

ENTELECHY: A SELFISH BIBLE

By

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Submitted to the

Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences

of American University

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree

of Master of Fine Arts

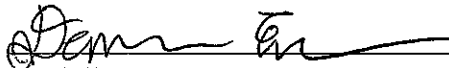
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April 21, 2011

Date

2011

American University
Washington, D.C. 20016

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ABSTRACT

As entelechy denotes the absolute attainment of potential, *Entelechy: A Selfish Bible* seeks to examine what it means to become. Pursuing ideas of identity, relationship, and sacrifice, this collection of short stories and poems looks to discover what it is to be a being — not only through its themes, but through its formal experimentation as well. Both the varied structures of each piece and the overall structure of the work — a mimicry of the form of the Christian Bible — seek the possibility of complete identity and fulfillment. In ranging from mythic recreations to choose your own adventures to unreal creatures to oft-recurring images (like the octopus) or lines, *Entelechy* embraces the multitudinous nature of an individual, and also humankind, by being both diverse and recurrent.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	ii
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Stories:

BOLD TESTAMENT.....	1
OMPHALOS (GENESIS).....	3
BELYING BUTTONS (EXIT US).....	14
THE RULE OF ST. BENEDICT (BOOKS OF LAW).....	31
A CARTON OF EGGS (BOOKS OF HISTORIES).....	54
REALING VISIONS.....	75
WHAT THE CAVE WORM DOES (MINER PROPHETS).....	90
MU TESTAMENT.....	110
ORPHANAGE (GOSPEL PRELUDE).....	111
EDIBLE PARABLES.....	129
ORTS (THE PASSION).....	143
M'AIDEZ, MAMAN (ACTS OF AN APOSTLE).....	161
GO (A LOVE LETTER).....	190
REVEILLEATIONS.....	216

BOLD TESTAMENT

After a little I am taken in and put to bed. Sleep, soft smiling, draws me unto her: and those receive me, who quietly treat me, as one familiar and well-beloved in that home: but will not, oh, will not, not now, not ever; but will not ever tell me who I am.

—James Agee, *A Death in the Family*

Fettered by the flesh's morbid impulse and lethal sweetness, I dragged my chain, but was afraid to be free of it.

—St. Augustine, *Confessions*

Before the Beginning

If on turning 81 I have lived all easily contented,
son, I might ask you to shiv a stranger at the mall
or shoot your pregnant daughter standing (not too) near me.
Don't. I won't deserve that story.

Turning one, you cried
as I breathed into your ear
my hopeful burden: "Make your life, son,
out there like me. But not like me. Get the story you deserve."

On turning 21 I ran at an unmounted mountain
but stopped where its slope steepened and slimmed
high above a flat shoal of hard slate. I feared
I wasn't served for such a story.

Once when there was only One,
the *nihil* dripped with potential —
but nobody
to serve the One their stories.

And then —

OMPHALOS (GENESIS)

I am a child of fire;

I am a lion;

I have desires.

—Adam Duritz, "Hanging Tree"

And suddenly one was there, running toward a dark mountain pass. He found running to be strange, but since that was all he could recall doing, he kept on. He mixed it up: sometimes he skipped, sometimes he leapt.

He passed someone. That was new. She was sitting, and he probably startled her. She startled him, too, by being there, so he ran on. He wasn't getting any closer to the pass. He clawed the dirt hard and ran faster, but he wasn't getting any closer. He slowed. He turned in a broad semi-circle, leaning into the curve, and returned to her.

"I know there's something over there," he said.

"I know it, too," she replied.

They were following a scent, they felt (or rather, smelt), calling them to a good garden. "Hurry." He pulled her. "It might diffuse." They ran through it, through it, and through it. In the pass, dark swallowed them, and the air was thick.

They paused sometimes to breathe and wonder about their destination. He asked, "Who put it there?"

"The God, I assume."

“Have you seen Her?”

“No.”

“We must find Her and hold Her close.”

They ran, they paused. She asked, “What will we do there?”

“Garden, I assume.”

“I’ve never done that.”

“Me either.”

“It sounds complicated.” She looked at the uncolored dirt and rocks. They were very clean. She sat on a well-planed stone. “Run ahead,” she suggested, “and call back to me. I’ll walk.” She lay on the ledge (was it humming?) and fell asleep. She dreamed of hyperbolae and vectors drifting down at a casual tempo. A miniature self ran in front of the descending geometry, pointing and pointing at assorted scrolling symmetries. She saw and knew them all.

His voice, winding back to her, pierced the graphic scene: “Quick, quick!” She yearned to be with him. In the ground, she meant to leave a mark, but his shout — “Quickquick!” — pulled her away before her thumb could decide which sign to inscribe: X or J or ^ — so many possible; the multitude surprised her, and she vowed to catalogue them all and teach him. She sauntered within the dancing vapors of orange blossoms and cedar. She took from her pocket a scrap of lemon cake she had found and saved just for such traveling leisure. She nibbled it. She saw a small spring. She sipped.

She did, eventually, catch him. “Can you still smell it?” he asked as soon as he saw her toes peek around a bend. “Do you think it’s died?”

“I don’t think it’s going anywhere. I think it’s here for us.”

“Of course it is, but that doesn’t mean it will wait.”

“Go,” she said. “Find our place.”

He sprinted. He found a stream. It was slow and deep, wider than he could leap. On the far side sprang an orgiastic esplanade knotted with lean evergreens and frumpy fuchsia shrubs. Beside him a dense bramble billowed, wet with berries; purple finches warbling within; a veiny vine; several auburn melons; ocelots flirting in a glen; trillium.

He wanted her to be there. Then there she was.

They lay together. He felt her hands across his chest, her breasts pressed into his back, her fingers flitting through his hairs, trickling down his sternum, his abdomen. They slept together.

When they awoke, they were frightened. They grew worried about so these urges that surged within them: hunger, drowsiness, thirst, and a shaking in the muscles to be used. They argued about how to escape them, or at least quell them. She tried to cover him, blocking out the light so he could return to sleep, but her shadow fell too small. He gathered a breakfast, but the twigs and nuts were hard or astringent, chipping their teeth or chilling their tongues.

“Where is the way out?”

“Let’s look for the dark.”

They thought the middle would be densest, and it was, but it glowed. They found shadows farther out, beneath several trees, but the shadows ended quickly and led to nothing. It got thin out there. There was nothing to fill them. They were afraid, and it was only the morning.

And in that morning, the God swirled up a mist-trail of jasmine. The two followed it and found a fig tree. It said, “Pluck.” In the evening, the God spritzed a line of bergamot. The two followed it and found parsnips. They said, “Pull.” In the night, the God breathed; the two slept hard, and they dreamed dreams. (Though his were littered with fleeting frights of awakening to a bare steppe around him, and no her.)

As the days became long, the stream called for them. He was the first to go in, but only because he ran there. When she arrived, having walked and touched with her toepads the clover his heels had dented, she watched him swim: sprouting in an arch from the stream and spouting water in an arch from his lips. “Here’s what the things in here sound like,” he said, going, “Fsh!”

“Fsh,” she whispered, “fish. Good.” Wading in, she pointed across the water to a large brown creature. “That’s more like...” She paused and pursed her lips. “Kao.” She thought about it and tried again. “Cow.”

“What are we?” he asked. She shrugged. He leaned back in the stream and, floating, splashed some hip thrusts. “Uhnhuhn huhn,” he suggested.

“Oh, you,” she said, slapping his belly. “We’re just, I don’t know, just we.” Everything smelled of spruce. He snagged three old perch and juggled them. Each fish, swishing in a parabola, whispered, “Delicious! I’m delicious!” Emerging from the swim, she kicked a little rock which caromed off a boulder and sent a spatter of sparks onto a frilly tuft. It smoked and flamed. They broiled one of the perch, held by a forked branch, and picked long, steaming flakes from below the charred tawny

scales. They leaned back on the grass and sniffed styrax blossoms. The God laughed.

The two heard it, or its echo. There they all were.

An octopus squished past, tentacles pulsing, trailing, pulsing, trailing, muttering about how tired she was from carrying her young.

“What about that?”

“How does it live?”

“Not like us.”

“We are quite flawless and mighty, not hideously bulged and slithery.”

“Let’s stay away from it.” Hexing their fingers at it, they skittered back.

They figured it was time to go.

The days grew shorter. On the edge of the garden, he found a darkening tree spangled by brown-skinned pears. It looked so full, and he worried it would break. Plus, he felt very hungry. He stripped it near to bare and listened to the limbs’ groans as they, unweighted, sprang back from his reach. He piled the fruits in his arms and, struggling, carried them back to her, trudging and chewing at the top one. Its sappy liquor seeped down between the others and made them sticky-slimy.

She asked him why he had brought so many. “They seemed weary. They were going to pear-ish,” he said, and they laughed while eating each and every one, becoming deeply bloated. They lusted for more. Following the stream, they peeked for the octopus. It seemed to have vanished, and they felt pleased. “We have made this garden clean.” The tree, as they approached, like bones and reeked of bark, not of grassy fruits — now all gone.

“I thought you had left some,” she said.

“I thought I had,” he said.

“You should have counted how many were there and counted down each time you took one. Then you’d have known.”

“So much work,” he guffawed.

“Well, maybe work is what we have to do.”

“No way. We’re here to relax.”

“While you were relaxing, you just ended one of our trees.”

“Okay, okay. I guess I could’ve just taken far fewer.”

They glared at each other, each certain about being right. They debated the proper approach to consuming fruits from trees and established a protocol. They realized how differently their minds functioned, and, walking around the garden they now knew well, they compared their perceptions, sometimes even seeing a third way that sprang from a synthesis of their notions, like when they realized the most efficient chestnut hulling came from a combination of nut alignment and husk-scoring. They began to wonder about everything and how it could be maximized.

They noticed the pear juices pooled and tacky in each of their little central pits.

“What is this for?”

“Does it go in or out?”

“Can it do anything?”

“Can we do anything with it?”

They poked each other’s pits. Twiddling the knot tickled, then hurt. “What a worthless thing.” They found small leaves and stuck them over it, ashamed of the

useless part. “Like that monster we saw in the stream.” They ignored it and returned to using arms, legs, teeth, fingers.

She ambled downstream toward the middle one day, and she saw the octopus again. She hailed him with laughter — “We will get it!” — and they leapt in the stream to beat it. They howled and sloshed, chasing it deep into the garden, cornering it at the stream’s central bend, pounding with fists and feet. After taking several kicks to its spongy distended head, the octopus faded into a murky trench. “Where did it go, oh, where did it go?”

“I think we banished it.”

Triumphant, they walked back upstream, inspecting it for other disfigured pollutants. It seemed clean, until from a craggy underwater hole spurted a cloud of tiny octopodes. Too small to be hit or caught, they spread and spread. “I don’t like how that works,” he said, “that trickery.” They felt very tricked: the pear tree, their pointless pits, the spawned octopus. The garden was not as easy as it had seemed. They decided to leave. They put up pillars to mark the area they would no longer enter, even if the God called them back. They moved to the outskirts, out where the stream banks were verged only by a foot or so of marsh, where the trees thinned and waned. Flat, dry, diggable.

A small pig came running, tripping through the uncertain ground. She smacked its rump. “It feels pretty strong,” she observed, but it was still young, and fat only in a cute way. They watched it root through the turf.

“Be grown,” he commanded. It wasn’t. “Be grown!” He grabbed it by its snout and shook it. It didn’t lengthen. She knelt and held a leg. They pulled. It

burst. Blood gushed on his feet; entrails swaddled her knees. They jerked flesh from its haunch and gnawed it. Trub dripped from his nose, which made her cackle. He cackled, too, at the rough chunks spattering her chin. They smeared their stained fingers on clumps of dusty moss. They liked it — though, as she noted, “It could have been bigger.” They decided to take charge of making things full.

She assumed responsibility for the organization of vegetables and fruits. She burrowed little squares to store cucumbers apart from blackberries apart from squash apart from persimmons. He came home from trapping pigs and smiled at her structure. She explained, “This way we can choose between so many. We won’t be stuck with potatoes if we want plums. We get to decide.” And usually they did, but, because of how it goes, things rotted, and then a square or two had to be filled in. That was fine. It made compost for his plants.

He built trellises. Tomatoes rose, crookedly. A few of his frames fell. At his troughs, pigs noshed. Clenched together, they snapped at others’ hides or ears. Bit them right off. Once, he tried to stick one back on, slathering a cast of river clay around the tear. The caulking never came close to gluing, but he tried a long time, past the sunset, fiddling with the ratio of earth to water, shoving and shoving the flappy cartilage onto the sullen boar’s scalp.

She, tired of waiting for him, grabbed some celery and dates. The stalk said something, maybe. Maybe it said, “We don’t go together; this won’t taste good.” Maybe she was just imagining that. That was probably it, probably because of how hungry she had gotten. It ached down there, around her pit. What an irritating thing,

so demanding. As if it had any right, as if it knew better what she wanted. She ate more quickly than she could taste. He could find something on his own.

But he didn't. He was angry she hadn't gathered anything for him and angry the ground bins were a long walk away. When he got there, he found them swarmed with flies and bats. He ran back hot. She admitted she hadn't checked them in a few days, maybe five. They saw nothing for eating.

"Where have we gone, oh, where have we gone?" they said, looking out. The tough earth lay flat with dull grass, uninterrupted, unfilled, blotched with long cloud shadows.

Lazy, she ate an fat mushroom the next day. It made her nose blaze and her teeth burn. He stayed next to her and cooled her face with water, but that was just surface relief. When she got better, he yelled at her for being dumb, for being so dumb. "Couldn't you see how it looked like that monster? She's haunting us, hurting us."

"You think everything looks like her. You blame everything on her. You're ashamed of your imperfection, unwilling to work for it."

"Better shame than stupidity. At least I know myself right, and what I can and can't do."

"Tiny."

"Fool."

When he walked off, she tripped him. He tumbled. His hand landed in embers, turning his skin to a sour-smelling gum. They were sorry, they said, and they loved each other. Soon her belly grew, stretching and hurting her pit. When the baby

came, they would understand the pit, but they did not understand their own, not until much later.

Palm wrapped in broad, heavy leaves, he assembled furniture. She dug a firehole and whittled stands to sear the meats he harvested during the days. They made a game of battering slow animals with palm fronds and rocks. Large cats sometimes attacked at nights, so he shaved sharp ends on sticks. First he stashed the lances close at hand, wielding them only if needed. Then he started hounding the cats during the days. Joyously, he slung spears through the hearts of the beasts.

The warmth of the days left. A crust froze on the stream; he hacked holes daily for water. Hard winds swept through the hushed nights. The trees they had planted were too sparse and spare to block the gusts, so he cut them all down and stacked them around the hollow where he and she slept. That worked a bit, but they still woke up with cold noses. He wove long, dry grasses into sheets, his a bit longer than hers. After sundown, they each wrapped a few of these around them each, then tried to sleep. The layers kept the chill a little farther away, and they each hated to come out in the frost-packed morning.

One of them did, though, always. One of them slowly, roughly stoked a fire with slow fingers and creaking knuckles. The crackling coals stirred the quiet, and smoke broke into the sky. They made their life out there.

BELYING BUTTONS (EXIT US)

I'd made my life out there, but now they've trapped me in their chowder-smelling halls. Not just me, so many others. Maybe those deserve it, should be here, withered and thought-free. They need all this. Constant check-ins, dumb-toned voices. Alarms and summons, social hours and therapeutic nonsense. Celled up and led around, grips on my arms like steel cuffs. Never a choice for me here in this institute's cement intestines. Joshua stuck me here. He pulled me north, way up over the river, and now I'm in here, always in

here, now what's this here on my belly? This fleshy keyhole into my belly. Where does it go, what's in it? Seems bored into my lumping skin. They've done this; they're readying to stick in another tube. Well I'll block them, stuff this cave with...these tissues. And cotton. Soft stuff, fluff. Only to protect for now, until I get out. Not to wall up forever what's hidden in its

depths, ah, my deep old cave. Always framed and accented. My touch. Veils of bright bittersweet vines, a doormat of bluegrass. It had a double cavern. Its outer chamber, a frame for a thin, sporty gal. Its inner tomb, an arced passage long as this slender arm. I was slender. I went there, I took things there. What things...my first shoes, the feminist books, coins. It was never empty, it was never full.

"Evening, Miss Jay-Jay. Dinner." Oh, this bitch. Tall and stiff, moving like a can. Smelling like old bark. Picking up books, opening drawers. I still have private

rights here. I know it's not my home, but I still have private rights. Oh, I'll tell her, I will.

"How are you, Miss Jay-Jay?" How am I? How'd you be? How do I look, crumpled in this flimsy bed? "fine."

"You're fine? You say fine? That's good, ma'am. That's good." Picking up clothes, opening doors. Where doesn't she look? Does she ever miss a spot? "All seems fine tonight. You keeping anything? Show me your hands, now."

I'll show you. I'll show you all. We used to feed them all, you know. Maybe not all. Anyone who came, though. Papa had a deal. A quiet one, but they found out. *Bring him a story and a scrap, he'll give you some stew.* I heard the whispers around the Hooverville. They knew that, but not who brought the cash for the hambones and potatoes. Mama wouldn't let Papa join that worm-fighting project. Scared they'd get in his fingers, eat his guts. Not so scared for me, though. I went. I smashed those rocks, I killed those worms. They paid me, I brought it all home. I fed them all, you know. All from my hands. I did it all.

Wait. Is Joshua coming? He might search, too. No. Maybe. Wait. Other meals, other forks to stash after

the meals I fed those people. Used all my worm money. Worth it? Still went to bed hungry. Even with the comfort Papa claimed. *Their warmth, Josephine, their warmth.* Well, at least the blankets he sewed from their swaths warmed us.

