy to purchase treatments for a condition familiar to most, and surely to Sherry T., the lone late-night cashier, who had been pregnant just last year. Sobriety, however, often cripples courage, and Luke paced the aisle stalking past the ointments several times before deciding to buy toothpaste instead.

Three days later, after sleepless nights and interminably itchy shifts at work, where blissful escape through inebriation taunted him every evening, Luke drove across town to another grocery store and bought some cream in comforting anonymity. Wedged between a loaf of bread and several jars of peanut butter, the incriminating box barely even registered with the dough-faced cashier.

Luke used the cream regularly and it provided temporary relief from the itching, yet the hemorrhoid itself persisted. Two days later, nearing the close of a particularly long shift, Luke feigned a cigarette break—which he no longer required—and snuck out to his car to retrieve the tube in his glove compartment.

"That's all right Luke, quitting is for losers; winners like us never give up!" Sandy called out as he ducked upstairs to the employee lounge.

In the bathroom he lowered his apron, pants and underwear and stood, his right foot on the toilet and his left on the urinal. With his back to the mirror he examined himself. The tube was opened in his hand as he dabbed at himself, but when he shifted his weight to get a better angle, his right foot slipped off the rim of the toilet seat and into the bowl itself. He listed backwards and, in the cramped bathroom, smashed into the mirror he had just been using to examine his rectum. Crumpling towards the floor, he banged his head on the sink on the way down feeling something in his ankle pop painfully and loudly.

Luke lay on the bathroom floor, his Dockers and underwear bunched around his knees and his leg cocked up at an awkward angle, the foot still caught in the toilet, sending all of the unmistakably agonizing signals of being brutally sprained and possibly broken. With the graying, stained grout and sticky tiles pressed against his face, he started to laugh.

Each shaking chuckle sent excruciating flashes up his leg, still stuck in the porcelain bear-trap, but Luke could not help himself. The unbearable heaviness of being was gone. *Life is not a tragedy*, he thought, *it is a glorious comedy*. He laughed about the ankle, the hemorrhoid, the gastrointestinal tract and the anus as a whole. The absurdity of existence, the sublime silliness of it all suddenly came into focus. He wondered how, how, how he could have been so egocentric all of his life. Alcoholism, infatuations, even love itself had all been eclipsed for almost a week by a little butt-itch. World events, wars and typhoons had become unimportant because of an inflammation of the pucker-hole.

How could evil megalomaniacs, how could Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin and Donald Trump become so caught up in themselves and their ideas in a world where hemorrhoids happen? It seemed to Luke that God, the gods, whatever, did the best they could to humble the rabid egocentricity of Homo sapiens. The sanctity of inanity and the inanity of sanctity are so inescapably intertwined that the gravity of serious thought should become impossible for man. The poignant tragedy of life he experienced while drunk, the grim severity he saw while sober, all disappeared into delightful comedy. In a flash Luke saw the whole script and the grand charade was revealed as a prank that few, especially himself, fully appreciated.

Alarmed by the breaking glass and what sounded like sobs, Luke's coworkers mobilized, found a spare key and got the bathroom door open, revealing a semi-nude Luke, foot cocked in the toilet, chuckling amiably to himself as he hummed: "Life is a cabaret, old chum; come to the cabaret...."

Sandy, who was putting herself through nursing school, cleaned him up in the back office. After a quick examination of the ankle, she pronounced the foot whole, if badly sprained, and Luke convinced his manager not to call an ambulance—without health insurance he was still hopelessly in debt from the last trip to the emergency room. A lady's razor was produced and the small laceration on the back of Luke's head was shaved and disinfected then he was driven home to contemplate his recent discoveries about life.

On Thursday morning he wrote a letter:

Dear, dearest and dearer still Jamie,

I'm writing this to your parents' address because I don't want to know yours. I know I could ask around and find it out, but you'd probably be more comfortable if I just didn't know.

Do you remember that Ike Taiga watercolor at the museum, the one with the line of horses climbing up a vertical rock face, twisting around and disappearing out of sight, only to reappear at the top, near a small monastery nestled beneath the blank sky? I came home—it was our

home then—and wrote down the caption underneath because it made us laugh so much,

“Oh my, ah! So dangerous! Precipitous! And steep!

The road to Shu is tough, much tougher than climbing the azure sky.”

I feel too sober—seven weeks and counting—to be writing this letter, but it would be pointless to write if I were not.

I thought I had hit the lowest point of my life a few weeks after you left, when they put me in the clinic—you probably heard about that, I know the grapevine loves bitter news. I thought after being rushed to the emergency room everything would change and life would suddenly snap into focus, so getting clean and finding myself still salivating over every drink I serve, I assumed I was just hopeless. But Tuesday I had the worst hemorrhoid in the world and as I stared at my ass in the mirror, trying to medicate myself..

Fuck, I'm so sorry, let me start over, god let me start over; this sobriety thing—no cigarettes, even—is hard to handle. Anyways, I realize how right you had been all along. It's been just like that Taiga caption.