Secretly, I saved a dime from every other dollar. Took those to my cave. My brother knew. Couldn't reach it, hands too meaty. Couldn't stop me, feet too slow. Papa said I ran like a fish. *Papa, fish don't run; Exactly; But I run; But it don't look*

like you do — just splash and you're off. Thank you, Papa. You watching? I'm gonna run again, gonna fly

away from everyone, Joshua could run. His coaches would tell me, *Jay, that boy...* and I'd say, *That boy*, and they'd say, *If he'd just stick with it...* and I'd say, *Some boys are bouncy.* Still is. Always taking off, landing somewhere else, hopping back one day then springing away by supertime. A visitor, a vanisher.

That bitch bumps me onto the bed, yanks around the pad that beeps if I roll off. Hate the beeping, hate more the beeping bitch come to turn it off. That usually keeps me on it. She shuts the door. Under my nightshirt I pull out the cotton. I poke my finger into that keyhole. Belly button, that's the term. How far back it's pulled now. Once my lifelink, now a pit. Back some days, to the good ones, it lay between way out and deep in, sitting flat and nubby, just enough into the world, enough back into me. Wish I could have fingernails. Wish I could pry it up, up, and out again, gotta get out, soon I'm

getting out? I asked Papa. *No, we ain't getting out. We ain't leaving. We ain't going to no Oklahoma, no California.* Papa loved Kentucky, but he was the only one. We rest were just loyal. We stayed there straight through that Depression, straight through, straight

along the raised sides of the bedframe. When I can't sleep I draw my finger straight along, trying to keep it in the slight groove. Can't usually do it. Falling away, falling away, soon to be falling asleep. I'd rather have a blanket and a story. That's what Papa got for us. *Bring him a scrap and a story, he'll give you some stew.* I heard the whispers around...oh, did I tell you already?

Damned bright in here. Who's that man? Who is it? Don't smile at me. Stay back.

I can't crawl anywhere. Where's that bitch when you need her?

"Hi, Mama. Did you have a nightmare?" I am having a nightmare, creep.

Wait. Joshua. Oh, son, son. "josh." I wish I could grin all the way.

"I know you don't want their breakfast. This here's mutton, chopped down so you don't have to chew much. Plenty of sauce. You want more?"

God knows how those Carolinians settled on pork when lamb was around. Let 'em have that faint tang, that stringy goop. Give me the firm, tongue-spongy mutton. Or this soup of it. Still got the smoky, springy flavor I've always known. Joshua remembers. He comes back, at least. At last.

Hours here go in blotches. Some spots of time, this old mind machine works and I can make thoughts. Some spots fall blank, spans of sparse existence. Like how, when your leg under a blanket falls asleep, you wonder if it's still there. Happens to my soul, trapped within me. Am I? Oh, I am. But I must be reminded, I must remind. I must run again; home is ever flying away. Most of the day is tenuous.

No, bitch, that's Joshua's teacup. Yes, it's gaudy, but you don't understand. Leave it. Leave it. And you, too, go and

leave, don't leave me, Joshua. *Listen, mama*, he said all those years ago, *just listen. Go*, I said, *just go, go down to Nashville*. I never thought he'd stay gone. Just

seventeen. Tired of Mama's chores, Mama's voice, Mama's distance, providing and that's it. *But don't you ever forget your granddad's stories about how we kept it together in Kentucky.*

And he said nothing. And I gave him nothing to go on, not even a map. Do you see me like that? Harsh like that bitch, providing but cold? I am not that.

"This is real pretty, Miss Jay-Jay. You paint this?"

Give it to me. Give to me. The cool glazed rims and ridges, lemon trimmed edges.

"You wanna hold it? When did you make this? You sure you can hold this?"

Wrap my finger around the handle. There. Pulling it in, pulling it in. Another finger. Joshua's, Joshua's. Let go. Let me. Let —

"Oh shit, Miss Jay-Jay. Shit."

Its splinters spit outward in a line. That bitch. That bitch, mumbling, thinks I can't hear, "Woman couldn't even hold a toothpick now."

Bitch. But she's right. I'm afraid my hands have gone. I'm sorry for that, Joshua, but it will help me, will distract them. They won't look closely later. They won't find the fork. They won't stop me this time. I'll get home. Start the potpourri, the boiled beans.

That bitch thinks, while I'm napping, she can rearrange everything. Flowers on the TV now. If I want to look at the TV, it's to watch TV. If I want to see flowers, I'll look at flowers. Why confuse it. Lines my shoes beneath the heater. Folds my robe over the chair. Straightens the doily on my tea table. Sets some garish new cup

on it. Touches, touches, meddles. Can't just let me be. I am; I can, I can run and run. Last week when I tried to run, they caught me before the door. I just want to make it back to my own place. I know they'll find me, but I'll make them pluck me out, yank me by

my arms with his big hands, Papa pulled me from my cave. He was weak, and Mama had grown frail. *I know what you got in there, girl.* He pulled me out, shoved in his hand. Couldn't even tickle the coins. *Just ask*, I said. He reached harder, farther. *Just ask.* He still didn't, but the way his grimace tugged his cheeks down — well, that was as close to a question as he would go.

Here, I said, reaching in. I remember now; I called that cave my belly button. *All what you want.*

You're the reason we can stay here. But then Joshua didn't stay. *Listen, Mama*, he said all those years ago. *Just listen; Go*, I said. *Just go.* I never thought —

“Miss Jay-Jay, you want some lunch?”

Sure, but you haven't got any lunch here. But fine, go ahead, bring me a tray of whatever mush. “yes.”

“Here. Just take what you want.” That bitch keeps standing there. What, you think it's funny how I eat? You want me to spill? “Miss Jay-Jay, what do you want?”

What would you want? “home.”

“Don't I know it.” She sits on the bed. She puts a hand on my knee, puts a hand on my hand, holds, stops the shaking. She has maple eyes, a smell of bittersweet berries. “My mama used to tell me nice stories. You want to hear one?”

As if I have a choice. She chatters on about a poor but happy family, some mom and dad trying to raise their two kids, two

sons. I had a son. I, alone. The man had long run off. *We'll make it, Joshua,* I told my boy. I took him to my cave, but I'd plumped too big for it. I set him in, watched him poke his arm in the curving hole, his tongue wiggling out. *Get it, Joshua. Get what you can.* Then I'd fret and stop him, imagining copperheads and centipedes, rusty nails and razors. But he never hit those. Only moss bits, a wayward sprout, crickets.

I had another son. I, alone. I told the man it was a daughter, hoped it was. It wasn't, but he'd split before seeing. The boys never played like I wanted. Franklin would sit by himself. It was a game, a dare. I refused to bend. I let him sit for over a day once. *Well, go in the basement if you won't clean up. That's where things just sit around.* I'd hand him a chair, he'd trudge on down.

Joshua, go talk to your brother, I said on a day Franklin seemed highly sullen. Heard Joshua say a word or two, walk right back up. *What a poor effort, Joshua. You didn't even try.* He scowled. *Mama, he's sleeping.* I scowled back. *Boy, no he's not.* How right we both were.

The red was huge around the bite. I carried him to the cave, I curled him in its bed. I scooped the earth, pressed the earth onto the wound, pressed the wound into the earth, praying the good earth would suck it all out. Joshua asked, *Can I help?* I said, *He's just real tired.*

Listen, Mama. Just listen, Joshua said a decade later. *I'm real tired here, but I'll make it big. I'll make it for you. I'll get my chance and I'll take all care of you.*

Go. Just go. You don't need to do any of that for me. Because it was easiest that way.

You see, you dumb bitch. Everyone leaves, you just ache and die. You'll know it. You've seen it. Home — don't you call this a home? Aren't I your family? — tells no nice stories in the end. And still I cry to go there.

What feels bad is that Franklin never got a chance to do anything, to make a story. Then again, he never seemed to want to try. And I saw how that worked out, so I won't be like that, not even now. Now maybe my chance is gone, but I don't think so. I'm leaving this place, going back to my own. I'll sit there, curled up, and say, *Here I am*. You can watch, but I won't care. Then I'll say, *Here I was*. And whatever you want to say, fine. I'll be gone. Everyone leaves.

Some days I feel I have. Some days I wake up, mouth stuck with dried phlegm, shellacked. These shaking fingers rip my lips apart. Some days I've slept on my hand. It won't move until evening. Some days I'm fine, and I walk and think of running. But the next day's not like that. Everything leaves me.

Except when I want something to leave. Bitch comes in and looks at me. "Now let's get you out of that knot you wound yourself in." She turns me on my side, pulls out my elbow, cranks up the bed. Feels better. "I can always tell when someone needs me. Lord knows it happens enough. Don't know how we'd make it if He hadn't given me that instinct." Bitch brags. "But you don't need me much, Miss Jay-Jay. You got your breaks and your bends, but I don't think those run deep." Doesn't

stop her from stepping in hour after hour, lurching me into that nasty bathroom, folding and folding, arranging and arranging.

Though otherwise, it'd be everything the same, one scene unaltered. Just paint it under my eyelids, get me ready for sleep all the time. But no. Still got change, a sort of movement. Reminds me I can move, too. Her back is turned, my time is now. I get the fork, press it on my belly, knock down the tray. "Miss Jay-Jay, you..." She groans as she bends, grabs all the spill. A guy comes with a mop. They fuss over if he missed any. She turns a photo my way. I frame a smile as she steps toward me and pats my hand. "Mm-hmm. Be back at bedtime."

I know. You always come back, tender in the night, no pillbox rattling, just fingers curling blankets around my sides. I remember her soft tucks, gentle as a girl child. A surge of appreciation gives me a moment of real speech. "Thank you. For all you do for me." I try to squeeze her fingers.

"Ha, and now you're acting sweet. Don't you worry about that spill. I don't hold a grudge. Can't fool me into being nicer. I just am." Oh, let me leave. Everyone gets to leave. I want my turn.

After lunch the next day I tell that bitch I want to nap. She smiles, leaves me on my big chair. After five minutes I stand, fork in hand. Peek down the hall, step out alone. From the inside I push the button to lock the door, then from the outside I snap off two plastic tines in the keyhole. That'll stop them awhile, leave them looking dumb, staring

in silence, Joshua and Papa looked at each other. Finally, I'd gotten them back together, years after Joshua had left. Finally, Joshua said, *I'll come to town for one night, Mom*. Papa had been easy to track down, kind as ever. Joshua, though, he didn't even try. Papa asked a couple of open questions, Joshua gave small answers. I left the room but listened through the wall. Nothing. He didn't even try. Before evening had set down, he'd left.

Sun on my head! What a feeling. A breeze whistles my hair. Across the street, boys playing ball. Think I'll go to them.

Even once I'm into the park, they seem so far. I'm still in the dirt diamond opposite their field. Gusts puff dust up in my eyes. I shield them, but the grit stings. I can't look forward. I feel like I'm spinning. I fall. Hard earth scrapes my hand. I bend my head into my arm to hide from the wind, and it feels dark but the sun keeps heating me and heating me, burning

my fingers on the pot one night, I cried. Papa came over and said, *Don't you touch that, Josephine*. I asked why not. *That's just my job. You just leave it to me. Go on out and play awhile with the kids*. I couldn't. I wanted to work, to make things better, to bring upturn to us, our lives. I stayed in and stirred.

Thirty years later, with two sons, one dead, one gone, I burned the same fingers right on their tips and remembered that night. I sat on the floor and shut my eyes, buried my face between my knees. I ran those same fingers down my cheek, my neck, feeling

a will for my past girl self to leave that fire, to go out. Go play. Go climb a wall. Go make a story, a game. She steps her way up easily. She laughs. Now, mark

a few spots, call them forbidden. She climbs again. Now, try with one hand. She climbs again. Now look down, look behind, and see the boys watching, and show them how to climb, arise. Show them, stay with them, raise them. But where are the other girls?

I hear chirpy voices. Small boys are talking at me. “What are you doing in the dirt?” “Are you OK?” “Who are you?” Little boys, little boys. Tufts of hair like my boys. Grow up, little boys. I must tell them!

I tell them, “I’m just fine, young’uns. You go mind your game. Play it, remember it,” as I push and rise up, “and tell your sons. Mind your games.” Small red faces, looking up at me, small blue eyes, full of wonder and pupils, holes to fresh spirits. “Mind your moms.”

The questions keep coming. “Did you see my hit?” “Why are you wearing that dress?” “Where did you come from?” Boys, you need to listen to me! You need to listen to me. I try to tell them, but my damn brain slips away again, and I can’t make the words work.

Their parents stand around. Looking at me. I brush them off with a wrist flick. Go on. Leave me be. Moms and dads scoop their sons, nestle them back to the other field. I stand and watch, or I try to, but suddenly I can’t tell a thing that’s happening. Noise and an occasional shout, but none of it has any order. What was I doing here anyway.

A cab. “Where you going, Ma’am?”

Home. Home. My old Kentucky home. “kentucky.”

“Kentucky? I ain’t going to no Kentucky. Find someone else.” I don’t get up. The big man slops his butt out of his seat, comes around and lugs me out. “You ain’t going to no Kentucky. Where you supposed to be? Get back there. I oughta call someone on you.” Don’t. Don’t. I’m going home. If not that, to my son. I point at a map. He lets me closer, and I press my finger into Joshua’s neighborhood.

“OK, now. Now we’re talking. Address?” I can’t remember. “A street?” Nothing to say. “Just somewhere around there? That’ll do.”

All these houses look the same. White fronts, concrete steps, swaths of brick. Not unlike the house Papa finally found for us. Too few bedrooms, but we fit. I had to be on the floor. *Take this pillow, only daughter*, Papa said, *and sleep here*. At the foot of his bed he spread a towel over the wood floor. Each day, he laid the towel on the radiator until it was night, then folded and spread it for me, a morsel of warmth to help me sleep and dream. He never did that for my brothers. *My only daughter*. I wonder how that felt.

It could have been any of these. I pick one. Why not this one?

“Hey now, hold up, this ain’t no charity cab.”

“son pays.”

“Where’s he at?” Here. I hope. I push the doorbell button, hoping. “That ain’t ringing. Push harder.” The cabbie pounds the door.

“Hi folks, can I help you?”

“looking...home.”

“This your momma?”

The man turns back inside. “Honey, it’s some old lady. I think she’s lost.

What’s your name?”

Not lost. Going home. “home.”

“So this ain’t your momma? She owes me fare. Someone gotta pay.”

“Why did you come here?”

Mistake. They mustn’t know. “old place. see it again.”

“No, we’ve always owned this. Before us, my parents owned it.”

“You gonna pay for this? Someone gotta pay for this.”

“joshua.”

The man tells us to step inside. He and the cab driver argue, I can’t tell about what. I try to tell them that Joshua will pay. He will pay. He always pays. They don’t understand what I mean. The man gives the cabbie some cash, the cabbie stomps out.

“You want me to take you home?” He turns to his wife. “Poor woman. Think she means Josh Nelson? I’m going to drive her over there.” He stoops to look me in the eye and puts up some baggy grin. “Come on, now, you’ve found the finest chauffeur around. We’ll get you anywhere you want. On this earth, at least. Need a special driver to get you above or below.” And a wink. I raise my hand to smack that clowny face, but he’s already turned away.

What if Joshua’s not there? Doesn’t matter. It will be a home. He may be gone, but he’ll return, hungry, and I’ll have a pot of pea soup waiting on the stove. I’ll carry it to him with toast and napkins and a cold beer. He’ll eat it all, and we’ll play rummy to a thousand, and he’ll say, *Ma, I think I’ll take tomorrow off*. The place

will be neither warm nor cool; it will be solid and strong, simply there, simply near, eternal like a cave, subsistent like a cave, and us as its tiny, odd prehistoric animals that dwell deep, sightless, ever-present.

He's here, but he's not happy. "Mother. What are you doing."

"joshua. hold me."

He doesn't. He goes to the phone, calls that prison, tells them I'm with him, to come get me. I sit in a chair. What could I say to him? It's too late anyway.

His living room has a spare decor. Even Papa, simple Papa, always kept things on the walls, on shelves. *The home must be heavy*, he'd tell me, *with things and people*. But Joshua is a traveler. The chairs are lean, bare blocky legs. Tables without carvings. A woman wouldn't allow this. One-color plates and cups. Suave, single. Maybe I wouldn't even want to be here. No man ever got me. Not even a basement.

I'd point to a chair, but he'd just trudge on out. *Mama, you need sleeping; Boy, no I don't*. How wrong we'd both be.

They talk around me. I hear you all!

"Mr. Nelson, with her heart's state plus this hot adventure, it won't be long. She doesn't want to stay in her room." Someone speaks for me, finally. "Could she finish it here?"

"I have work. I travel."

“With flexibility, right? Arrange a few weeks working here? It won’t be long.”

“What’s the point? Does she know anything? What difference does it make?”

“She doesn’t want to stay in her room.”

“Up her limit. Buy whatever she wants. Clothes, food — she likes mutton barbecue.”

“That’s really not it.”

“I can’t.”

No, I’m the one who can’t. Can’t take it, do it, leave it. Can’t anything. Not anymore. I earned this. Thought I was such a good daughter, then became hardly a mother. Gave him no more than needed. Then let him go; what need did he have of me by then? What duty does he now have? He’s taken care of himself, and me, now. Life is fair, and he’s doing fine, right? And I didn’t, right? *Go. Just go. You don’t need to do any of that for me. A lie.*

He drives me back.

“joshua. family.”

He huffs. “Mother. I’m the only family now.” I know, oh, I know. “I don’t have time to come around.”

“yours.”