I am going to interrupt.

Luke's apology is long and inelegant. The paper he wrote on was left over from his stay at the clinic—the shrink thought it would be helpful for him to write letters to his loved ones. The stationery and envelopes had sat unused by his computer for three months. The only thing he had written by hand recently was his customer's orders at the restaurant, so his handwriting was at first scratchy and almost illegible. Still, he preferred the inalterability of pen on paper to the flexibility of the word processor, which allows time for thought and polish—all too often the enemies of honest expression. The eloquence of the heart often cripples the elegance of the pen. This is as it should be, since sincerity is rarely inclined to primp and posture with affectations, preferring to be swaddled in the crude, inexact ejaculations of haste than to be arrayed in all the motes-hautes of deliberate circumspection. Am I wrong?

The everlasting awkwardness of intimacy, the knowledge of each other's private dreams and private sounds, of what a lover-turned-stranger's antiperspirant tastes like, lies between our dialogues like a minefield of mutual silence, until one old flame breaches the no man's land to trespass the stony boundaries of the other side. I will not disclose the memories that inevitably explode like buried bombs, both bitter and sweet, recollections that seem inane to outside spectators, yet choke the throat of the participants, cloud their eyes and send their hearts skipping like scratched CDs.

Luke posted the letter on the next Friday morning, hesitating after writing Jamie's old address down, debating whether or not to scratch out the clinic's return address and add his own, and finally deciding to do neither. After he dropped the letter in the mailbox, he stared at the cavernous blue maw for a few moments, then became nauseous. He hobbled home on his sprained ankle and reached the kitchen sink before throwing up for the first time since being sober.

As Luke bent over, his nose perilously close to his own vomit, he chortled and recited,

“Oh my, ah! So dangerous! Precipitous! And steep!

The road to Shu is tough, much tougher than climbing the azure sky.”

Compared to the bile, the tap water tasted sweet, so that it made him smile. Luke limped down the hall to the bathroom to brush his teeth, still smiling.

JAKE'S PAJAMAS

Goodnight, Jake

The world spun around him for a few minutes.

He felt for the cold metal of his belt buckle, loosed it, his pants fell. He threw them over the chair. His shirt was soon next to it, then his shoes and socks very carefully under it. His earrings went on the dresser; he took off his fingers and toes and put them there too, next to them, ten little piggies and ten fat worms. His head went on the bed stand by his watch and his penis, his skin and bones each on their own hanger in the closet. His heart he very carefully put in the drawer of the little pine bed stand, the rest he carelessly left on the mint-green shag carpet.

Then he stretched out on the alabaster sheets, naked, looking up through the ceiling, up through and past cracks in the tobacco-stained plaster and bumps of wall-board screws, up through the floorboards, up to where stars wink at bashful satellites and planets waltz with moons in endless ellipses.

Then he fell asleep, thinking how near it all looks when you are naked.

NOTES

MISTY EYES:

“Jersey Girl,” lyrics and music by Tom Waits, was released by Asylum in 1980 on *Heartattack and Vine* and covered by Bruce Springsteen and released by Columbia Records in 1984 on the B-side of the single “Cover Me.”

“Red Headed Woman,” lyrics and music by Bruce Springsteen, was released by Columbia Records in 1992 on *Bruce Springsteen in Concert/MTV Plugged*.

Ulysses was written by James Joyce.

Delta of Venus was written by Anaïs Nin.

“La Belle Dame Sans Merci” was written by John Keats, more on the 1819 and 1820 versions of the poem to follow in the commentary.

DEAR JAMIE:

Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus was written by Mary Shelley.

THE PEANUT BUTTER INCIDENT:

“I Want You to Want Me,” music and lyrics by Cheap Trick, was released by Epic in 1977 on *In Color*.

AN EX-MAS CAROL:

Scrooged, directed by Richard Donner and produced by Richard Donner and Art Linson for Mirage Studios, was distributed by Paramount Pictures in 1988.

PORTRAITS OF DICK:

“American Gothic” is a 1930 painting by Grant Wood.

“Angel of the Resurrection” is a sculpture by Walter Hancock and part of the 1952 *Pennsylvania Railroad World War II Memorial* in 30th Street Station, Philadelphia.

SQUIRREL SAVERS IN SPACE:

“Ashes to Ashes,” music and lyrics by David Bowie, was released by RCA in 1980 as both a single and the first track of *Scary Monsters (and Super Creeps)*.

“Mr. Brownstone,” music and lyrics by Guns N’ Roses, was released by Geffen in 1987 on *Appetite for Destruction*.

THE ROAD TO SHU:

“The Road to Shu is Hard” was written by Li Bai, a Chinese poet of the Tang dynasty period, more on the translations of this poem in the commentary to follow.

COMMENTARY

I drink too much coffee. I like to joke that I'll quit drinking coffee when I figure out how to cook it down and freebase the stuff. In light of my caffeinated excesses the working title for this MSWord document was, "Offerings From the Coffee-Stained Pit in My Stomach." I finally decided that if somebody tried to offer me anything from the coffee-stained pit in *their* stomach I would probably decline rudely, while suppressing a gag reflex, so let's just call it a "Commentary," a memoir and contemplation of the writing process for this collection of stories.

The original purpose of this project was to provide snippets, portraits, anecdotal ethnographies of the twenty-first century American male of the mid-Atlantic region. That's a roundabout way of saying I wanted to write a few short stories about guys in and around Philly. I would use overlapping perspectives, coincidental phrases and parallel situations with a variety of characters, writing styles and stories to create a cubist portrait of the men I see. Call it an overly-ambitious undergrad's attempt at James Joyce's *Dubliners*, if you will. Of course, I did not achieve what I'd dreamed of achieving, so I did what every creative person must do from time to time: I took an honest look at what I actually *had* accomplished and redefined my goals. What I wanted was a cohesive collection of short stories; what I had was a few good yarns in need of a point, a unified theme.

Ernest Hemingway broke up his short novella, "in our time," to frame a collection of stories. He divided the novella into short sections that offset and explain the rest of the stories, collected under the same name, *In Our Time* in 1925. Read individually, each section of "in our time" is part of a coherent narrative, but split up in the collection, each fragment eases the transition from one story to the next creating an over-all sense of wholeness.

Hemingway described the effect to Edmund Wilson in 1924:

Finished the book of 14 stories with a chapter on [of] *In Our Time* between each story—that is the way they were meant to go—to give the picture of a whole between examining it in detail. Like looking with your eyes at something, say a passing coast line, and then looking at it with 15X

binoculars. Or rather, maybe looking at it and then going in and living in it—and then coming out and looking at it again. (...)

I think you would like it, it has a pretty good unity (Baker 128).

I was hoping for this kind of unity as I continued working, some story or character that would make tie all these pieces together. I cast about for some trick—even though a young writer once warned me crudely that ‘tricks are for magicians and whores—that would pull all the stories together the way the novella “in our time” unified the collection *In Our Time*.

I tried slipping myself in as narrator and character, the way John Fowles does in *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. I made myself the narrator of “An Ex-mas Carol,” “A Cut Above,” and “Phat” and started to write “Misty Eyes” and several others from my own experience. Eventually other characters clamored for the parts though, and while I remained the narrator of a few of them, it was clear I could not gracefully use this trick to create the unity for which I was looking.

I was stuck in the middle of writing “Misty Eyes” and had actually abandoned the story, struggling with my narrative voice and personal experience, when months later Will, who I had already written about in “The Peanut Butter Incident,” offered—anthropomorphically speaking—to take over for me as narrator. Writing for a character gave me a lot more freedom and with the help of couple of dear editorial friends “Misty Eyes” came together in a few hours.

After abandoning the notion of somehow shoe-horning myself into all of the stories, I foolishly thought doing the same thing with Luke might work. I made Luke a writer and gave him letters, poems and an angry essay—the ‘dear Jamie’ letters and “Mediocrity Rant”—and started to think he might sit in for myself, as the story-teller that writes it all. I would write the stories about Luke and Luke the writer would ostensibly be the author of every other story.

Needless to say, I abandoned this gimmick also. My friend is right; tricks should be left to legerdemains and professional sex workers. I was at a standstill, I had pursued many avenues, and in the process had written a lot more good material, but I was no closer to a united whole. While the stories were not connected by a single theme or character that I could see, I did begin to notice that all my failed attempts had created a

larger, varied network of meaning. Characters reoccurred and intruded on each other's lives; common themes and motifs kept surfacing in new ways I hadn't originally intended.

In looking to create a single narrative upon which to hang, like a hat rack, all of the other stories, I had developed each of the characters in more depth and found shared meanings between them that unified the whole collection much more effectively than I could have hoped to with my tired tricks. I found that like people in real life, my characters shared emotions, secret fears, behaviors and common expressions of love. I searched for these shared experiences and reinforced them wherever possible.

During the revising process I tried to look for words, turns of phrase, interactions that unite the stories and characters and emphasize these things. *Heavy stones in the throat, heartbeats like skipping CD's, kisses and words breathed into the soft places behind ears, the way people laugh when they are fat and old*, there are words I try to use to tie these stories together just as there are behaviors that bind people one to another.

The stories were now connected by more than mere narrative gimmicks or rigid plot constructions; they were connected by wordplay, character and meaning. They were a whole work, harmonious (mostly) and unified.

Ursula K. LeGuin had the foresight to find a name for a collection of stories that is more than the sum of its parts. In the foreword to her book *The Birthday of the World* she identifies it like this:

Once more I plead for a name, and thus recognition, for this fictional form (which goes back at least as far as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* and has become increasingly frequent and interesting): a book of stories linked by place, characters, theme and movement, so as not to form a novel but a whole. There's a sneering British term "fix-up" for books by authors who, told that collections "don't sell," patch unconnected stories together with verbal duct tape. But the real thing is not a random collection, any more than a Bach cello suite is. It does things a novel doesn't do. It is a real form, and deserves a name.