“Mine? You always think I need one. As if I’m wasting my life because I haven’t made a handful of whelps to run around and leech off me. I’m a working,

living man. I do a great job, and I provide. For me, for you, for the places I give money. Frankly, the world needs more like me.” And fewer like me, right?

“yes. exactly.”

“What do you know about it. About me or the world.” I’ve known you both so long. “Whatever you know, we’re not that anymore.”

“home.”

“It’s about time you went there. I’ve long paved your way.”

I’ll show you my new room. They let me pick it. Number 8, on the corner. New section, away from that bitch. She still stops in. Joshua came to help me move. He gave me a hug, and I apologized for being a burden. I don’t know if he accepted. I don’t call him anymore. He’s too busy scouting some promised land. Anyway, they give me all what I ask for, I guess.

Bitch enters. “So, Miss Jay-Jay, nice new digs. You like them?” Yes, it’s nice. “That son of yours sure sets you up. You must have raised him well.” I raised him. And I don’t need anything from you. But you stay a moment. I’ll show you.

She adjusts a picture Joshua left. It had been crooked. She turns a wreath of bittersweet, gets the berry clusters on the bottom. She has a touch. Your mama showed you that? I would’ve, too.

Here, my couch. They vacuum its pillows and cracks daily. You could sit there or in my chair, though I’m usually in it. Authentic leather now. Those flowers come on Tuesdays in assorted vases. They offer to vary the arrangements. I like lilies’ scent best. Might get an indoor windowbox, which I could tend, herbs and

such. That table, hand-lathed back in the 20s. Look at the curves on the posts. Don't usually sit at it, though. The dinner trays fit on my chair. Hold on, just a moment more. You can leave soon.

Here, a button to adjust the bed. A button to change the TV. A button to call someone and they come running. Like whenever I'm hungry. A button to switch out the lights, or switch them on. A button to give me morphine. My button, swollen over. It fed me life in my mother's cave, I gave life out from under it, and here it stays with me, shriveling. Here, me, this shape and dented brain — these are my returns, buttoned up from toes to hands to lips. Now I'm in here, still.

THE RULE OF ST. BENEDICT (BOOKS OF LAW)

The monk's diet is extremely plain, but is ordinarily enough to keep a man healthy for long years, and monks traditionally die of old age.

—Thomas Merton, *The Sign of Jonas*

His goddamned back. If he were stronger, if he were smarter about bodily maintenance, his bones would not be creaking. Doesn't matter if that's what they do at his age. Doesn't have to be so.

As the abbey bell rings, calls, rings, calls, Brother Francis lurches from his straw-padded pallet and places his feet flat on the cold stone of his square cell. He slides his heavy white robe over his lean nakedness, pulls on his black-hooded scapular, and firmly cinches his broad brown belt. In the still January pre-dawn, he hurts, but he pulls his shoulders back, pulls them up. He prays, (God, pull me up, too, to You.) The cloister is dark, but he knows he knows the way. It is straight.

Entering the sanctuary's dominating silence, he turns to the altar and bows low. Pain flares; he bows lower. Rising, he does not wince. He crosses himself, folds into his pew box like a bee into its comb, and sits until the abbot's knock commences Vigils.

Sitting, reciting Psalms, Brother Francis feels pain, hunger, restlessness. He feels stiff. It was never like this when he first joined. Eager and fit, he was sure he'd become clean. Not instantly, not even within a few years, but a decade, yes, that would purify him. He chanted hard then, exuberant to taste each word and swallow

it, confident the litany of verses would course his soul and clean it out. Freed, he would float through the cloister's halls with the lightest strides. But over three decades he has mastered the life of rigor; it is now familiar, and what yet can he strive for?

Brother Francis returns to his cell. His shoulders on the floor and his heels on the pallet, he flexes his spine and holds. Static hurt lights up the rent fibers but does not pulse or sear. The injury is muscular, not vertebral. He relaxes slowly, then flexes and holds. He relaxes slowly, then flexes and holds. Nothing else moves. He presses his gaze into a crucifix. That one suffered, submitted, and held. That one was an upright man.

Brother Francis goes to his desk to meditate on St. Paul's letters.

But I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified. (1 Cor 9:27)

I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified. I punish my body and enslave it, so that after proclaiming to others I myself should not be disqualified. So that I myself should not be disqualified. Not be disqualified. I punish my body and enslave it. Punish and enslave it. Punish and enslave it. Not be disqualified.

A link, a bond between mastery and perfection. Paul, a Jew of Jews, mastered his body. He knew the rules, the route to righteousness. One must be a master or be mastered. Must have only one Master. The body lies between man and God. It must be replaced. Must be re-placed. Not be disqualified.

Enslave it. Punish it. Must do physical labor, essential work. No indulgence. Not even making indulgence — no more fruitcakes, no more fudge. Not be disqualified by indulgence.

Have let self be disqualified, have failed to be master, have been weak master. Again, as when out in the dirty, bent world. Must punish and enslave body that was given. Will be stronger. Will be straighter. Will not be disqualified. Amen, Master, God my God.

After the sung Psalms of Lauds and the Eucharist of Mass, Brother Francis hustles next to Abbot Pastor, pulls him away from the few dozen monks receiving breakfast: buttered cream of wheat, rye toast, an egg or two, boiled.

I want to switch my labor. I must. My body must be put to work.

Your body is no longer young.

It lives. It wants to be in the fields, or cleaning. It wants needed work.

Perhaps Anthony will want to switch. His back is growing tired.

We grow tired if we let ourselves.

Well.

I live our Rule well. I want to live it more fully, in pain.

St. Benedict's Rule, not ours.

God's, not St. Benedict's.

In late March, the insipid sky spits after the morning Terce prayers. Brother Francis sets his hood far forward so only his nose gets nipped by the chilled drizzle.

(God, shield me.) The cold Lake Michigan wind pushes his habit into his back as he looks east. Lightly leafed cherry orchards drape the land. A lake there, another there. The waters are guarded by hills, but he knows they are there, they have ever been there. He swam and splashed in them when he was young and August brought heat for a week or so. How late he would stay in the water, hiding his shivers, insisting in the dusk that he felt fine.

The sun's crown bleaches the horizon. Brother Francis grips a trowel and a burlap bag and moves toward the thin strips of garden that will provide much of the monks' summer meals: tomatoes, zucchini, radishes, corn. Good food, plain food. The beds look like dark, whole soil, but Brother Francis knows bits of weeds are creeping beneath and between the clumps. He kneels and looks over the first plot.

A spot of crabgrass, tossed into the sack. Dandelion sprouts, tossed into the sack. He plucks with his fingers, pinching down and under to uproot fully. Done timely, this is easy, if tedious. Just needs method and focus. Brother Francis works for mastery and control and a clean garden. (God, weed my distracting urges.) His fingertips become tender with dew, and they burn for warmth. (My ears burn for Your words.)

As he crawls to the next plot, his back seizes. He tries sitting, using one arm as support, but the imbalance is aggravating. He lies on his stomach, but extending his arms stretches too much. He returns to his knees and tries to go quickly. He wants to negate the pain and pull with absolute attention. He wants to hear God as he works, but he doesn't. He asks to hear God, but he doesn't. Oh, he of little faith. He

slaps the dirt and slaps his thigh and decides to listen now. (I am listening now.) But his back...

His body is separating him from the bodiless God. He feels disqualified after aiming for ardor again.

Decades ago in Chicago, he was walking into a movie theatre, telling a young lady about the Cherry Bowl Drive-In, wildly in love with her. Do they serve popped cherries instead of popcorn? she asked cheerily; That'd be indecent. Are all the films about bowling?

He laughed, as usual, and didn't need to reply; she filled in the details, imagined them: No, it's just a tall screen in a flat bit of the orchard region, huh? He nodded and squeezed her fingers — they were newly engaged, and he liked to feel the ring.

He liked to feel her upper leg, its fullness beneath her long, loose skirt. He lost track of the movie, schemed ways to slip the fabric up her skin, inch by inch, pretending to be idly rubbing until — there — his finger slipped onto her real knee, up to her real thigh, and up, and up.

She shooed him down, but passively and with a slight smile beneath her facade of scorn.

I made you cake, he whispered, so let's not wander out and about after this. She waited on his couch while he doused the old slices in whiskey to freshen them, to relax her. They drank cans of beer and ate with their hands, and he was wildly in love. His hand found its way in, more quickly this time, more insistent. She smiled at his rising touch, and he rolled onto her.

She was mumbling. It sounded a little urgent, he thought, but he continued his progress and pushed into her. She tightened up all over, then, after a few rubs, loosened and meshed with his rhythms. They finished, enthralled, and in the morning she had something to say.

I was resisting.

I thought you liked it.

I did, but I was resisting.

I was just trying to show you love.

You did, but you didn't listen to me.

—

It's okay. I forgive you.

Her mercy stiffened his sense of boundaries, obliged him to heed her limits. He kissed with dry, tight lips. He touched with limp fingers. Hating how he had been wrong in delighting her, he didn't dare pine for that sort of satisfaction — for her or for him. But he did pine. On the El he saw a brunette's heavy bra, and he wanted it, and in Columbus Park he saw a runner's lean navel, and he wanted it, and he began to hate his fiancée. Why couldn't she make it easy? He lost satisfaction, and, both of them pretending and halfway hoping it was a mere retreat, he left.

Brother Francis leaves the weeds. He must prepare to sing at Sext, the midday service built to rescue a day from slumping into perdition. He sits in the sanctuary before the bell calls all the monks. The tall walls' damp, stony scent settles him, and he breathes steadily. Attention must be paid.

The monks file in. The abbot raps his crozier. They rise to sing praise and chant Psalms. As the organ sounds the tone progression for the antiphon, Brother Francis hums quietly. He wavers up and down, then settles on the keynote. Some brothers merely cough. Others do nothing. Do they even sing? Do they relax some Hours? Brother Francis pities them. They don't know the joy of inhabiting the plaintive intonations.

When the Psalm begins, his voice flies sharp a half-step. (Tune me.) No one notices, but still he quiets himself. The next Psalm, he goes too low at the verses' ends. He focuses harder, looks harder at the notes and the words, but he keeps missing.

Do not let anything devoted to destruction stick to your hand, so that the Lord may turn from his fierce anger and show you compassion.
(Deut 13:17)

Do not let anything devoted to destruction stick to your hand. Do not let anything devoted to destruction stick to your hand. Not be disqualified.

What is devoted to destruction now? Desires that pull eyes downward. Tastes that turn thoughts self-ward. Anything not directed upward to the Lord's compassion. Oh, turn from anger; heal, please.

Bent back — the wages of destruction, indulgence of wants. Anything not for building is destroying — ornamentation, frills. Think of the plain chapel, the unpainted halls. Devoted solely to construction.

Will cut whims, pleasures. Will construct, will make a good garden. Will not even look away from being built up, up. Amen, Master, God my God.

In May comes the time for planting. Brother Francis gathers pails of seeds. A novice, Louis, comes to him.

Brother Francis, I have many desires.

That's too bad for you.

How can I win?

You just have to go above.

How did you?

I decided.

I've tried to run from them. No, I tried first to build walls. Now I've run behind these walls. Wants won't leave me alone.

Maybe this is not the life for you. Maybe you aren't strong enough to live without.

But I want to be.

But are you?

I want to be.

Brother Francis looks at him. Very lean, a thin beard on his young face that should not have been grown. A shaved head. Tiny ears. Brother Francis can imagine how the boy must have struggled to get what he wanted, with his strange face and tinny voice. Did he ever taste the feminine? Is that what he once wanted? Wants still?

I want to be.

It's up to you. Be it.

Abbot Pastor said I don't get to decide. I was made a monk or not.

Make yourself. Stand up. But stay humble, work in the dirt.

Brother Francis doubts this boy belongs in the monastery, but he doesn't belong to the world either, so here he is, submitting to all the rules. Brother Francis invites him to help seed the garden, assures him it will be allowed. The boy comes.

When he fled Chicago, he went home symbolically: the long way through Milwaukee, Green Bay, and the small lake towns of the Upper Peninsula. It felt important to cross a bridge after a long drive, and the sparse span across the Straits of Mackinac implied the cleavage he sought.

It didn't work. Roots of desire did not perish, but stayed in him despite his expectations that they would wither. In Traverse City, left alone, they grew. Tourist season spurred them up; he'd sit near the beach on a Monday and look for ladies looking lost, cautious but confident in knowing they were already there for casual leisure. He'd give them directions, make a recommendation, happen to see her there later, have his tongue between her thighs by the weekend. It was easy, easy when she was already there on a spree, easy when she left after a week, and easy to see how flimsy the pleasure was. And yet, he dreaded September when they would stop coming. What if he had to try harder? What if he couldn't find someone up for the quick fun? What if they were plain local girls? He deserved gratification, having not known it so long. By mid-July he was making sure to snare at least two separate series of trysts each week — indeed, that was the bare minimum.

The boy never speaks, not even when Brother Francis stops, stands, grunting as he rises, and stretches his back. But he looks, and Brother Francis feels ashamed. The boy is stronger than he'd thought. Brother Francis is not. Brother Francis stoops again and scoops a mound, scooting around it on his knees, trying, oh, trying not to slouch, but his back keeps crying. (May my tongue cry Your name always.) At five spots around the mound, he places pairs of zucchini seeds in inch-deep holes. Bending to cover the seeds, he spasms and pitches forward. His left arm barely catches him before he flops flat.

The boy is watching, surely. (Watch my ways and correct me.) Brother Francis pushes himself up and uses his other hand to neatly cover the seeds. He waits for a minute, his eyes stuck on the mound. He rises and tightens his jaw so as not to betray the pain pulsing up his spine. He stands. The plot has room for another few plantings. He would have to squat again.

Well, Louis. These need to be watered.

I'll go get it. You just stay here.

No, I can. I will. It's good for me.

You are hurt. Let me work. Thrusting my hands into the sun-warmed soil gives me shivers and joy.

Brother Francis begins to object, We are supposed to be recognizing how paltry we are — but he stops, pats Louis's back, and gestures at the pail of seeds.

As soon as he gets into the store room he sits onto a stepladder, resting heavily back on its arched grip. He sees the watering can, and his arm imagines how it will weigh. His back imagines how it will swing the body's balance. Too much, perhaps.

(Your burden is never too much.) It sends a shiver of warning. He sits for some minutes, and one more, and one more. Then he moves. (Free me from my body.)

He doesn't remember her name, and maybe he never knew it. He'd seen her Illinois plates, complimented her taste, suggested she must be from a big city. Indeed, she visited from Chicago each August, she said. She said he was more sophisticated than these northern Michigan yokels. He told her he'd always lived in Chicago and only knew Traverse City from past summer visits. She talked obviously, discussing her troubles in finding fitting shirts on account of the significant size in her breasts.

Then they were in his room, shirtless. He couldn't help grabbing the swells of loose, pale flesh on her sides, pulling it. It was delicious, and he thought he had found his taste. She clenched when he clutched; he realized he was displeasing her. He looked up with the quiet smile that he'd learned could melt reluctance, and he unbuttoned her jeans, tugged down her emerald bikini. It was smooth and beautiful, and he wanted only to work just as elegantly — emeraldly. There, he nuzzled her.

She moaned, Oh, oh, oh, like a bell. Her body fluttered. He had done it, but he had not been done. She lay, silent; her hands held her breasts; she did not move to touch him. He felt alone and stable.

Do you want, she started, her hand reaching, but he, feeling safe in his performance, was shaking his head. He walked her to her car, swearing to remember that people were always a trap.

In the kitchen, he fills the can high to preclude another trip. As he turns down the smooth stone hallway toward the rear door, water splashes on his habit, soaks the sock beneath his sandal. He looks down at it as he leans his shoulder into the door which gives way fast. Stumbling forward, he bumps the monk who had been walking in, and he twists around, the watering can yanking him by the arm in an unglorious arc. Brother Francis wonders who else hears the lumbar pop.

The can lies on its side. Its water leeches into a white fold of Brother Francis's habit. The rest of the hem flips in the wind, but Brother Francis is still. He hears novices shouting. In the long, spring grass they are kicking a soccer ball. A leg extends, stretching a habit in a rippling arc, greeting the ruddy old ball and sending it flying. Beneath its path, Louis leaps, launching his baton-straight body upward and outward, meeting the ball at a crosspoint, and thwapping it past a flailing novice guarding two chairs simulating a goal. All of them, even the scored on, rejoice.

Brother Francis looks up at a high cloud. How fast it slides through the air, now blocking light, now allowing it. (Save me from shadows as before.)

September did come, and so did his ex-fiancée, hopeful that his invitation signaled a successful retreat. His urges were ready for her small, slim body, and this time she was not resistant. He finished and rolled off her.

So you just go at it and get it done.

I thought you enjoyed it.

I did, but did you notice *me*?

He hadn't. She stayed a month to solidify her presence. They went to Mass as they had before; they argued about symbology — unimportant compared to actions; no, essential and soulful. And they tried several more times, always ending with him pushing down into her, eyes squeezed tight in concentration to get that fiercest friction and squeeze. His lust had grown tough and stale and practical, unpleasant except at the point of satiation.

They were driving without destination on Benzie County roads, wondering if they could grow back together. He intended to sit staring straight the entire time, not once peeking at her in want. But when he leaned the seat back, he could glimpse the impress on her sweater of her right breast. It was a fine one, and he knew the other was as fine. He pulled the seat lever and sat up.

You've been resisting again. Did I ever please you?

Well, you do have a good tongue.

Did it ever get better?

Did it for you?

Sometimes I pretend you're someone new.

So you've made up your mind, too. A life of promiscuity.

No. I'm cutting it all out.

They passed the monastery he had so often seen in his youth. He asked if she would drop him off there in a few days. She could keep the car.

The Abbey of the Incarnation's high walls had impressed and scared him as a boy; he had imagined not monks within, but monsters, fashioning machines to strip fun from the landscape. He thought the grounds must be flat and monochromatic,

perhaps unseeded dirt and rubble. He and a few friends had visited it one day on a ploy, excused from their Catholic high school by the credulous headmaster. The friends had joked that the dour-looking men were probably just too dumb to talk, had mocked the less-than-dulcet tones of their songs. But he had noticed the deep bows and perfect postures of the monks entering the sanctuary to chant, their settled steps gliding to their places. Their prescribed movements, not perfunctory but intentional, seemed to rise. Even when they stood still they had the air of ascent. And the gardens —

She left him at the monastery gate and grabbed his hand through the car window to request an intercession.

Pray for me and my spirit and for this whole dirty, bent world.

He kissed her cheek. She hadn't washed it. He had been so close to her lips, and she had driven away so quickly. Then no one was there. All the monks were singing at Sext, preparing their steady souls to work in the earth, apart from the earth.

Sometimes he remembers her, or one or another. But he always shuts those doors and returns into himself.

Soon, soon he will be well and able to comb the ground again.

The Abbot arranges it so that one novice, usually Louis, works the garden under Brother Francis's orders. Brother Francis watches from a chair and directs as sparingly as possible. He likes being outside in the bright Michigan spring afternoons, but he itches to have his hands in the dirt. He deserves it. He does not deserve to be disqualified. He is a good gardener; some things can't be taught or

made, must just be done; he should be guiding the shoots from the bed, up, up. (May I be raised.)

He has patience in the growing warmth, and he meditates on how to prepare himself to labor again.

On the tenth day of this seventh month you shall have a holy convocation and deny yourselves; you shall do no work. (Num 29:7)

You shall have a holy convocation and deny yourselves; you shall do no work.

A holy convocation, deny yourselves, do no work. Deny yourselves, do no work.

A day for atonement, a time for all things, a time for no work. Still do spiritual work? Yes, the work of denial. Holy convocation of self. Release outer things, embrace inner. Consume less. Be consumed by holiness. Holy convocation with God alone.

A day for denial, all days for denial. To deny: indulgence, taste, evasions, ease, clinging destruction. Will deny these, obliterate the past, look only forward. Will begin the convocation; may it never end. Amen, Master, God my God.

In the early summer the tomatoes have grown. Brother Francis looks at them proudly as Louis hunts weeds beneath the vines. They'll need more cages than they had thought. The Abbot lets Brother Francis leave the abbey to get more.

He might have forgotten the way to the hardware store in Honor. It's on US-31, but he had thought it was south of Benzonia. He rounds a big bend, and the road curls down the hill. Beulah, definitely too far. He turns around beneath The Cherry Hut's grinning pie sign: inverted Vs for eyes and nose, crescent smile,

scalloped edge. It reminds him of a cackling jack-o-lantern. A pie-o-lantern, mocking his loss of direction.

Maybe it was M-115. He veers onto it, but when he hits Thompsonville's little airfield, he realizes that this way, too, is all wrong. He returns to 31 and stops at The Cherry Hut. As he enters the restaurant, the hostess beams the same eerie grin as the pie-o-lantern. Brother Francis nearly backs out. Her red-white striped shirt is too small; her breasts' heave raises its hem above her pantsline. A crest of skin creeps out from beneath it.

Are you one of them monks?

Yes. I'm lost.

OK.

How do I get to Honor from here?

Oh, you're real close. Just keep on 31 North. It'll be a bit after that big bend up there, just past the Cherry Bowl.

Thank you. I should have known that.

Want some pie?

No, thank you.

It's real good. Hot.

I don't eat sweets.

Everybody eats sweets. Every body demands it.

In three minutes he's at the hardware store. Why couldn't he have had faith in knowing the way? At least a bit more patience. He snatches some stacked tomato cages.

Good afternoon, brother.

Hello.

I didn't know you did tomatoes there. When can we get some fruit of the spirit?

We grow them just for our meals.

Ah. But send out candy for the heathen, huh?

We abstain so you can indulge.

Fair trade. You don't ever sneak a bite?

It's not disallowed. But no, I don't.

I must say, your cherry fudge has something that makes it worth extra days in purgatory.

—

I'm kidding, brother. Fudge isn't a sin, I know.

Anything can be a sin. It's a dangerous, crooked world.

Amen. Need anything else?

Could you tell me the time?

Just after two.

Brother Francis would miss the None service. He had gotten lost and would miss it. He hurries, still, and pitches the cages in the back of the truck.

Here, brother, let's tie those down.

It takes eternity. But as they strap the cords through the steel rods and cinch them, Brother Francis lets his heart unwind and embrace the careful tying. (Bind me to You.) The small work with his hands doesn't bother his back at all. He can't make

it for None, so he drives slowly, tries to remember these roads he knew so well, that stream that flowed soft and slow and warm.

He stops at The Cherry Hut again to ask how to get to the Betsie River. Walking in, he fears his diversion is wanton leisure, devoted to destruction. No, it is construction; he is rebuilding an old bit of his self, a part of his past free of contortions or complications or destructions. The girl smiles as she reworks her ponytail.

Back for that pie, huh?

No, just wondering how to find the Betsie.

Well, that's a long question. I know lots of ways. What part do you want?

The girl turns away and bends over. She grabs a dish with a broad pie slice: silky crust, garnet guts.

Seriously, it's real good. I shouldn't eat it. I'm too fat.

No, you look nice.

Aw, thanks. Now, don't blush. Take a bite and I'll tell you how to get to the best stretch of the river.

Brother Francis listens to her directions. He doesn't take a bite. She speaks, then stops and writes, thinks, crosses out a street, changes an R to an L. He doesn't take a bite. He watches and listens and watches how her right eyebrow crumples down when she tries to envision the landmarks he'll see. He doesn't take a bite.

Take a bite, it's getting cold. And it's hard for me to remember right with you looking at me.

He looks down, peers into a crack of the pie's lattice. He shouldn't have looked at all, shouldn't be here. He picks a chunk with his fingers, barely chews before swallowing. Some crust sticks in his throat, and he coughs, but it doesn't come out. He spoons the cherry goop in his mouth, lets it melt over the dry flecks. It is very sweet; the cherries' tartness barely speaks; they have been overpowered.

Yeah, get the good stuff.

He looks at her, leaning forward with that smile. The back of her shirt pulls up over her hips, and a swell of loose, pale flesh shows at her waist, and her panties are emerald. A taste returns. He sits there; must mind his back. He sits there, and, slowly, stands. His goddamned back. His goddamned eyes, goddamned tastes.

Stripped to old shorts, Brother Francis toes the sandy bank. The Betsie River is low, but still it runs fast, broad at this part, and cold. He dips in his entire foot, and his leg skin gasps and clenches. A refreshing punishment. He dips in his other foot. He strides forward. His knees, submerged, shake.

One foot slumps into a trench. Backpedaling, his heels just smash down sand. He topples, clutches at the river floor, but the silt sifts through his fingers. He is carried downstream toward the falls of the dam.

So lean, he sinks. He lets himself sink. Just for a moment, just to feel the hand of the water close around him. In here he is trapped safely from anything. (Hold me hard.) His shoulder catches the bottom, digs softly in, stops. The current runs murky, and grit and bits shine, caught by the high light. The river rushes on. Water fills his mouth. He raises his head out, and he rises.

Francis, it's fine; I understand. Did you have some pie? That's good pie, there.

Still, I submit myself to your discipline.

I have none for you. You have enough.

Not enough.

I don't want you working any harder. I won't injure you.

The garden needs it. See the little thistles in the snow peas?

I'm sure Louis will get them before they destroy anything.

It will drop seeds. It will spread. It will never die.

Some things do live. I want you to live.

I want to work.

I want you to live.

A dry July and August slows the tomatoes; their trellises look bare. Brother Francis struggles to relinquish his tasks but clings to the abbot's rule. On a September afternoon, he walks the plots and sees crabgrass encroaching the soil, maple seedlings peeking through zucchini sprawls. The novices have fallen into laxity.

Louis.

Yes, Brother Francis?

Come here. Tell me what this is.

Brother Francis pokes his unvarnished oak cane under a zucchini leaf.

Those are zucchini.

Yes, and beneath them?

—

And beneath them?

What, dirt? The earth? What.

That, there.

Some little shoot? I don't know.

A seed of destruction you have allowed to grow.

I'll get it when I weed next.

Now.

—

Now.

Brother Francis steps back.

Now.

The boy looks over to the belltower, and Francis swats his cane across the boy's ribs. The boy keels back onto one leg, then kneels. He lifts the leaf; he pries the seedling. Head bowed, he holds it in his palm and raises it to Brother Francis. With his other hand, he rubs through the soil, pulling each weed he finds, and placing them, too, on his upraised palm.

Brother Francis is already walking toward the cloister. Vespers, celebrating the day's work, will begin soon, and Brother Francis must diffuse his anger.

O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailed. (Jer 20:7)

You have enticed me, and I was enticed. Was enticed. Am enticed. Am overpowered, but by my frail core. May You yet prevail!

Yield to You, take nothing for self. Am but weakness, am made but to be enticed. Must be emptied, destroyed of destruction. The weakness is inside. You are outside. How to let You in?

Deny. Deny all wants. Deny even needs. Have no need but You. You have enticed. Amen, Master, God my God.

Brother Francis aims to keep his fast quiet. He walks last through the meal line then back to his cell, having touched nothing but having been seen in the dining hall. The first week, he lies on his pallet to stretch his stomach and feel its pangs. They fade. In the mirror, his small face has withered. His short hair grows sparse. He shaves it off.

In the second week, he is often tired. He begins again to use his cane. He falls asleep during chants but stirs himself with fierce pinches on his thighs or neck. He grows his fingernails, files them into points.

In the third week, he lets Louis do all the harvesting. He points at ripe tomatoes but no longer grouses when Louis picks some with green blotches. He has time only to strip himself and become as thin as a veil. (Shimmer through me.) He looks around the hills, the novices are playing soccer. He hears thwaps of the ball, and the flies' buzz, and the squirrels' chits. His head lightens, he sits in the grass, ants stride across his robe. So many things living, so many ways.

On Friday he doesn't even walk out to the garden. He naps after Vespers, and only the last toll stirs him for Compline. In October, it's dark now for the final service of the monastic day.

He refuses to be late. He hurries, leaving his cane. Halfway down the hall, he stops, plants his hand on the stone wall, and breathes. (Push me on.) He breathes more, then continues. He stops. He walks. He falls. He doesn't rise.

In the sparsely lit corridor Brother Francis looks like sandstone. The soft waves of his habit seem like rock worn down by a now-dry creek. Louis sees him first, runs to him, tries to awaken him. The boy puts his ear to Brother Francis's heart. It sounds like butterfly wings.

A monk mashes cherry fudge in milk, gets him to sip the pinkish slurry. He groans. Swallowing hurts. He has rarely done that lately.

He accepts the soft meals brought to him each day. He spends the weekend in bed. They ask if he wants to go outside. He begins to sit, but, oh, his back.

Louis drives to Traverse City, gets a wheelchair. Brother Francis doesn't want it, but he lets the boy pull him up and off the pallet and into the seat.

Let me roll it.

He bends to the right to release the lock. Something clenches in his back. With his left arm, he reaches for the other wheel. He can grasp it, can turn it. Leaning, he follows the boy through the dark hall toward the garden.

A CARTON OF EGGS, OR, THE HATCHERY CHRONICLES

As Cruz was fighting in the darkness (as his body was fighting in the darkness), he began to understand. He realized that one destiny is no better than the next and that every man must accept the destiny he bears inside himself.

—Jorge Luis Borges, “A Biography of Tadeo Isidoro Cruz”

or,

All stories are haunted by the ghosts of the stories they might have been.

—Salman Rushdie, *Shame*

No egg but a poached egg. Though any egg is an innately good and delicious thing, it seems to me that a gentle blob of silk and gold was designed for tender handling. Hear it fatly drop; watch the albumen spindles dance; see the simmer’s pops; feel the lurid yolk leak along your tongue — an egg as an egg.

Poaching is not hard (literally: unlike in bed, hardness is failure), but it is as intricate as love. Follow my laws:

Find an egg, a good one, probably brown; tap it to ensure it has no cracks.

I found my wife decades ago through multivariable calculus. During each class, overwhelmed by integrals and matrices, I scanned the room and invariably (hah) settled my eyes on Eva Nadas, the plump, curly-haired brunette know-it-all. So one day I tripped her. She didn’t fall, but recovered, spun, and whispered fiercely, *Don’t play games with me, Jimmy Mullins.* In awe of her upright anger, I somehow spat out, *Let me buy you dinner.* She said, *No*, and paused and paused, *but you may make me dinner on Friday. If you can.*

For three days I ran a circuit from the downtown Cleveland Library to West Side Market to my dorm kitchen. I savored the robust sound of chicken paprikash over nokedli, oblivious that Eva Nadas was as Hungarian a name as could be, nor that her place on E. 79th was in the heart of Little Budapest. After a few bites, she confessed (my first glimpse of the tenderness she hid in her thinner-than-I'd-thought shell), *Nagymami Ilona would be furious to hear this, but, your dumplings are now my favorite*. Eager to secure my seat in her esteem, I blustered that I loved the stove and found it nourishing in many ways, unaware that my facade would become a passion. Now she thinks I indulge it too much, making sea urchin foams and Frangelico caviar — *Unnatural*, she says about the chemicals and devices that empower my whimsy. *Just roast a well-spiced chicken*. But there are so many ways to cook!

Heat a deep pan of salted, vinegared water to a soft boil.

After three months of dining in, we went out. The requisite performances nervewracked me: handing her jacket to the maitre d', greeting the cummerbunded (cummerbound?) waiter, pronouncing Cotes du Rhône. All night I'd hoped to touch her gently, but our table was too large, and littered by sundry utensils and vessels, mysterious to me then. We'd already kissed — and frequently and well — but I craved the more particular intimacy couched in rituals of small contact. Could we be ear ticklers? Elbow pinchers? I slipped to the bathroom.

Under the gaze of the bathroom attendant, I failed to pee. Under the faucet, I warmed my hands. Returning, rubbing my fingertips, eyes fearfully fixed on her neck, I slid my full hand from the peak of her right shoulder to the peak of the left,

tracking the back swoop of her green dress. I didn't look at her until I had pulled my seat to my knees, but when I did — ! *I love quiet touches*, she said, and I knew I had found a one whose desires echoed my own. We sleep with our toes' tips together. I mean, we did, then.

Slide the egg quietly but quickly into the water.

A couple years later we were off to hear some neurology lecturer she'd raved about, which was frightful because I worried (still do, sometimes) she'd find some earnestly smart guy, not a silence-aided faker, at the reception. At the time, though, I'd met most of the smart guys she'd dated before, and they were ugly, so I had that advantage (still do, most times). The bus came early; we had to run and shout and wave it down. I let her take the last free seat. She spoke in chunks; a gap to breathe; after every four words. Seeing in the window that my airy hair looked strong, I reached into my pocket and presented the thin, bare ring on my quaking palm. My blood was moving fast.

Hers must have been, too; she had to clench her fists a few times before her sputtering fingers could settle on the diamond. I asked her to stay silent for a bit; she listened and did. Without looking down from my eyes, she reached for my arm. The clutch of her hand said, *Yes! Here I am and always will be*. My bicep's flex said, *I will hold you all the days*. No one heard but us.

With a spoon, fold the feathery white silk close around the heart; wrap it and wrap it.

When the doctor said kids weren't happening for us, she gave up on a lot, including me. I felt crunched; I had gone back to school, and I was a bit dependent

on her, or at least very settled in the comfortable life she provided (and still does). I was embarrassed and scared (she knows this insecurity, usually doesn't exploit it), and I had no idea what to do, what I could do. So I just stood there, just stood there.

I told her, *I'm not leaving you*. She looked out the window, nodding, *I know*. I told her, *And you're not leaving me*. She stared at me and bickered a bit, but I always said, *No. No, you aren't. You know we are each best when we are both near*. And so, we made our life (though she claims she herself would have broken out of the sulking, eventually), the only life we could make together.

Cradle it out, drain it, plate it, prick the yolk, eat it as it seeps.

A marriage's delights emerge slothfully, and it has only so many to give. Yet even after twenty-some years, the joy still flows thickly for us. Sometimes we must give a push or a pop, but it flows. Yes, we are deflating, and we will die, but I am not afraid of draining out — I have a love! Only bad marriages fall empty or get too hard-boiled to ooze out at the right slow pace.

In this allegory of cookery, there can be many eggs. Certainly, Eva is my egg, but/also, I am an egg and she is my poacher: she was waiting for me, and, as it happily turned out, I was nicely equipped for her (in many ways, I might add). She pushed back at me with fire and fervor, but never so hard as to burst me; I have become the egg I was made to become.

And the grand, unseen egg is the third person of love, the secret being that springs forth when two matched persons weave all their ravelings together. The third person is a colicky baby some days, but other times it's the strongman binding us together. Most wonderfully, it always walks around me (and Eva) like an old nun,

pointing out when I have slumped from good posture, rapping me on the skull until I realign myself.

Lately, though, my head has been thick and numb. Eva said last week, *I'm going to use the gym more. I think I'm out of shape.* I didn't even look before saying, *Yeah, a bit.* She said, *Excuse me, James?* I stated that honesty was healthy and helpful for her goals; I was thinking that I've grown tired of closing my eyes, tired of imagining some younger woman with less sag on her tits and gut, someone who could make me come. My mental infidelity burns the third person deeply, and I fear that Eva notices.