Maybe we could call it a story suite? I think I will (xi).

I think I will also.

So I had my suite of stories, a whole thing, tied together, if not neatly, at least effectively by stronger threads than narrative artifice can provide. When I showed the printed manuscript to my readers—the kind of *readers* who edit and polish unfinished work, telling you where you did well, and where you failed miserably to make yourself understood, or beat your reader over the head, or just plain sucked—they pointed out strong but undeveloped themes of which I hadn't even been aware.

“So many of your characters are trapped,” my friend—known to the publishing world only by her *nom de plume*, Molli Rocket—told me.

I should point out that I had said the same thing of her book, *In Real Life*, so I was suspicious that she might just be teasing me, playing a game of critical “Repeat.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, if they're not trapped, they're hiding and a hiding place is a kind of trap, sometimes. Eman is hiding, or trying to. Richard is trapped in a relationship by Eman's deception. Luke is trapped, by his alcoholism, by his girlfriend, or at least the memory of her. The boys in that peanut butter story are trapped; the one's got the pills, the other his girlfriend. Misty is definitely trapped. Or just plain doomed.”

I was editing “Misty Eyes” at the time and her words reshaped the entire ending of the story. The thought occurred to me that William's dead-end job is the trap to end all traps. I had originally ended the story on a tragically romantic line: Tom Joad's final ‘I love you’ in the last of he and Misty's exchanges in the story. In thinking about Will—a young man grieving a lover that was mostly imaginary, stuck in a job that bored him to tears—I thought of Keats' “La Belle Dame Sans Merci.” Just as the pale knight was trapped in the enchanted, lifeless world, held in his lover's thrall, William was stuck in a soulless corporate center in a future-less career, missing a woman who would not return and who in a way had never existed at all except in his imagination, and perhaps hers.

I hurriedly looked up the poem on the internet—a life-saving gift and a time-consuming trap for undisciplined writers such as myself—and happened upon the rarely anthologized 1820 version with the verse, “She took me to her elfin grot,/And there she gaz'd and sighed deep,/And there I shut her wild sad eyes—/So kiss'd to sleep” (Keats 1820).

Later my thesis supervisor and primary editor—Dr. Tramble Turner of Penn State—found the verses unfamiliar and looked up the more frequently anthologized original version, written in 1819. This version has the following verse instead: “She took me to her elfin grot,/And there she wept and sighed full sore,/And there I shut her wild wild eyes/With kisses four” (Keats 1819). We looked at both verses and I decided that going with the more familiar, more frequently anthologized original version would be best.

Upon further reflection, however—actually on the occasion of reviewing that change for the purpose of this very commentary—I changed my mind again. What had caught my eye in the rarer version was the “wild sad eyes (...) kiss’d to sleep.” I hesitated to change the lines back to their original wording, since the poem they come from is the less published of the two poems and a young man such as Will would be unlikely to come across it. Still, Will has much in common with the pale knight and it seemed to me that he would identify more strongly with kissing “wild, *sad* eyes to sleep” than shutting “wild, *wild* ones with kisses four.” In the first poem, La Belle Dame is as much the victim as the pale young knight, and she seduces her lover as much with her frailty as her charms. Knights in shining armor like Will are far more vulnerable to the bonds of women they perceive as fragile than all the shackles in the Tower of London—well, maybe not metaphorical knights like Will, trapped in a world of stodgy realism, but the general point is sound: he needs to be needed, as Nate points out to him “The Peanut Butter Incident.”

“The Peanut Butter Incident”—or “Bad Habits” as it was titled before Ms. Rocket insisted that “the ‘peanut butter’ title” was more suited to their “messy situation”—has Will once again trapped by a relationship to a fragile woman, but as in “Misty Eyes” one gets the sense, I hope, that Will’s mettle is more in question than his (ex) girlfriend’s.

I originally wrote Will and Nate’s story as a one-act play comprised of two scenes. I had wanted to practice a variety of writing formats for this collection, and I thought limiting myself to stage directions and dialogue would be a challenging way to explore drama, tension and character. I wrote it as a play and was quite satisfied with the result, but reading plays always upsets me. The format is maddening to read—all ‘*NATE: this*’ and ‘*WILL: that*’—so I reworked it.

After I was done I still had my scene titles and instead of getting rid of them I changed them both from ‘scenes’ to ‘Acts.’ I debated whether the headings should be done away with altogether and decided I leave the unusual story format as is if I gave it a lyrical intermission. A few readers still found the heading titles questionable and I considered doing away with them once again, but I finally decided that it really *was* a story about two acts with a lot of banter in between.

The ‘act’ in Act I is Will leaving his girlfriend, setting aside the dictates of his conscience—to say nothing of his narcissistic self-importance—and leaving her to her fate. Of course, the act in question happens ‘off-page,’ not actually in Act I, but the whole Act revolves around that deed, even the silly banter that dances around the subject.