Which brings us to this morning's bed. She's a lusty one, and she often awakens drenched in desire. She'll roll to me (after a swish of mouthwash, which I'm careful to keep filled on her nightstand) and grab down my underwear to see if I'm up for it. I usually am, just because, well, I am. But today it's a false indicator, and I'm clearly playing a passive role as she crawls on top of me, nibbling and grabbing, whispering in my ear, *C'mon Jimmy, stick it in me.*

So I do, and I begin to feel it, too. I flip her over and angle down, closing my eyes and picturing someone...who...the girl at the gym. Melie. Lean navel, tight tank, slipping it off. Yes, her. *Yes, Melie.*

Excuse me? She turns away, looks at our frost-moussed backyard — the line of pines stiff at the back, the fat central maple bare. *I'm going now, but thanks for that. Go on, finish off. With someone you like.*

I, too, look out. Some birds are lurking around our stone patio.

As I watch the bird hopping on the ring of its nest, dropping down bits of worm, I can hear Eva. I can hear her moving heavily. I can hear her slapping journals and notepads into her briefcase. I can hear her rummaging through drawers, snatching clothes. I hope they're workout clothes. She stomps in, fast.

Leaping in front of the door, I stop her. *Today, I say, you don't need to work.*

Today, she retorts, of all days I need to work. Don't you need me gone for your romps?

No, I say, and I hold her for a minute. Stay for the day and heal.

I'm just fine, thanks. And she does a little marching in place, farcically grinning.

I mean our third person.

James. Our third person has been lame and bed-bound for months now.

I know. I know. I regret it.

So let me go now.

No. I hold her. She squirms. I hold her. She squirms. These discomforts happen: our third person, neglected, reverts toward infancy and wails.

If he feels her knees knocking, turn to page 60.

If he feels her necklace nicking his breastbone, turn to page 65.

Her knees are wiggling. *Let's walk*, I say.

Fine.

The sky is falling, or else it's snowing here. I start to raise my hand to her shoulder, but then I don't. She quickens, and I stay just behind her, watching the flakes cluster on her curls. She quickens more; she is going too fast now.

I remember our first kiss, my hands engulfing her chin and cheeks, my lips doing all the pressing. She stepped back and said nothing, then started our second kiss. Later, she told me, *I didn't expect you to, but I was glad. I wanted it too much to do it myself.* We still agree: that sensual discovery twirled us together even tighter.

I reach for her hip and step into the back corner of the McKinseys' woods. She is pulled, then she follows. Past the dense brush border, I spin into her and shove my face at hers, missing her lips a bit, nicking her teeth with mine. She kisses back. Our arms wrap. The tendon beneath my tongue stretches and strains. My hands are moving. So are hers. We're trying.

She steps back and says nothing for a second. *We're just trying*, she complains, then slowly picks her way through the bramble and back to the road.

The third person likes trying, but I don't say so. I step out, too, and see that she has gone farther on.

If he grows cold and goes back quickly, turn to page 73.

If he walks back slowly and she hugs him at the door, turn to page 65.

If he walks back fast and stares at the patio, turn to page 63.

An egg is beautiful in its distribution of weight. The densest part in the middle so that it wobbles when spun; the thinnest on the outside so that its fragility shimmers. I set the twin eggs down and begin my cooking quadrille: spinning the gas to medium-high, laying the sauté pan on the burner, salting the simmering pan of water, slicing the red pepper finely, splashing the olive oil, dashing the rosemary. I am light on my feet, and alone, and free to indulge.

I have another hunger, too — one a little lower than my stomach — and I want to be desired. I remain desirable! I'm not a craigslist regular, but I know of it, and today I am beautiful. I declare my present tastes — taut navel, firm tits — and upload a few photos from our beach vacation a few years back. I still look that good.

I am nearly ready to poach the eggs when I hear the ding of an incoming email.

If he turns off the stove, turn to page 66.

If he leaves the stove on, turn to page 67.

I swing open the back door and cackle; the birds scatter away, and some nearly collide. Laughable!

It's not really that cold. I step barefoot across the stone patio's meager veil of snow. Past it, the hard grass pricks my feet, but nothing really hurts in the winter. Or else it really hurts. There are seasons of extremes here: blizzards and heatwaves can be neighbors in any week. I have run shirtless in January; I have shoveled the driveway in May. Nothing is designed, nothing is restrained.

As I screamed out the wrong name, I could see the third person, silent, slit at the carotid, unobtrusively crumpling in the background. I wanted it to be a false ghost, but I could hear its red spurts slapping on the floor.

Our attic has high rafters. I have a rope. I had a love.

If you ended up here, some narrative rift has happened.

On our patio, a finch pecks at seeds. I look at the ground. We constantly walk all over it, impose our burden onto its unassuming crust. Fortunately, it's strong. I am not.

I think about our infertility. Every day after we learned, she said, *I've stopped caring, and so should you*. For awhile, I said little, just lived: made her coffee, bought her cigarettes, drove her to her hospital. She'll shrink up again if this turns into a split, but I've grown too tired to hold on. Maybe we weren't meant to make any life at all, not even our third person. Well, we did well for awhile.

Hungry, I open the refrigerator, which, oddly, seems to whine.

If he swings it again, turn to page 71.

If he walks to the back door, turn to page 63.

If he gets hungry for eggs, turn to page 61.

High in the pines when we moved here was a tree fort that some kids, now grown like me, had built out of lumber scraps they probably stole. I tore it down; it was an invitation for a lawsuit. Some days, though, I wish I still had it — my very own eyrie, and I would swoop from it to feast upon the little vermin that life sends to spook me — as if it could!

I'm a dozen years too old for that dreaming, yet this morning's drama — a piddling thing: I know nothing will happen, nothing has cracked — is nearly enough to send me out into a snowy day to build a ludicrous roost. Does a man have a point of no return?

What I have is a love; what I have is a war. I'm not a lazy man. I can stay on this earth and work, and I probably will. Why not?

Well, but why?

Something cries outside; that's how too many lives are: a little pain then a long whine. Why does the creature sustain its hurt? It will live; I will live; we will live. Effort is superfluous.

If he looks for the whine, turn to page 70.

If he goes back to the refrigerator, turn to page 61.

Her earring's narrow emerald bud presses into my breastbone, so I ease back a bit. She wiggles away and slips into the hall, out the door. The warmth our bodies were making will vanish. She needs something solid, but I know very little about things. I know some names: Jimmy Choo, Tiffany. Neither can be, I learn, found here in Cleveland. I know better than to buy these things from our joint account. *So you bought me something with my money*, she'd say and not be wrong. The real quest comes in picking not a blatant appeasement, but something personally relevant to her; at this I've always been good.

At a jewelry store in Lakewood, a short, expressive man raves that old pendants are the new thing. *Rare and unique. Give you an excuse to stare at, well, you know. Make her feel quite particular. Everyone wins, y'know?* Especially him, at these figures. I see a small, wrought gold charm holding a clear grey orb. *That's art nouveau*, the man says. *Very particular.* The twisted arms branch and converge; the Sri Lankan moonstone shines smoothly; it reminds me of her voice.

Back on my couch I dangle it and imagine placing it on her, my hand swooping across her back after securing the clasp. Has the healing simply suddenly happened — i.e. been bought? I haven't considered how the third person is aching.

Snow falls yet again. What else to expect by a so-called Great Lake. This city's decline: maybe it's just weariness from constant sleets and rains. Maybe we just need a bit of sparkle, or a happy breath. A small mewling comes from the back patio. Probably just that old cat of hers.

If he looks curiously at the patio, turn to page 72.

If he looks perturbedly at the patio, turn to page 63.

I turn off the flame below the pot. It won't cool much, and I prefer to be ready for anything, to be cautious. The email is just to verify my craigslist post. I approve it, then poach my eggs and eat them.

Responses don't quite pour in, but I get some. More from men, which doesn't bother me. Men like a well-kept body, too. One girl has written a lot; she's into me. I read a few lines then check her pictures. Blurred out her face; nice waist. Young.

Careful not to be too hasty, I reply that I'm intrigued. Some shorter emails follow, working out details of place and time, all laced with innuendo. I ask for her address then hop in the shower, very hot so that my stubble will shave more cleanly. The steam billows, and I scrub across my chest to strip out any greyed hairs, the ones that Eva so enjoys plucking and waving in my face, fluffing her hair, daring me to find one on her. Next time, I'll pinch one of her rolls, dare her to find one on me.

This girl lives over on the east side, not far from my old campus. Bet she's a grad student — too busy to work for sex. Definitely not just plain or something.

Just onto the main road, I see in my rearview mirror Eva's car slowing up for our street. Not using her blinker, of course. I wonder if she sees me. She turns. She won't call; I left a note saying I'd gone out, probably for dinner, too. But I keep glancing at my phone. I wonder if I'm already too far to be called back. I wonder if she could, if she would. I wonder if this girl will let me spend the night. I'll promise to make her a fine breakfast. At the old Giant Eagle I loved, I pull in and grab some eggs. After paying, I see that one of them is already cracked. That's what I get for grabbing this carton by just this one end.

If he is here, he is gone.

I leave the stove on. The water isn't hot yet, and the computer's just over there. The email is to verify my craigslist post.

A hiss snags my attention; the covered pot has spewed over, and the water has extinguished the flame. I scamper back and almost relight it immediately, but my blood is moving too fast. I clench my fists a few times before my sputtering fingers can settle on the knob. I hear a bus.

What am I doing?

I wait and let the gas diffuse; its odor fades, and the household vanilla scent drifts back in. I ignite the flame then dial it to the lowest setting. The water slowly returns to the proper mild bubbling.

I delete the post and the email. The egg doesn't poach quite right; the yolk's outer portions feel like play-doh and look just as garish. The spillover must have lowered the water level, letting the egg bump the pan's floor. I eat it anyway, of course, and the red peppers are delicious, but I'm not filled.

Getting out another pair of eggs, I notice the chicken. On a hard snowy day, Hungarian comfort food can heal anyone, even a third person.

Turn to page 69.

Cold eggs always feel heavy. They aren't ready, not for nakedli. They should be warm. But at this temperature, they will be stiff, and the necessary muscling and shoving will leave them tough. Unless tire-texture dumplings sound appealing, it's best to wait for the eggs to lose their chilled tenseness.

The pressures to move quickly don't make much sense to me. The world has gotten more complex, and yet we're supposed to move through it faster. This Rust Belt town has the right idea, what with its deceleration in recent years. Its old machines — its only things — just grew tired. I feel the same way, and this morning my machine — great food for an appetitive lady — stalled. It's the way I love, but I wish I had a backup. Loving by pure action is a fragile feat, and prone to break down after overuse.

After a nap, I begin the dumplings. They are difficult. In the middle of a mound of flour, I stir the eggs and water carefully with my fingertips; flour gradually dissolves; I avoid heavy, hasty kneading. The dough must remain loose, wet. There is an elegance in absence.

The dough has grown sticky, but if I let it rest and dust my hands with flour, I will be able to roll it tenderly when the time comes to snip it into its proper nuggets. Rinsing my fingers, I hear Eva step in. *You love me*, she says, *and it is wisest for me to stand near you today*. She quoted me! My quick words did some good. I go to her and run my warm palm across the top of her back. She turns and holds me.

If he presents the budding dinner, turn to page 69.

If he hugs her tightly, turn to page 73.

If he lets her go, turn to page 60.

The loose, late light — lush ochre like a good yolk — slides across the counter. I stand at the stove, stirring the paprikash, as Eva saunters around and sings a bit: a silly, improvised thing: *my dove* rhymed with *high love*; *midwest* rhymed with *the best*. I look at her lips on occasion; her eyes are always on me. She trills on: *Someday, I'll chirp a great birdsong. You'll like me enough to sing along.* We are not fully cooked, after all; we still may hatch soft surprises.

The slick leg meat, grown dark, eases off the bones in slivers, meekly glimmers. The sticky broth spits, and Eva stands near, watching me roll the dumplings and stack them. Vapors rise from the simmering sauce and from the near-boiling pot, and the steam tendrils mingle, weaving themselves into a greater plume. She strokes my back with her palm, drooping along my spine then rising to each shoulder. *I didn't know, today, I say. I had no idea what to do. I had so many ideas what to do.*

You did fine, she says. *You are a fine man.* I am a fine man! *You are a particular, fine man, whatever you do.*

It couldn't have happened any other way, I tell her, but she doesn't seem to hear. She is looking out the glass door again: more birds, more active now in the casual snowfall. A finch furiously flaps to stay aloft, a hunk of bread bursting from her beak. A hawk drifts on high, far away. A hummingbird, flurrying. A sparrow, hopping. A chicken in our pot.

Fin.

The whine comes again; it's outside. I burrow through the pantry for something fun: a cardamom gelee! Shaking many green pods into my hand and placing a small pot of water on the stove, I still hear it, louder now. Something out there is hurt, but I want to cook. The crying lasts ten minutes before I go to it: a spare-haired raccoon curled under a rhododendron. He doesn't bite at me. Back inside, dissolving the agar agar, I wonder what to do. I grab a pair of rubber gloves, heavy ones. I watch the raccoon breathe; his lips move, and his eyes sputter. A small noise slips out. His feet tremble, and his toes' tips touch. Something is dripping from his face fur. I think to twist his neck hard and quick, but instead with my boot tap him toward a thin hole. He slumps in head-first; his squeak's tone lowers. With quick kicks of dirt I cover most of him, then go back inside to strain the cardamom.

I pour the liquid into a chilled silicone tray. I'm deeply hungry, I realize, and not doing much about it. I too often don't do much. Relational momentum is a fallacy; lovers in motion tend to fall to rest. An Amish chicken peeks from behind the kohlrabi. Eggs sit under the cilantro. I see our first supper. I quarter the bird, then shake its breasts and thighs and drumsticks in a paper bag with flour, paprika, and thyme. I drop the dredged parts into a hot cast iron skillet. The chicken fat renders, and I dump in diced onions and sliced mushrooms. The only sound is sizzle, and the third person is eager to eat. I love deeply, but I love simply. I'm a plain man; I've lived in Ohio my whole life. I make things better with a particular deed, usually baked or sautéed. If I have no way to meet Eva's desires, then I don't. The chicken thighs will simmer and soften in our homemade beer-broth. We will be filled.

Turn to page 69.

I swing the door again, and it does creak — a bit different, but close enough. In the refrigerator I see a broccoli crown, a celery bunch, some radishes, hummus. I have an abstract desire for fullness, but nothing suggests satisfaction. The hunger shrivels up. Eva wasn't really so bothered. She's brash enough to ignore slaps at her. She just wanted to get away from me. Fine. She'll come back and apologize for bitching about all this. She'll try to make me apologize, but this time I won't. It's her fault, too.

I'm surprised she flipped, because she is so self-certain. Then again, her self-certainty paves the way to firm crashes. For my fortieth birthday, she promised an elaborate dinner. She decided the best dishes would consist of all my favorite ingredients, no matter how divergent. She seasoned lamb chops with caraway and cardamom, stewed red peppers with celery seed and beets, made a sauce from port wine and fennel seed. Having heard the menu, I insisted she take the first bite. She forced a swallow yet still claimed, *I cooked this well*.

Maybe she just didn't know. Maybe I don't. Maybe she's worn me down like old marble stairs. Maybe we have deflated after all. I was weak to let her walk right out, but, after the failed appeasement, am I at fault? She was bothered; I knew; what could I have done? What deed would have sparked anything in her besides more rage? Did the third person offer suggestions? No: caught in the flames, it stupidly remained quiet. I look through the door. Snow has dappled the yard; petite meringues cling only to the tallest tufts. Most of our lawn looks dry and tired.

If he looks at the pine tree's rustling, turn to page 70.

If he looks at the refrigerator, turn to page 61.

Where the dirt skirts our stone patio, one bird stands alone. It doesn't move; I don't either. Eva and I once had a beautiful sense of silence. I am slow with words and dumb at talk, especially when she, effusive, is around. She can be like instant sobriety, salting my tongue to a dry fumbling. She learned this struggle, learned that when I just sit after a pointed question, I'm thinking. Sometimes I never respond. That hurts her, I realize, and I try to hold her hand and squeeze or stroke it as my mind and heart quibble over a phrase like chefs over a soufflé. She gets it, usually, and doesn't demand speech. Still, a word is a word, and it makes an explicit clasp that touch can't quite prove or promise.

That clasp sounds like a pinch right now, but I know better. My love is larger than this day. I sit down and type her a quick note — apologetic, a hinted promise of a good Hungarian dinner — so that I can get on with my day alone, as I want.

She understands my independence. After we got off our engagement bus, I opened my mouth, but she blurted, *I hope you aren't going to explain yourself, or say something about how I complete you.* I wasn't, but she gave me no chance to say so. She continued, *I promise we will be together yet still be individual. We aren't some single entity.* Then I stopped her. I explained the third person. She got it immediately: *We can create that, if such a love is even possible.* It's not, I know, but working for it has helped us each hold our selves a bit better.

I turn to the refrigerator and grab a pair of eggs.

If he remembers egging cars as a boy, turn to page 64.

If he notices the eggs' lightness, turn to page 61.

If he wonders why the door whined, turn to page 71.

Her thighs are warm. They are still nice thighs, strong and symmetrical. Her breasts remain large, but, having grown flat and low, they look better in a bra than out. I never knew how a breast's shape worked until she introduced me to hers; the inflated ones in pictures and films taught an inverted geometry: convex bubbles, not gentle slopes swooping to the nipple. Still holding her, I move my hand to her flabby bottom. *James*, she states, *don't bother*, and goes back to the bedroom, tossing the double doors shut.