The second Act’s ‘act’ also does not take place ‘on-page.’ I did not show whether or not Will takes the pills; I think I prefer to let the reader come to his or her own decisions about that.

I know that if you leave something out of a story, you should know what that something is—a Hemingway directive, if I am not mistaken—and I certainly my ideas about Will’s decision. I also know Hemingway’s theory of the iceberg, and I know that icebergs are very large, especially in these days of disintegrating polar caps. I have to acknowledge that a reader might come to a different conclusion about Will’s choice and be as correct as I am. How is one man supposed to know every icy nook and cranny of an iceberg’s largely submerged mass? I bet Mr. Hemingway allowed aspects of his stories to remain a mystery even to himself, leaving the critics and readers to spelunk their glacial depths without him. After all, know-it-alls are no fun, especially if they really do know it all and a little mystery suits literary fiction as well as it does pulp thrillers.

Dr. Linda Miller—a supervisor for this project and a known Hemingway scholar, who pointed Hemingway’s *In Our Time* out to me—gave me a little boost of confidence when it comes to the unknown in fiction.

I had shown “Jake’s Pajamas” to a professor who’s opinion I cherish and he asked me if the drug addict, Jake, was overdosing or just fantasizing. When I replied that I did not know and did not care to know, he seemed to think it a failure on my part as a writer. The rule seems to be that if the writer does not know all the answers, the reader should not think them worth knowing.

When I was assembling the stories and decided to put Jake's cosmic trip at the end, I was hesitating, still unsure as to whether this was a 'redemptive,' 'transcendent' story or not. It's a very short piece that I love, and I read often—a sure sign, in my mind, that a story is good is whether I want to read it again, not because it needs editing, but because I *like it*—but I was never sure whether it had a 'happy ending.' Sometimes, when in a black mood, I thought Jake was 'checking out,' swapping the complex, brutal inanity of life for the oblivious anesthesia of a drug addict's death. Sometimes I think he achieved nirvana. In the end I decided that it did not matter, and Dr. Miller graciously encouraged me to leave it as and where it is, and let the readers decide for themselves.

Jake's stories are some of my favorite to come back to and read. I've never tripped on mushrooms and I've never done heroin, so I talked to a lot of interesting people and ran the stories by them several times before I felt confident that I had achieved the kaleidoscopic stream of consciousness for which I was aiming.

My favorite part about Jake's stories is how he always manages to get naked. Dr. Turner was the reader who brought to my attention this theme of exposure running through these stories. All of the trapped characters who find redemption seem to find it through an unveiling of themselves, and the ones who do not, remain, in a metaphorical sense, clothed and concealed.

I've discussed Eman's entrapment, how his secret identity traps him in a hidden alter ego, but Eman is also liberated, redeemed through discovery. I decided to belabor this point so much that I wrote, very near the completion of the stories, a whole short piece about Eman's secret gender performance, and called it—not to beat a dead horse—“Exposure.”

I will confess that writing about a transvestite—and opening the can of worms that is gender performance in post-(post-post?)modern America—was and is a daunting ordeal. I'm not going to pretend to understand the nuanced and varied experiences of transvestite, transgendered, aspiring transgendered and closet-transvestite Americans. I hope that Eman's drives, his emotions and aspirations find their place in the singular spectrum of these experiences and do not ring false.

I do not intend to make a statement against gender reassignment in “Exposure,” “Dick” or any other stories—or at all, for that matter—and I hope that these stories will

be taken by the reader to represent a depiction of the life and motivation of an *individual* and not an extremely varied population. If I have a broader motivation in writing about current American sex categories, it is to look at mainstream perceptions of these ‘non-conformists.’ People are subject to many societal pressures to categorize themselves—are you this or that, man or woman, straight or gay?—and sometimes the individual’s complex identity is damaged or constrained by these inflexible categories.

Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman explored the rigidity of American gender roles many years ago: “Although no one coerces transsexuals into hormone therapy, electrolysis, or surgery, the alternatives available to them are undeniably constrained” (“Doing Gender”). West and Zimmerman continue by referencing J. G. Raymond, who exposes societal pressures to conform:

When the transsexual experts maintain that they use transsexual procedures only with people who ask for them, and who prove that they can “pass,” they obscure the social reality. Given patriarchy’s prescription that one must be either masculine or feminine, free choice is conditioned (“Doing Gender”).

Times change and I hope we are entering an age where all—or to be realistic, at least *most*—sections of society make room for the gender and sex categories individuals choose for themselves, surgically altered or otherwise. Nonetheless, there are still many social pressures that can coerce individual motivations, and I’d like to think that Eman was a victim and ultimately a survivor of these pressures.

Exposure—especially with oneself—is the highest form of honesty. The act of acknowledging one’s own entrapment is the first step of a long and difficult journey toward redemption. Luke discovers this when he acknowledges the scatological baseness of his condition. Addiction is a kind of narcissism, and what’s more narcissistic than staring at your own asshole?

A friend to whom I showed “The Road to Shu” asked me, upon reading it, if the whole story was really about this character’s hemorrhoid. I wanted to justify myself, to find some fundamental truth about humanity to show my reader that would validate the crudeness of the narrative. But I have to ask, what’s more fundamental than our fundament?

My niece has a book called *Everyone Poops* by Taro Gomi. It's apparently quite popular with parents and toddlers. I think there is an important and—extremely—basic principle here: everybody is subject to the dictates of their biology and this informs our every decision as a person, as an inhabitant of a physical body. Every success, every victory is the product of a physical conflict, a triumph over our own or another physical, tangible form.

Luke discovers that his angst, depression and addiction are neither more base nor less spiritual than his hemorrhoid. The irritable condition of his anus is no less common to the human experience than 'higher' sentiments, love, hate, the need for acceptance, the fear of rejection. The road to Shu is a metaphor for the condition we are all subject to upon birth: life as we know it—it isn't pretty and it isn't easy, but it's all we've got and we've all got it.

I saw the Ike no Taiga piece that inspired this story at an exhibition of the Philadelphia Art Museum called *Japanese Literati Culture in the Edo Period*. The piece featured a beautiful depiction of horsemen ascending a steep, winding path to a small sanctuary at the top of a mountain. I was admiring the painting when a girl next to me giggled and read the caption: "Oh my, ah! So dangerous! Precipitous! And steep!/The road to Shu is tough, much tougher than climbing the azure sky." This struck me as amusing—and profound—as it did the young lady, so I wrote it down.

Curiously enough, the poem from which those lines are taken is not Japanese. Li Bai, a Chinese poet who lived during the Tang dynasty, wrote "The Road to Shu is Hard" about a deposed king fleeing his last sanctuary. The king is leaving the last of his salvaged possessions behind, his wife falls to her death and everything pretty much goes to hell in a hand-basket. It's a tragic poem about loss, the Tang dynasty equivalent of a sad country music single and hardly appropriate for a story about recovery and redemption. But the phrasing of the opening lines in that exhibition tickled me, as they did the young girl next to me, and simultaneously struck me as a profound statement about living: it's pretty damn hard.

I was unable to find a translation of the poem that phrased the exactly as I had first read. I have tried since to find that exact translation of Li Bai's poem but all the versions I find begin with dramatic and sorrowful exclamations more suited to a tragic story about fallen royalty, but less suited to my capricious needs.

All I have of that exhibit is scratched into an old notebook and I have not succeeded in verifying its accuracy, but I do feel as though those lines redeem this collection just as they redeem Luke, who—had I not received the inspiration for “The Road to Shu”—I would have otherwise left unconscious on the kitchen floor of his dingy apartment in a drunken stupor languishing in narcissistic self-pity. So I am grateful to Li Bai, the unknown translator, and the unnamed curator who chose that whimsical translation for Ike no Taiga's piece.

I like “The Road to Shu” because it acknowledges an important aspect of our existence: the biology of our physical bodies. We human beings cannot escape our fallible flesh any more than we can escape our neurotic psyches. As flesh-covered, physical beings we interact physically, our actions, our love-making, our words (sound waves) are all physical things that occupy or disrupt space and confrontation between these physical objects and forces is inevitable.

In the longer story “Portraits of Dick” Richard and Eman are reunited through a physical confrontation. The piece is, as implied by the title, fraught with sexual puns—a perfume named Bonheur, French for ‘lucky’ or ‘timely’ sounds, of course, like ‘boner’—I indulged myself by highlighting the inanity—and sanctity—of a story that revolves upon the penis—don't so many?

I struggled with how to end this story for quite some time. I wanted Richard and Eman to have a happy ending, but I could not find the dialogue, the words they could speak to each other that would set their hearts at ease, bridge the gaps in trust and shame and reignite their passion for one another.

My breakthrough came when I remembered a lover's quarrel a friend of mine described several years ago. I do not recall the nature of the dispute, but I remember the resolution. After several days of not speaking to one another, my friend and his boyfriend met for ‘a talk.’ My friend's boyfriend met him at the door with flowers.

“So we talked,” he said. “We talked like girls about our feelings and our assumptions and the fight. We talked like grown-ups, actually.”

“And that was it?” I asked.

“No. I was still mad, so I punched him and then we wrestled.” Then he smiled and gave me the (almost) ending line of the story, “because boys will be boys.”

Years later—sitting at my desk, and wrestling, alone, with a love affair between two gay men that I did not know how to fix—I remembered my friend’s words and found the actions, not the words, that would bring Eman and Richard back into each other’s arms. Sometimes boys will be boys, and sometimes boys just need to duke it out, express the pain they feel on the inside physically and inflict it on someone else. This confrontation resolves matters for Eman and Richard and shows the reader that love is more biological, more physical than transcendental and crises of biology sometimes demand physical solutions.