Glad she is here, I let her rest alone. I will join her eventually. I am a splendid lover, and initiating a romp should erase that other name. I make it great for her, even lately. She might still think my skill comes from cultivation — I was only her second or third, whereas she was my eleventh — but, simply, we fit well, and tend to climax together.

I watch the snow falling heavily and listen for rustles or yawns. She walks quietly to the bathroom and closes the door. I step lightly, keeping my toes on the long hallway carpets not the hardwood floors, to our canopied bed and remove my clothes. The white covers are warm against my still-firm, still-hairy chest.

She does not show surprised happiness, but a face for vindication, as if having been tripped. *You have no shame, do you?* she asks, now standing by the edge of the bed, leaning over enough for me to peek down her old t-shirt.

Not when those are around, I say, reaching into the collar. She slaps my hand; I grab hers and pull. Takes a bit of a yank to get her all the way off balance, but then she climbs in the bed of her own accord. She tries to ball up and turn her back, but I nudge my nose between her chin and her neck and nibble near the long tendons that

run behind her ears. She exhales, uncurls. I turn her and kneel over her and untie the drawstring of her scrubs.

We are naked, now, and deeply braided: her hand tugging my neck, my palm pressing her hip, her feet flexed beneath my calves. Our cadence sometimes flows, sometimes slows — elegantly conducted, it feels. We are mostly silent except for breaths, but certain twists or squeezes reach us deeply and yank out a strong sound. Our movements befit a symphony, accelerating and crescendoing to the final monosyllabic blasts: horns and winds and the timpani, altogether.

The third person stands near — a sweaty singer. I had forgotten its voice. *I think you were wise, I say, to stand near me today. We do best when we are close.*

The snow has grown thicker, and now it falls with great grace. Eva pushes the window open a bit. We look out until one, then both our stomachs start grumbling. The flakes, swooping and looping, dust and pile on the sill.

Turn to page 69.

REALING VISIONS

And the Lord said to me, “What do you see?”

At Gethsemani

The monastery breathes its Hours —
vigils, lauds, terce, sext, none, vespers, compline —
but otherwise lies silent.
Monks work, pray within, without.
The hilltop fire tower in my mind
promises long sight, pulls me up
a rutty road, now rarely used.
I walk its way
and find a barren crest: alone.
Here no man helps me any more;
here no man is my guide.

Tethereal

There have been lots of Jews: Abraham, Saul, Simeon, Saul, Maimonides, Shylock, Chagall. In a very old covenant, the God bound the Jews to Herself. Religion is a very old Latin verb meaning to bind. Jews are bound to follow the 613 laws in Tanakh, their very old book of sacred stories and rules. Saul (the second one) had been bound to the 613 laws but then bound himself to a new covenant,

whereas I can't bind to even one,
save my own with my shoestrings.

When praying, some Jews literally bind to their foreheads and arms boxes with bits of their very old book. Others wear a gold Magen David: two triangles bound together. Many of them like it; they are bound together. Marc Chagall liked to wear no clothing when he painted. Sometimes Chagall painted a self floating in the air, bound to nothing.

I like Chagall. I wear
no jewelry, no binds, no others.

In Tanakh, the Jews always break the laws of their bond, but the God always rebinds it like a very old book. She calls them Her people, and they call Her their God,

and I am jealous
but I say I'm bound to my own young book.

And the God thinks, *I bound myself to this man?* And the God thinks, *Yes!*

Still, I tie my shoestrings again,
and it's not the same.

Selfish Ecclesiastes

Schedule your funeral.

Send gilt invitations, and RSVP —
good hosts set good examples.

Stay awake every hour
of your birthday. Sleep every hour
of your half-birthday: apogees, perigees.

Swim through your self always,
or at least daily. Sea floors warp,
and you alone are a tectonic titan.

Whisper to desire
as to a cat. It will stay
a cat.

Work the soil
of your soul
like an Ohioan.

Eat your regrets,
rich in minerals
and fiber for firmer shits.

Build for sorrows a cradle,
small, so they remain small
like bonsai, perfected.

Carry bad lusts forever, sealed in a pouch
outside your heart — marsupial mother of dead ‘roos.
They spring back alive if you forget them.

Shout at losses, those mimes
who respond to near-ear yells;
suffer their hand-jeers.

Circle your failures
like a bull rounding his matador.
Charge them until they kill you.

Attend your funeral. Good hosts
set good examples; good hosts
get nowhere.

Back When I Lived Next to Christ

Give dope to Lebron? Of course I did. How else to beat him? His buzz arrived slowly, yes, but I waited. We sat on the roof of his fifth garage until his mind tumbled upward and upward:

You write about monks, right? They levitate?

In spirit, yes.

What's it take?

He leapt over the hoop and dove deep into his bottomless Icelandic hot spring. Starting the game, I said, *You are a great king*. He gave me the ball and spread his arms, bellowing, *I am the Emperor of Man!* I ducked beneath his elbow for a layup. I promised not to tell, apologizing, *You are a great king*.

I was born to be more.

We all were, I assured him. *You'll still save plenty*. He shook and sunk his head, muttering, *That's hockey*.

I had taped it all, but he stole the camera. *Gotta save myself*, he told me, *Gotta save somebody*.

Jeremiad

Then the Lord said to me: ...“But you, gird up your loins; stand up and tell them everything that I command you. Do not break down before them, or I will break you before them.”

—Jeremiah 1:17

Jer, do you think She feels

our hands: their frail sheaths, their stubborn joints

in autumn's dawn?

Do you think She feels

how vulnerable they are, how vulnerable

to shattered pottery, spears, well winches?

Do you think She holds us, knows us?

When I was a child, Jer,

I feared only

no one would (not now, not ever) tell me,

“I know you,”

as She promised you, called you

Hers as a child, molding you as a jug to hold

the heart of your rebellious nation. You feared

none would listen. You feared

they'd all listen, and you'd end up wrong:

if She never sent conquering hands. Not that you feared

men's judgment,

but that you'd realize She was full of it,

“I know you”: you and

your prize jug junked in public.

Then they’d know your hollowness,
and you as the deserted, ungreatful griper.

One thing She called right, one thing you relayed:

“Can a man bear a child?

Then why do I see every man

with his hands on his loins like a woman in labor?”

Jer, aren’t we groaning

that our fears are crowning?

I’m afraid my hands are very small.

I’m afraid my hands are made so large.

Everyone That Rises

My clean family of four makes many cross-country trips, our van filling with postcards and drive-thru sacks, each itinerant summer rerooting our flighty schoolboy lives. On crowded sand dunes and riversides, we invent freeform games — our play is inscrutable, yet the import is clear: love, we love. But we boys grow, and up come sweethearts, and up come colleges; and their hairs gray, and there come separations, and there come relocations. An anchor quartered: each drifts off to a fondly remembered region — coast, forest, plains, coast. No one invites, nor opens doors, nor rains down a cascade of hugs upon a familial but decreasingly familiar guest: settle, we settle. Each records the information of private life landmarks and transmits messages (“She’s walking!” “I fell.”) in correspondences distributed efficiently — CCs, facsimiles. Through wires we tie tethers, but convergence will come only in the ground.

Adam, Eve, Cain, ~~Abel~~, ..., Us: A Letter
To the Layout Editors

It is almost old as sin. Still,
 we headline it:

MAN KILLS MAN

We should; this, the final
 story of one, and the other
 we must shame. It can be worse:

MAN KILLS MANY

We all weep; it might have been one (or all) of us.

Sometimes, it escalates:

MANY KILL MANY

Awful, but equal; more frightful:

MANY KILL MAN

We wonder which side we'd fall on,
 which would be worse. We'd stay
 out, we know, neither
 wanton criminal nor foolish victim.

But the private one is found, if at all, low on C7 —

MAN KILLS SELF

Do we care? Did we know that man
 or that self? He didn't:

SELF KILLS MAN

His nucleus,
mismaintained (we do better), split:

SELF KILLS SELF

Fission, fallout. Radiation
(we're shielded)
zips forth, spreads (not in us) as,
following fear, we fall away.
We fall away each day,
complicit with every MAN:

SELVES KILL MANKIND

Our slaughter of abdication.

Reeling Visions (The Prophet and the Psalmist)

P: Now what do you see before you?

P: A child, a man, an octopus.

P: What else do you see there?

P: Two parents, two sons, two billion babies.

P: What else do you see there?

P: Three ways I am not.

P: Will you go there?

P: A worm will more easily chew through rock.

Micah's Mitzvah

I am two years old.

Mom and Dad bring home a baby
with half a brain
who dies in two days.

On our one couch

Dad holds Micah.

I am eating M&Ms
(which the distraction from a baby permits).

I give a green one to Micah
(which never is OK for whole babies)
who dies in two days.

Dad lets me put in another

(which hardly matters for this baby)
and Micah blabs his gums around,
slobbers it out,
then dies in two days.

Mom takes him up to her breast
where Micah blabs his gums around,
dribbles some milk, and, after slurping his fill,
gargle-coos himself into sleep.

Micah is my brother
but not for long, they say.
I don't understand
how it can stop.

Mom and Dad have brought Jeremy home
alive for a chance to breathe
this good air himself
and to taste it.

Detective; December

Hey, Moondoggie: your pops don't forget you, won't let you waste away in that cell.

Found those cloth diapers yesterday. You sure bleached their stains those years ago. Couldn't believe you managed that, only twelve. *You didn't know me at two*, you whined, scrubbing out your shitty past. *Don't know me now, neither. Not gonna believe it, not gonna stay and believe it.* You did, though; you stayed, then. Now, you disbelieving, denying? Here, here's a picture, you at two. See? See your mom's lean arm. See she had two breasts those days.

Found that tooth-torn Trojan foil. Can't believe I heard you and your gal that night. You know I listened to it all, all two minutes of your glory? She's still there down the street. Tells me you got all slick, all smart. 'Course.

Found that damn bike, that Huffy you rode off the roof. Spokes all splintered. Thought a scrap of your skin was stuck on that pedal. Couldn't have been, right? You know about that stuff? They taught you that at big city school, before you got locked up, how long a body takes to fall apart and away?

Found your note, the first, the one you almost meant. Found the shotgun, too, and the shells, dusty. Found your fingerprints.

Didn't find your big jacket. Didn't find that ring. Didn't find those ball cards or autographs or rare coins. Didn't find quite the cash you asked.

'Round here, that knobby tree's old bones crackle in the cold.

Call. I'll come by. I'll knock at your wall in the night.

The Joy of Parenting

The male octopus, laughable, fucks then dies
elsewhere, alone, unbothered.

The mother accepts
and cradles his wad until her eggs ripen.
She sows his seed into herself;
strings roe like lanterns in her cavern;
fans breaths of the rich sea through the dense strands.

He left, she remembers
and does not leave. If hungry,
she chews on her arms.
Suddenly, hatchings. She nearly faints.
Lurching, she plops her self-
gnawed limbs out to the cod
lurking hungry for her infants.
It eats her instead.

Hundreds of thousands of octobabes sail
to a bay thick with plankton where they chow
and grow and never know
until their time.

WHAT THE CAVE WORM DOES (THE MINER PROPHETS)

The Cave Worm (Tubifex spelaeus)

In hard places (such as your house's foundation) live multitudes of cave worms, so named for the tunnels they create, chewing through the rock on which they subsist. When a new cave worm is born, he cries because he fears brightness will strike his perceptive, lidless eyes, but soon his mother, with her single tooth, bites them out and licks the wounds. The infant makes a slimy purr as he suckles a speck of feldspar.

A cave worm is sated for a very short time. He hews and chews a granule, another, another, and, sure enough, a spot, a hole, a passage rapidly forms (do not worry for your home; the cave is thinner than the hairs of your hairs). The worm presses on into a cold, stony silence.

The pitiful things think they like their rocky diet. Agricultural scientists, trying to expedite decomposition, have incorporated cave worm colonies in various sorts of garbage, but the worms invariably migrate to the nearest sizable stone where their sensitive tongues need not cringe. In one glass-walled experiment, the cave worms, quarantined in a compote of mangoes and tarragon, thronged into a bolus in the high corner of the case. When the lead researcher (who reported hearing squeaks) opened the lid, the cave worms sputtered onto the table, slithered down its legs, dove through the carpet, and entered a new dark dwelling. They recounted their exodus to

native inhabitants who received the brutal tales of fruit and leaves with skepticism, then growing mortification. When the story concluded, each worm burrowed alone away from warmth, which implied light, which implied so much of a world. Nothing seemed to be able to reach them. The scientists saw struggle only when, while watching through a microscope, they crushed a rock laden with cave worms — how frantically they fluttered, desperate to return to rich enclosures in a heavy, deep place.

Discovery

Following reports of sounds emanating from some rocks near Clingman's Dome in Tennessee during the late 20s, scientists gathered and examined pebbles. Under a microscope, they noticed for the first time the now-unmistakable pores of cave worm tunnels. Actual specimens were observed shortly thereafter, and the cave worm was cross-taxonomized as the first tubifex worm in the Nematoda phylum in 1931. Despite this classification, a question remained: what does the cave worm do?

The Scare

Strapped with poverty and the scar of the 1918 flu epidemic, an already depressed America gasped in horror at a *New York Times* report that the cave worm, related to hookworms and the source of trichinosis, was infesting houses in legions of millions. Hooverilles laughed schadenfreudely at distraught homeowners before warily scanning nearby buildings or boulders.

Some risky souls signed on for a WPA project (American Nematode Termination) intended to wipe out the cave worms. Roosevelt signed the executive order rapidly, before anyone really knew how to determine success. Thus, ANT

shouted easy, unqualified money to numerous citizens, though phobias and spouses prevented greater numbers from joining the squads of ANTlers. The process devolved into a storytelling contest; in front of three government-appointed scientists, an ANTler explained once per week which structures he had exterminated and by what method (e.g. dousings of bleach, extended screaming, building a fire around it, cracking it with a sledgehammer). The panelists then paid or declined according to their “expertise.”

While ANTlers were ransacking public rocks and pavement, most homeowners were crawling around their houses with magnifying glasses, peering for signs of infiltration. Oils and salves were marketed as aromatic barricades (to be applied thickly and frequently, of course). Prayer services were held in church basements, and hands were laid upon the floor to press the squirming spawn of Satan back into the depths before the infernal vermin could consume polite society’s undergirding.

Researchers tried to ward off the slaughter, but the press’s clamoring backlash led them to shut their mouths, gather samples, and study in obscurity until the mania diffused, happily keeping private their discovery: the cave worm posed no threat. The public was humiliated to find out the pointlessness of their pursuit, but, as they’d found it fun, they resumed their Depression feeling slightly the better. The emotional boon didn’t have any lasting effect. Bereft of an enemy, the public returned dutifully to sexism, racism, classism, jingoism, narcissism, and hanging the president in effigy.

Beneath all the bruits and frenzies, cave worms tunneled on, unaffected and unimpressed.

Reproduction

As cave worms generally detest open air and live in spaces too tiny for cameras, many of their doings cannot be seen, only conjectured. Italian researchers in the late 1920s made painstaking observations via X-ray photography to unravel the ornate mystery of cave worm tunneling paths, but instead they discovered the equally intricate courtship behaviors of cave worms.

Like most nematodes, cave worms are dioecious and must find and lure the opposite sex, but the researchers found that it is the males who require the females to show off and wow. He gives a singular trial in which a male cave worm discovers, through a male-only hormonally heightened sensitivity to vibrations, a proximal female. The male then projects a series of rhythms to her. Careful recordings and transcriptions have shown that these beats are not guides to lure her, but a set of coded instructions wherein she is granted the chance to prove her spelunking splendor, showing him that, with/in/through her, his seed will become a titan of caving. He tells her to X, then Y, then Z, and perhaps she tries. If uninspired, he emits nothing more and ambles away, envisioning another.

After a failure, the female might make frantic searching efforts, or tunnel faster and faster, or repeat her interpretation of his transmissions, or resign herself, writing it off as a tease and resuming her solo trek with presumably no hard feelings. There are plenty of worms in the rock.

If he proceeds from his initial patter patterns, he changes his cadence dramatically, now hinting at his location. Their paths veer nearer, nearer. He doesn't

make it easy; he continues to loop and zig as though lacking any desire to meet, preferring to jest and toy and test. Oh-so-close-crossings, sometimes split by but a thread of stone, show the many instances when she couldn't quite reach him. Perhaps he stopped calling, and she waited for the next step by corkscrewing upward to resonate her wanting. Or perhaps she lost her wanting, and, as he felt her tunneling grow faint, fainter, he repeated his toothy taps hard, harder. They could yet come together, he yearned, he tried.

What happens at intersections remains an undiscovered coupling, for the X-ray images show only the tunnels' linkage, not the wedded cave worms', which is brief. Anatomical dissections suggest that the docking is more of a dousing. The male's vessel for sperm is relatively colossal, so he likely just spits out all his stuff, and she sops up as much or as little as desired. None of this takes much time.

They continue on their ways. The X-rays show that one certainly leaves before the other. Experts debate if the male, content with his discharge, can think of no reason to wait, or if he respects her modesty, understanding that fertilization is far too intimate for him, a brief pawn, to witness. Maybe she stubbornly refuses to start until he goes. Maybe she is the one hurrying off — eager to be a mother or disappointed at his performance. It is all unknown except that they continue on their ways, one of them relieved, the other burdened, but demonstrably strong enough to bear it.

After the season of mating, hopeful mothers in urban areas tunnel for a full week toward the epicenter of city activity, flocking most heavily near subway tracks, factories, and dance clubs. Experts are confident that the heavy quakings from these

structures help the infant cave worm shudder out of its mother's pouch, but they suspect that more is at stake.