Of course, expressing an emotional state through physical blows is dangerous behavior that leads to real violence and abuse. I like to think though, that Richard and Eman were not simply substituting aggression for real conversations they should be having, but were rather using it as a means to get close enough, emotionally and physically, to have those important conversations.

Boys will be boys, but sometimes boys will be men. “The Boy and His Dog” is the first short story I ever wrote, or at least the first one I kept. I hesitated to include it in this collection but ultimately decided that even though the geography did not match up with the other stories—otters have not been spotted on the mid-Atlantic coast for quite some time—it did fill a gap in the collection. Most of the other stories are about men in their mid-twenties to late thirties, but I wanted at least one story about how boys become men and I knew that “The Boy and His Dog” fit the bill.

Making the story fit this collection was a challenge. I had written it over nine years ago, when I was seventeen. The narrative voice was overdone and arguably still is, but not too much for a teenager. Editing the words I had written in my youth was a difficult and nostalgic ordeal. When I sat down to revise the story on paper, there was so much red ink and so many blacked out sentences that I felt as though I had beaten the thing to a bruised and bloody pulp rather than edited it. It was more of an act of violence

than an editorial process, but—like Richard and Eman’s fight—it was necessary and valuable.

Consider the original opening paragraph:

The boy and his dog lived somewhere in the middle of America. If it were of importance I might specify where, but it is not. They lived on a small farm in a big state in an age that seems to us to be vastly populated by boys and their dogs. It was the age, give or take a decade or two, of Lassie and Old Yeller and many other boy-and-dog couples. But that is not important either. Nor is it important that the farmhouse was white, the barn was red and the tool shed was red too, and that cornfields surrounded the house in all directions. However it is of some importance that about a mile away there was a lake, just as you might see in any episode of Little House on The Prairie. It was a very quaint lake, with ducks and otters and Canadian geese stopping by on their way to warmer climates all through autumn. It was deep enough to dive in some places and narrow enough to swim across in some places, if you were young and had the desire to do so. Tall marsh grass grew up along the banks except in the steep parts where the water was deep even close to the shore.

Or the penultimate:

It is a momentous thing to kill something. Satisfaction and pride get tangled up with guilt and regret. Everything is the same afterwards, yet nothing is. It is a man’s burden that is placed on a boy, and it inevitably takes its toll. The boy had cried for his dog, and he might have cried for the otter, or more truthfully, for himself, because that is what he would come to miss the most as the time passed, but he could not cry. The otter was dead under the surface of the cold lake and he could not cry, even though his shoulder ached and even though he choked on that coal in his throat.

The problem is that I did not trust my reader to understand my point—overwriting every detail and every theme—because I did not trust my writing skills. I found upon revising that I was perhaps a better writer than I was willing, at the time, to believe.

The first paragraph now consists of two concise sentences:

The boy was neither homely, nor particularly handsome, but pleasant-faced, agile and not quick to tears. The dog was an Irish Setter, a beautiful creature with a thick glossy red coat and a friendly disposition.

And the penultimate paragraph is equally as brief:

The boy did not cry. The otter was dead under the surface of the cold lake and he did not cry, even though his shoulder ached and even though he choked on that heavy stone.

These latter versions show a greater confidence in myself as a writer, and in my reader.

Confidence—but never hubris or arrogance—is key to succeeding in any activity. It does not guarantee success, but if confidence is lacking, failure is almost a certainty. I lived by a creek growing up and I remember trying to jump the few feet to the other side. My friends were older and taller and hopped the gap easily, while I hesitated on the bank. Every attempt ended with me landing squarely with both feet in the water, or worse, attaining the far bank clumsily and falling backward on my ass into the water. Paradoxically, I was unable to jump the creek until I was confident that I could.

The first draft of “The Boy and His Dog” was written by a boy standing on the edge of a creek, wondering if he could get to the other side. The version here presented is not perfect, and still—for nostalgic reasons—reflects some of the overdone diffidence of that boy, but it is written by someone who, after years of writing fiction, research papers and love letters, knows he can jump the creek and is pretty confident he can tell a story.

Thinking about these stories, written over almost a decade—though mostly in the last four years—and assembled together, revised and rewritten to create a unified whole is strange. When I took this project on, I had intended to create, as earlier stated, a reflection of the men I see around me, the guys with whom I work and conduct the business of living. What I see looking back at me is—not in contrast to my original intent, but in addition to it—a reflection of myself.

Toni Morrison described a similar revelation, “as a writer reading, I came to realize the obvious: the subject of the dream is the dreamer” (17). Writing stories is just putting your dreams—the thoughts in your head—on paper and at its essence is a reflective—in every sense of the word—activity. For this reason I think the ‘comic-style’ stories are a fitting inclusion. What’s more reflective than a self portrait or a memoir?