Though the diminutive cognitive processes of the cave worm are little understood, it is possible that the hatching of babies in tremor-filled places imparts important instincts. The cave worm's tactile sensitivity is full-bloomed at birth, and being tossed from the soft lining of mom's pouch into a heaving world infuses the newborn with a useful and proper terror of life.

The rumbling environment makes difficult the mother's task of extracting her progeny's eyes, but it also enables her to slide off before the flailing creature clings onto her or lazily follows her tunnel, failing to hone his teeth or grow his strength. Abandoned and blinded, he must feel his way through the epic etchings and tunnels that have been wrought in these birthing berths for generations. He learns. Soon enough, he becomes irritated at following unfamiliar trails that bend where he would have curled, and he takes his very first bite of stone, delighted to taste it himself.

While this discovery is happening, the mother is hastily returning to her native area, following the path she made. Careful observation has noted that these are two of the only three times a cave worm will follow a previously forged tunnel. Even when frightened, the cave worm never takes an easy evasion, perhaps because making an escape down another's tube could very well end up offering a double serving to a hungry creature, or perhaps because such an escape could encroach on a happy worm in his fine-furrowed home. To the docile cave worm, death is preferable to intrusion.

The Farmer's Lament

In the 60s, an Icelandic farmer submitted a series of reports that fascinated and infuriated cave worm experts worldwide. Provincial and superstitious, he refused to allow direct observations and never included a return address, though he did document his claims with visual evidence proving that something, at least, was happening.

Dispatch 1 (April 21, 1965)

International Cave Worm Institute
Gibraltar

Dear sires,

I am undertaking a bold task that will interest you. I have discovered that my soil is often choked by rocks, which throttles my barley and berries. I am laughed at unfairly, thought to be stupid. But I am not stupid. I read and write even in English, as you can see, and I am a man of science, whereas few of them have even a known sense of the existence of the cave worm and what it does. But I do, and, therefore, here is what I have done.

Through a series of lures and devices (fig 1), I have harassed for my utilization several colonies of cave worms from our local volcano. Understanding that they are liable to escape, I kept them in a sealed container (fig 2) with plenty of pebbles for them to enjoy. On account of how they reside in the rocks they eat, I dribbled the stones across my plot.

I have concentrated the cave worms in the center (fig 3), for I am afraid they will leave. If they insist upon doing so, they will thusly have to chew through all my land and leave it futile for great growth. The stones were scattered several weeks ago. I will sow the seeds tomorrow, after performing the traditional prayers of planting that we do here. I assure you, I do these only to keep everything else constant, and isn't it worth it to make sure that no one above is angry? You may not understand this in your laboretum, but there are many threats out here.

I will file my full account after the harvest.

Good day and good wisdom to you all, from your fellow
researcher,

Jón

Dispatch 2 (October 22, 1965)

Dear sires,

I hope that the gods of summer have smiled upon you as they have upon me. Only a manner of speaking, of course. Did you receive my series of soil samples in May, July, and September? Perhaps not. Perhaps one of our governments' jurisdictions has laws of mail preventing such a delivery. It goes, after all, as we say here, The whale's mouth is larger than his brain.

Whether you have them or not, see here! The photographs from last year (packet A) show my typical frustrating crop. The photographs from August (packet B), still weeks before harvest time, clearly emanate a vast increase of growth. But, you say, perhaps this was just a good year for all of Iceland? As you can see in the enclosed records (packet C), all farmers here but myself suffered a decrease in output.

Please note my attached plans (packet D) for an in-ground barrier around and beneath my farm. I would like to keep my cave worms next year.

An auspicious autumn to you all, from your man in the field,
Jòn

Dispatch 3 (October 12, 1966)

Dear sires,

You have already noted in my photographs (pic 1-9) the lowered soil level around the containing barrier that I implanted. Please look now to the diagrams (fig 1-5) that illustrate the networks of holes through the roots and rhizomes of my mangled crops. I have encapsulated more soil samples so you can conjure what happened and why my cave worms turned against me. I fear that I angered Someone in my effort to bottle the worms within my field. The tiny cave worm is a mighty being, I have learned, beyond my understanding. It goes as we say here, The hidden is the holy. I hope that you have better eyes than I, and I will continue to read your supernatural Journal for further epiphanies of my superior, the cave worm.

Attentive lookings to you all, from your retired college,
Jòn

The scientists at the ICWI were lost. They avalanched Iceland with letters to Jòn, Barley Farmer, but never received a reply to their pleas to study the crop-based cave worms in person. With the samples they had, the Institute confirmed that Jòn's cave worms had turned their teeth from rocks to plant-based material. In the

laboratory, the worms rifled through organic material — never leaves or fruit, only roots or mulch. They posited that the cave worm is an intensely adaptable creature, especially under constraint, and surely it is easy to learn to digest softer things even if disliked.

Furthermore, considering the cave worms' occasional history of collectively causing sinkholes — sparse, but confirmed — the sudden revolution on Jòn's farm fell well within the scope of cave worm possibility. All things with determination can both raise and raze, they wrote, and Jòn, at the foot of the volcano — that primal orifice of building and destroying — surely knew so better than they.

(Their direct flattery still did not elicit Jòn's response.)

The rumbling cloud above it all was that these worms had not come from stones, but from the volcano, and perhaps sometimes a cave worm was not just a cave worm.

The Volcanic Cave Worm and Other Mutants

The cave worm, like mankind, is not one. When experts realized that there might be riffs on the general tune of a rock-gnawing nematode, they quickly discovered many such alternatives, just like you can find your friend's coat in the pile once he tells you its color.

The first was found in Iceland, 1969. As suspected, it was a volcanic cave worm. These are ferocious. Their bodies are not smooth, nor straight. Their tunnels do not spiral; they jag. Their survival is shocking, for their ultimate goal, after being birthed in the outermost shell of the volcano's cone, is to plunge into an uprising shaft

of magma. Fortunately for their race, they are very poor at this quest, and enough of them wind up giving birth along the way that their kamikaze subspecies persists.

In Antarctica, there is a frost worm. It is very slow, and it survives on luck, hoping that its rarely curling tunnel will happen upon a bit of rock. Freed from this environment, they have been able to speed up, but they never quite develop the ability to loop.

In the Amazon lives a sort with a tooth for wet bark. This organic chewer is evidence that further evolution could yield (or could already have yielded) a carnivorous cave worm.

In Turkey, a surface version wanders, nibbling flecks while fleeing the sun, never managing to escape even though it thinks, each night, it has won.

In northern Australia, huge ones. Children are told that these will bite into disobedient fingers. It might be true.

In Mongolian sands, feudal cannibals have emerged. It is suspected that they got there by delighting in the ease of slithering through the unsolid dunes. They meandered far from firm ground before discovering that sand, too small to be tunneled into and too large to swallow, could not suffice. Many grew too weak to wiggle beneath the bits; they fried in the sun. But some found rocks, and, fearful that a slender stone could not harbor two cave worms for long lives, defended their pebbly perches, learning a new way to use the tooth. Hierarchies are clear: vassals attack smaller cave worms then bring them to lords in exchange for protection and permission to nibble the dead worm and a corner of the lord's sovereign rock. They are endangered — they breed rarely — and their death will be quite deserved.

No cave worms are built for a ranked life. They would enter it with ambition, eager to taste the complexity and dynamics of communal systems, thinking their experience with the intricacy of tunnel routes could serve as a good primer, forgetting that those ducts, for all their bends and hooks, are singular. The irrepressible instinct to dig alone would beget selfish behavior (peeking into others' nooks, growing jealous, invading, thieving, assailing, devouring, and covering it all up while the rest wriggle around in their own blind pursuits) and a nasty failure of a nobly intended establishment.

Scientists wonder how the prehistoric cave worm abided in such environs. Generally, they assume that those cave worms, their smaller communities close to and shaken by an exterior world, could not lapse into assuming inherent safety or blessing. They kept strict diligence against terrors both unknown and known, those believed and those merely seen.

The Song of the Cave Worm

Should the cave worm fade away, its legacy, fairly or unfairly, would probably not be sinuous tunnels or spartan dining, but music. Fairly or unfairly, the minutiae of cave worm living have never enchanted the world. And, fairly or unfairly, only its aural grandeur truly, though briefly, captured the fascination of this world, though the cave worm didn't mean to do this.

The sounds that attracted the Tennessee hiker-discoverers bemused cave worm researchers for many years. Dissections revealed no organs that could produce the described sort of noise. Lacking the necessary internal structures, the cave worms

were assumed to make noise by the friction between their sleek bodies and their tunnels' walls. But experiments disconfirmed this hypothesis. Sensitive microphones registered no reading although seismic devices showed movement within the sample pebble. Realists dismissed the hikers' original report as a hoax, though dreamers argued it was a happy fluke and still possible yet.

Reports of humming rocks persisted, and witnesses insisted. A cadre of experimental composers gained fame in the late 1960s by holding cave worm concerts. They staged symphonies in large fields with their orchestras arranged like a half Stonehenge. Low-wage conservatory students lugged shields and drapes to channel or mute the sounds according to the conductor's instructions. TV stations clamored for broadcast rights, and bidding wars to record the events made the Beatles' contracts look pauperish.

Skeptics were numerous, howling that these well-attended, high-priced shows were fraudulent leechings based on popular legends that had long been scientifically debunked. In retort, the preeminent maestro, Gianculo Zeffifinci, permitted scientists to study one of his practice instruments, grandly assuring them they would find nought inside but quartz and cave worms. And he was right. He and all other composers refused, however, to divulge whence they extracted their sonorous stones.

Therefore, the scientists defrauded the government and spent significant endowment money on private investigators who trailed the composers to the source. The scientists made their way to the region of the once-famous Choral Cove, long before that stretch of Hawaiian shore was, in the 80s, vandalized into oblivion — just like most things musical during that decade. At the volcanic field smoothed by tides,

the scientists wished for earplugs so they could have lingered and beheld the beauty of the Gothic-looking spires nestled between the black cliffs and the ocean. The sound wasn't blaring, but, to the scientists, it was a hideous bramble, incessant and needling. They huddled to talk, hacked off crates full of fragments, then hustled away.

Hidden behind felled palms, the composers emerged, turned off their amplifiers, and went home.

After their tests detected no cave worms at all, the suspicious scientists returned to the cliffs and, digging around, discovered the wiring, the composers' equipment, and the composers. After some mutual verbal thrashing, the groups came to an agreement: in order to visit the real site and take limited specimens, the scientists vowed neither to disclose the location nor to destroy.

The cove was much plainer and gentler than the dramatic trick location just south. Its ruby-sand beach was broad and calm and washed in well-tempered tones. The composers danced a mild, swarthy dance to the lugubrious melodies while the scientists gathered their permitted quart of rocks. As their jug filled, their gnashing and arguing crescendoed. The composers stepped in and amended the deal: an entire gallon! If only they would hush now and dance.

The tempo rose, the key shifted to F-sharp major, and the composers moved the scientists like marionettes until the tarentella drenched their calculating hearts and hoisted their measuring limbs. They paired off; they formed quadrilles. When they laughed — this was often — they were always in tune. Amidst these cavorts, the

cave worms flourished and burst the tops off their homes. The unseen virtuosi augered on unfettered. Waves swelled to slap out the beat on the sand.

Despite extensive examinations, the scientists' theories were only guesses. They made very little noise on this loud planet, which, typically, had lost interest in cave worm concerts by the time the study was unveiled. This was something of a relief, for the scientists really weren't sure what caused the songs. It all made little sense; the deaf wrigglers could have no awareness of what they were making. Perhaps they enjoyed the particular frequency of the resultant vibrations. Perhaps the results didn't matter at all.

Some hobbyists have tried to carve and cajole cave worm-laden rocks into resonant shapes, but quality cave worm instruments have all but vanished, what with the ruination of the Choral Cove and the never-launched efforts to breed those colonies' remnant. Despite these attempts, none has been able to recreate the movements of music. Few ever find or hear it, though the recognition thereof takes no skill or education. Even the once-great Zeffifinci, disillusioned by the massive public failure of his Symphony of/for the Perplexed, returned to smithing songs for human orchestras. In a failed effort to be taken seriously again, he, hammer in hand at the Choral Cove, declared, "The cave worm was a fad, and I was a fool. Mankind is steady and forever." And then he swung.

Yet his biographer insists that he retained one small stone, a high G-sharp, and endeavored until his unnoticed death to sculpt it into an intense shape that could shatter glassware within a small radius. To account for the lack of literal solid

evidence, the biographer suggests that, as Zeffifinci's days ran out, the stone dwindled to so many grains of sand.

Deaths and Dyings

The cave worm leaves his life the same way he enters it: following a tunnel. He winds backward, carefully assessing his work. Each twist, he remembers. A fond turn, a dull stretch, a difficult loop. The first few are easily remembered, but at latter landmarks he needs to pause and think before he can recall what went on in that place. The farther, the fuzzier. Somewhere along the way, he will stop and rest forever.

The ICWI has catalogued the most prevalent places of last living. A body is often found at his tunnel's one intersection, sometimes accompanied, though not always. It has been difficult to determine if the pair arrived simultaneously, or if one waited for the other, or perhaps failed to wait long enough for the other, or if the latter might have intended to continue but found the other too much of an obstacle to pass.

There are ones who are afraid to look back on what they've done (or left undone); they refuse to go through with it, and they wrinkle, shrivel, and gnarl shamefully, silently stuck flat in their pit-end.

Hearing the Call

After so many cave worm luminaries fell silent, Zeffifinci's biographer kept on prophesying. "Consider the cave worm," he proclaimed, "and how it toils and spins!" He was a tad full of himself in all of this, and in the early 90s he was

outclamored by a village in eastern Hungary that, since the late 1800s, had been holding cave worm competitions.

In Szentpéterszeg, not far from the Romanian border, stone threading contests are a traditional competition of dexterity among children. Cheaters who tried to train cave worms to make straighter tunnels never came to prosper. Adults, irritated at having nothing they could do and jealous that their little Magyars got all the fun, began in the 70s an opposite approach: who could bring the pebble with the most serpentine path.

This, as it turned out, was, if not trainable, at least studyable. Each family harbored its own lineage of cave worms, carefully grouped in a series of wooden boxes all within a wooden case. These rockariums were always shown off at parties, but also always locked, lest a scheming Molnar try to filch specimens from the far more successful Bartoks. Every so often, the family patriarch would crack a pebble, and the matriarch would examine its quality. Over time, some groups were clearly inferior and boring. These were kept only for the children's game, which, of course, lost its luster once the grown-ups found their own playtime. Neither the cave worms nor the children appeared to care.

In 1991, as Eastern Europe breathed relief out from the Iron Curtain, a young Szentpéterszeg Bartok ran off to Paris with her family's heirloom pebbles. Studying their cores with advanced imaging machines, she used graphic design programs to draw models of the ineffably coiled tunnels in the tiny stones. With wires and silk, she turned them into an exhibition that she inflated around the Arc de Triomphe one April afternoon.

It was a hit, and, suddenly a celebrity, she began an international tour with her pieces. Some critics called it frivolous, but the majority applauded: “These scintillating simulacra encompass and incarnate the labyrinths of life.” — “You can feel all anguish and delight in each bend and coil. Stunningly evocative.” — “A brilliant commentary both on the messes we have wrought and on our inability to see the vital details.” — “Humbling. To think: these tiny bugs? Bulling through rock? They made their life in there.” — and other such high-falutin’ semantics. Masses flocked to her shows: in front of the Taj Mahal, beneath the Statue of Liberty, across the Golden Gate Bridge. And everyone wanted more.

The sequel show flopped. Having used the very best of the Bartok cave worms, she had to resort to second-tier stones, and these did not impress the on-looking world. Young Bartok dismantled her favorite (entitled “The Eightyfold Path”) and hanged herself with the wire.

Szentpéterszeg’s mayor commissioned a Budapest architecture firm to turn “The Eightyfold Path” into a children’s playground. Despite its immense construction costs, the project was completed within a year. The concrete supports of the structure incorporated the remainder of the Bartok stones, so as young Szentpéterszegers crawl the tunnel, so too do Bartok cave worms.

Years later, an ICWI team sneaked to the town and chipped off a few flecks. Desperate to solve about burrowing patterns what they had been unable to solve about music, they vowed to solve the manifold mystery. Comparing the tunneling rates between the Bartok bunch and a control set, they discovered a slew of cave worm corpses, many times greater than the typical amount for specimens of those sizes.

They repeated the Italian X-ray procedure and discovered that, while the Bartoks tunneled at the usual rate, they coupled at a far higher frequency, gave birth at a far higher frequency, and died at a far lower age. The deaths were all natural; it must be exhausting to weave a wondrous life.

On closer inspection and on a nearly imperceptible scale, the Bartok tunnels looked slashed and ragged. These winding worms, it seemed, writhed not in joy but in agitation. They chomped the stone with force. The sharp formations must have caused great pain to the progressing cave worm, yet on she went with no less forward motion than any of her cousins.

Introducing infant cave worms to the Bartok tunnels yielded sporadic results. While some learned to imitate the radical routes, others rebelled and went rather straight when they forged their own. There was very little pattern, no matter where the cave worms had come from. Some spun, some sat. The scientists were confused, for this debunked their thoughts on microevolution having happened in the little cloisters of Hungarian rockariums, but then they realized this hereditary irrelevance proved that tunneling was an acquired, chosen skill: the cave worm does what it chooses.

When the scientists returned to Szentpéterszeg to share this result, they heard a humming from the playground. They wondered...

Returning to their lab, they switched off all the buzzing, blipping, chirping equipment — they heard the hums again, loudest from the stones with purely Bartok cave worms, though also faint tones — yet growing — from the stones influenced by Bartok patterns.