The graphic-memoir stories—“Virgins,” “Cigarettes,” and “Pervert”—are all true, if over-simplified, tales from my youth. Writing about oneself, not obliquely but directly, is difficult enough but visually representing oneself and showing oneself to the world is especially difficult. The cartoon-like stylization of a character is called, in the illustration world, ‘masking.’ I like this word as it indicates both a display and a concealment of the character, two things that are absolutely necessary in autobiographical writing.

I think all memoir is subject to a certain amount of masking. When we write about ourselves we are making ourselves into a character, a representation. Like the portrait of Dorian Gray, we can analyze, abuse and subject this character to our reader's scrutiny without assuming the responsibility or damage directly. In graphic memoirs the writer is forced to acknowledge this aspect of self-narration without prevarication. I am on display in these three stories, but I am also concealed—as to some extent we all are we put pen to paper for any purpose.

These stories were difficult to write not only for existential reasons but also for practical ones. So much is visually represented in graphic novels and memoirs that pithiness is not just an asset; it's a prerequisite. I enjoyed telling so much with so few words and the exercise has honed my writing skills and served me in revising the non-graphic stories also.

Telling a story is not easy, as I have learned over hours of painstaking editing and revising. Telling it well is even harder. In an interview for NPR's *This American Life* Elizabeth Gilbert said, "I really do feel like, when they (the muses) see me working, they take pity on me" ("Help!" *Radiolab*). I hope I've worked hard enough to earn some pity.

Henry Ford's famous line about creativity being ninety-nine percent perspiration and one percent inspiration is true, but I like Gilbert's addendum, from the same interview, to the Ford formula: "it's ninety-nine percent oyster one percent pearl. (...) It's a bargain to get one percent inspiration, you know, it's a miracle." ("Help!" *Radiolab*).

If I found any pearls, if any of the stories resonate with my readers it's as much because of luck—the muses' pity—as talent or hard work. I feel as though the writing process is really about getting out of the story's way. If I'm fortunate enough to have a decent yarn in my head—composed of stories and characters I cobbled together from people I know and things I've read—it's all tangled up. My job is to sit down at a keyboard and untangle the thing so someone else can follow it. It's not easy work, but it is rewarding, and sometimes miracles occur.

When I really stop to think about it, all writing is a kind of miracle. As I alluded to in the introduction, William Carlos Williams has displayed the nature of this miracle well. The poet has never been to my suburban Philadelphia apartment, but when I curl up in my blankets and read "The Red Wheelbarrow" I know what he was picturing in his

mind, at least at the level of the fundamental image: white chickens and a wet red wheelbarrow.

Stephen King discusses this quotidian—but no less extraordinary for its frequency—phenomenon in his book *On Writing*:

I sent you a table with a red cloth on it, a cage, a rabbit, and the number eight in blue ink. You got them all, especially that blue eight. We've engaged in an act of telepathy. No mythy-mountain shit; real telepathy. I'm not going to belabor the point, but before we go any further you have to understand that I'm not trying to be cute; there *is* a point to be made (106).

Like photography, writing benefits from clarity. A good writer excels because he or she is able to use their words to emphasize and focus their subject for their reader, the way a photographer might use aperture and a telescopic lens. At higher levels, writers are able to capture—not unlike very skilled artist photographers—emotion and character, but at the end of the day writing is still just making marks on paper. The actual images, the characters, objects and narrative, exist solely in the writer's mind and the reader's.

When a reader sees the markings a writer has organized, he or she instantly grasps the writer's mental image—provided they share a language and some basic cultural reference points. The picture might be unclear or distorted, but a mental transmission has taken place. By observing and interpreting the writer's scribbles, the reader has engaged in an act of telepathy. In a way, Toni Morrison's words—"the subject of the dream is the dreamer"—do not simply apply to the writer, the maker of marks, but also apply to the reader who engages the writer's dreams and make themselves the dream's subject. The reader who dreams the story becomes its subject just as much as the writer does.

Put as plainly as possible, you and I are united—by quotidian acts of telepathy, abetted by our imaginations and our dreams—and are both reflected in these words, these stories. We are participants in an every-day miracle, joined at the mind by a few words composed entirely of a scant twenty-six letters. It's pretty neat, don't you think?

Stephen King must have had this miraculous aspect of writing in mind when he gave his readers— aspiring writers—a strongly worded directive that I try to keep in mind:

You can approach the act of writing with nervousness, excitement, hopefulness, or even despair (...). You can come to the act with your fists clenched and your eyes narrowed, ready to kick some ass and take down names. You can come to it because you want a girl to marry you or because you want to change the world. Come to it any way but lightly. Let me say it again: *you must not come lightly to the blank page* (106).

Thank you, reader, for spending this time with me. Please know that I did not come to any of these blank pages lightly and that I take your attention, your imagination and your time seriously. I hope the characters and stories are sufficiently connected with one another to connect with you and I hope you saw yourself reflected in them as I saw myself. I hope you were entertained and enriched and so many other wonderful things too ambitious to put into words. Most of all I hope you had a good time, 'cause I know I did.

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