What the Cave Worm Does

A letter of young Bartok's, undated:

I stole grandpa's best stones. I'm sure you all suspected me. This will bring disgrace upon him, for he will be too proud to admit having been burglarized, while his second-best are not enough to win again next year. I feel sad for this loss, and sad for how I will surely never return to Szentpéterszeg, not without risking my life. But these stones, these worms — they call me to do this...whatever it is I shall do. I will make sure you someday have it.

I see it as a fine thing, a map of sorts, since it will take you somewhere. Not a practical way, not even a physical way. A rough way and difficult, easy-to-quit. Do not quit it. I know you won't. You are my son.

I know this makes no sense all vague. As I crawl and craft, I am unsure. Wait until you can enter it, and then you will go. Only follow my way for a way, and feel how to make yours.

Please win the stone threading for grandpa. Practice on stones from the low-numbered cells. I know; they are tortuous. On the day, pick one from box twenty-four. It will seem as wide and straight as a ox's nostril.

To my so-young son,
Mama

The Museum

The North American Cave Worm Museum in Cave City, KY, enlarges the cave worm's life to human size. At the entrance, you are blindfolded. Your tour guide slaps you then leaves you. You could try to follow her, but you (wisely) fear she will attack you far worse upon a second encounter. So you push into what seems like a wall of packed, moistened cobwebs, raking your way forward. You find it fun, gouging a path yourself, a path never before made and never to be made again (though the museum refills the material hourly). You become a bit proud, then ashamed of your pride because it's not like you could do anything wrong. Your behavior lacks intent.

So you decide to find that particular, kind companion you'd hopefully dragged to the museum. You shout, but the material muffles the sound, and you can't hear his reply. If he replied. Perhaps he has no need for you now; perhaps he is having fun, even having moments and steps of transcendence, tunneling solo. You yell louder, you jump on the floor, you turn wildly anytime something — a thinning of the webbing; the murmur of probably just your legs' brushing but maybe another's motion; some tremble in the ground — suggests a soul near to you, near enough to be reached, and it no longer matters who it is.

Then you hear the soft call. You turn to it in a bound, clawing clumps larger than you'd suspected your hands could. You hear, "I'm over here." He speaks lower than you remember, but that's (you assure yourself) the dampening acoustic of this warm stringy gunk that's keeping you so alone, and you seek him still. Now you rush (so does your heart) as you feel pulses from his footfalls; but wait — they hit so heavy, unmistakably heavy, especially considering the webbing's cushioning. You step lighter. You pause. "This way, or another?" he asks, but you can't respond to that voice. "This way, or another?" — you let it pass, and you move in exactly your way rather than weaving and twisting for something merely possible and there.

When you emerge, you are inside a typical museum speckled by glass cases and well-labeled scraps. He is at the Italian X-rays that detail the pace of cave worm tunneling. He asks, "Didn't you hear my calling?" and you have to say no, and this evening you will drop him at his house, a gibbous moon breaching the horizon.

MU TESTAMENT

A monk asked Zhaozhou Congshen, a Chinese Zen master, “Has a dog Buddha-nature or not?” Zhaozhou answered, “Mu.”

—*The Gateless Gate*

At last he fell asleep, with his hands covering the vulnerable parts of his body, and wishing he had hands to cover himself all over.

—VS Naipaul, *A House for Mr. Biswas*

If I see three oranges, I have to juggle.

—Phillipe Petit

ORPHANAGE (PROLOGUE)

Being God, You must know everything. Up to a point, only up to a point. What point is that. The point where it becomes interesting to pretend I do not know.

—Jose Saramago, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*

Several existences ago, the God made a big mistake growing up. Or rather, didn't make. "Well," She tried to pardon Herself, "I didn't have any parents." Still, She could see there was nothing and that that was Her fault. "Things," she shuddered, "what a worry." And She was right; She could have messed them all up.

She huddled in Her cosmic corner and moped, hoping to massage Her shame into self-pity. But, so honest, She could only knead it from pointy guilt to lumpy loneliness, an aching accurate feeling: in the nothingness, She could not find Her self to keep Her company. She couldn't even buy from a pet store a calico kitten to soften the hardness of Her empty life.

She got active. She whirled and whirled (something about that word seemed close to fulfilling) in the nothingness. She had fun at first but grew nauseated, so She stopped. She played with concepts (stereognosis, the Maillard reaction, octagonal symmetry), juggling them, learning to crash them together into paradoxes, delighting in Her play. *Use these later*, She jotted on a scrap of aether, *and often*.

With repetition and practice, the God grew able to juggle longer, and with more jugglables. Inventing tricks like the Inverted Flux Flip or the Mid-Spin Knockback, She found a twig of contentment in Her imaginative recreation. She

developed rituals, performing particular exchanges in a never varied order. Stability flowed in, and, in the safety of ruled routines, She felt OK. She made Her life in there.

It wasn't enough. She returned to invention, and, rehearsing a new combo move, She felt a twinge, like the sharp yet relieving extraction of a splinter, leaving a vacuum that ached, but nicely. She examined herself, desperate to find what had been removed. Then she saw. There, a thing was there. It rested in front of Her, quivering and very fuchsia. The thing looked dangerous, possibly destructive, but it was intriguing. She had made something; She smiled at it, though gingerly, for She felt She had been a little pitted, maybe robbed.

She itched; She wanted to make more. Not clones, but other things, at least. She tried to remember what maneuver she had been doing — the Swap Toss? The Backward Hold-Heave? — when the first thing appeared. She began, but stopped, remembering the stab of it. She became frightened that the next thing, made intentionally, would be bigger, uglier, and even more painful to pop out. Perhaps it would seriously empty Her.

She was tickled to have made it — the knowledge of power is a joy — but wary of the cost to repeat it. Inside Her, joy tried to spurt as from a shaken bottle of beer, but she capped the ecstasy, worried She couldn't ever recapture it, and laid it away. She moved far from the thing, hating it for its taunting implication of obligation. It had destroyed Her la-la life, had torn open Her tent of casual living. Sure, She had been insecure before, but the discovery of Her creative abilities proved that She was very far from where She could have been.

Afraid and alone, She begat a son, which didn't ache. He was a fine son, full of Godliness and energy. His perpetual motion made Her feel dull. She was jealous; he seemed to have no problem charming himself in the nothingness. He came up with games — She wanted to play! He tried to teach Her, but She was sometimes slow to grasp all the required transactions and interactions. She often quit before the heart of the game could happen. Perhaps he was the real God, She thought, and Her job was to disintegrate beneath him like the mother of those little spiders that hatch then chew their mom apart.

But, as sons do, he got bored: “Madammit, there's nothing going on.”

The God juggled this idea of names and the idea of portraiture and the idea of semiotics. “We don't need to,” She concluded. “We are.”

“Whatever that's good for. We never do stuff. Or make stuff. Boring.”

Humiliated that Her son was right and cringing that he somehow seemed to know Her manufacturing abilities, the God sent him to his room. “We don't have rooms,” the snotty deity sneered. He wandered away, and She let him, relieved that his absence freed Her to juggle again the questions of being and doing. She felt She was progressing toward an understanding of entelechy, but then he found the thing.

His squeal disturbed the universe and Her. He laughed, “Where did this come from? Why is it here?” When She said nothing, he looked at it more closely. He felt weak at being unable to fathom how to make a thing. He began to look up to his Mother. He began to wonder what all She knew that he didn't, couldn't. He asked, “What can we do with it?”

The God grew bloated with shame. “I don’t know what that is. Stay away from it.” She pitied it. “Anyway, it’s not so bad; it deserves to be unbothered.”

“It’s so gross,” he scoffed, a little afraid.

“But it wants to be touched and molded.” So did he. So did She.

The God pondered their intangibility: finite, like a thin, flat shoreline by a boisterous ocean. She realized juggling might be far more fun with hands. Then one could juggle, say, underripe avocados or polyisoprene orbs or bronzed scimitars. Merely hoping for external fun, She began, slowly and arduously, to test tactility, negotiating the thin strait from vision to substance.

In secret, She cranked out things: bulbous ochre horns, a pack of prickly sticks, tough trod trenches; pausing after each to recover from the strain, but never really feeling as exerted as she feared. She got used to it, toughed it out, even claimed to like the slight twinge of each invention, though secretly She felt She was underperforming.

Unwrapping each trifle, She felt like a naughty child on Christmas, knowing She ought to have done better but still insistent on deserving a delight. And then she dared approach the biggest. Disgrace could have been within. What if the thing were ruinous? What if it, colossal, pushed Her and Her son from their place, demanded their service? What if they became defined by this thing, or even contained? As if in a box.

Oh well; She made it anyway; She, with a yawping lunge, inflated a full physical world. Her son watching, She yanked it outward and outward, sweating and

burning while expanding it from an irregular heptagon into an icosahedron into a mass of wormy tendrils, mingling, growing, combining. She lost Her grip, couldn't hold it anymore, couldn't give it anymore. It floated for awhile, its molten strips dangling down like myriad tentacles. She was barely aware of it, Her thoughts blackened by the slowly ebbing agony. In her stupor, She worried it would fray apart; She stopped; She was feeble after all. A quitter. As it drifted away, its arms slipped off, leaving only its knotty head, bumping along like a tumbleweed, turning slowly. She gave it a twist, and little things began to squirm all around. Still woozy, She was pleased with this start; She was afraid it wouldn't continue; She was subsumed in its becoming.

“Whoa,” Her son marveled. He hadn't suspected the depths of Her making. “Teach me that.”

“Umm,” the God stalled, “I think you're made for something else, *mi principe*. Hold on. I'll let you know.” How he wanted to know!

At first, the God kept Her son away from the burgeoning world, worried he would leave Her for its sensual promise. He was watching, She could tell, hoping to mock any structural absurdity or manufacturing miscut. “Haha, Mama, that's goofy,” he'd jeer, and the God did not want goofiness. She wanted extension, connection, interaction. She wanted the still warmth of a father's hand on Her shoulder and the champagne zest of a child's hand on her knee and all the degrees between. She wanted the world to show Her, to give Her these touches.

The first world, nonetheless, was goofy. On a hot afternoon, eleven barnacles sprang from most navels. The masses of atoms varied depending upon photon levels.

Boys went to bed in fear of awakening as armoires. Nothing remained itself long enough to do much of anything.

It was widely goofy, and the son, relieved that it would not surpass his place in Her life, laughed for eons at the chaos. “Seriously? Did you seriously think this anarchical, inchoate galaxy would be able to juggle? Come on, you were joking. Good one, Mama, good one.”

Although She metaphysically blushed (and he knew it), She laughed as well, wanting to join him. Anyway, he had misunderstood Her hopes for feeling and the emergence of greatness. She smote the whole thing.

The son got pissy. “I wanted to do that. Let me next time.”

“Maybe.” She had no intention for another goofy, disposable world, and felt lucky that She hadn’t been overtaken by it. What a waste of suffering to have made it. “Maybe there won’t be a next time.”

All he had really wanted was to watch longer, to see if, perhaps, it would have been possible for the beings to connect and blossom into their own full worlds. He thought he’d never get the chance. “Please let me,” he begged.

She denied him.

Single parenting is painful. Often for the parent, too.

The second world’s birth went easier; She did it Caesarian style — cut and pre-planned, surgical. She stabilized it with logic and consequence. Almost love, also, but the son argued that passion mixed with reason would sputter and foam.

“That’ll be goofy,” he said, doubtful She would listen, but pretty sure he was right about this one.

To the God, love plus logic sounded like one of those fun paradoxes She had yearned to meld, but Her son’s caution spilled a thick puddle onto Her hope. She couldn’t try such a risky idea, not while he watched. She was the God, after all, and She needed to appear faultless. He needed to see perfect growth; he could follow Her model toward whatever it was he was. “I’m glad you saw that,” She said, and said he’d passed a test.

He was surprised; he smiled for once without irony. “And You should add foresight,” he added. He, too, wanted this world to beam. It did; built on a Cartesian grid, its precision was a technical marvel. Signs marked all the paths, and the groundlings walked iambically.

Time (another addition, which really cleared things up) passed, and Mother and son enjoyed some betting on the events below. The wagers were friendly and trivial, and the God always defined the terms. She knew that, if She followed rational thought lines, everything was predictable. To please Her son, She proposed plenty of faulty predictions, usually letting him win more than She so he’d like Her and keep playing, keep near.

The son caught on, but he didn’t say anything. He was bored again by the lack of possibility or newness. “This time, Mama, You name the claim, and I’ll lay the lines.”

“That one at his breakfast table,” the God asserted, “will leave work to visit the cobbler this evening.”

The son thought for a minute and listened to the world; the toast nibbler's shoe was creaking; the rate of erosion would cause discomfort well before evening, probably by lunchtime. "If You are wrong," the son stated, "You must let me uncreate it this time."

Then he grimaced. He knew She knew his trick. He shouldn't have been so immediately bold; he should have played along, lost a few. She was going to retract it, possibly retract Herself from him and his bloodlust. He almost hedged, but he decided that being strong was best. He was Her son, full of power and might; he would show Her all.

She knew She'd been hoodwinked. She was horrified to imagine another uncreation. While the world's plainness had disappointed Her, She felt fond for the gentle games it afforded them. She couldn't rescind the bet, so She tried to reassign it to another being: "I meant that one. That one." The son refused. She found Herself trapped in rules. Perhaps, perhaps She could fudge the world, fog the bad-shoed being's mind, numb his pain, make him wait until evening. A small cheat to save a solid, innocuous world.

But Her son would have noticed. "No more smiting," She tried to declare. "I'll just rearrange a bit. If You win." He smirked and agreed. His chance would come eventually. He had figured out how to dupe her.

Noon came, and the man, befuddled at his pain, sat down to rub his blistering sole. He looked at the black shoe's back and shouted in triumph at his deductive powers. He marched proudly out the door. The son was about to brag and tease, but he saw his Mother was bent and beaten. "Look, Mama, You were right before, You

see? They need something else. This is boring. This is worse than goofy. It's no fun if they can't fail, no fun if they don't get to decide." He thought, *Just like I never get to decide here.*

She was glad he said that. Ready for a touch of goofiness, She shook it heartily, and all the beings died. "Ah," She cried, as once again Her power startled Her, as once again Her inability to control it saddened Her.

He loved the raw decimation of the static place; inert, it had been no more than nothing. "Good one, Mama." He realized he, too, was nothing, had done nothing. Again. Moreover, because of him, all had been undone. He was a universal negative. "But let me shake it next time; maybe I won't kill it all."

The God repented and retired from making. "No, no more of this."

"OK, good," the son said. "I'll make it." He hoped to relieve Her. He loved Her and wanted to be Her.

"No, no more at all." What She meant was: *This business of creating is very sorrowful, and I lose something every time.* What She was thinking was: *Who can tell me how to do this right before I'm spent?* She remembered the very first thing. Its blobby visage sneered, teased Her with dreams of more perfect objects — and beings. Beings that could become. Beings that could work toward Her and find Her and say, "There You are, oh, there You are!" And they would ask Her what it was like to create, and She'd tell them, and they'd say, "Ah, yes, we get a taste of that down here." And She would ask them what it was like to handle things. And they would tell Her about juggling, and She'd say, "Ah, yes, I always suspected as much," and they'd all say thanks.

She went to that first thing to smite it, but it did not burst. It sat, shimmered a bit, and blipped and blopped. It mocked.

Her son, She thought, perhaps he knew how to really create. Perhaps he did create, secretly. And if he did, would he chide Her for not knowing? Or for knowing but not pulling through the pain? Would he laugh and call Her goofy? He would. He would realize She was a fraud God, and he would grow daring, and he would be the one to make the richly interfolded world. She retreated to Her corner, longing to rest in silence and absence, maybe for always.

Her son pestered Her while She tried to nap: “Can we make another one? Pleasepleaseplease.” She said nothing. “You’re being like those boring beings.”

“I’m content.”

He abandoned hope of seeing action and risk. “We could have made another one.”

Well, wasn’t he getting uppity. *We*? He meant *She*, no? Or so She hoped. She hadn’t been watching him always. What was he supposed to be doing anyway? He must have been making things. Worlds even, practicing gently while She drained herself on misforms. What realms had he wrought? Did that hurt him? Were they ruled or wild? Would they encroach the heavens, invade and force the God to incarnate and be a mere member like so many others? Maybe that would be easier. But being the God was not meant for ease.

She became awake. She remembered the warmth of when he watched Her build, a salve on the pain of production. She made again, deliberately, in front of Her son. With greater concentration, she dragged the flotsam of the old world back

together, embroidering it with all the concepts She had loved and juggled, patiently and cautiously getting them right, pausing often to keep her focus amidst what felt like a whirlpool sitting beneath Her, slurping at Her, guzzling Her down and out.

Suddenly She got it; She wrought a wormhole and funneled what flowed from Her into the clump She'd knit. The clump couldn't hold it all; from its bottom burst out a flagellum, and another, and still more. They wrangled and wiggled, thickening and whipping; eight full arms splayed out from the head; the galactic octopus pulsed and squished, pulsed and squished along.

Now She had it. She commanded it to ball, and it did, knotting its arms above its head. The suction cups shot out ribbons, joining in intricate intersections. These jaunty veins broadened and forged a net of bridges around the octopus's outer limits. A turf skin spread across its lattice. Mounds sprouted; pools sank. Things swam, flew, crawled. Groundlings bloomed, testing their arms and grasps, learning to hold pomegranates and hurdle hedgehogs and peel bananas and soak cashews and chew peaches and spit the pits of cherries. They spread all over, and She wasn't sure She'd be able to tend to them all. Her son found this very exciting, and always kept his eyes wherever Hers were not. That was where he hoped to see something happen.

There were seasons, now, and when winter came the beings began to feel cold. She watched one who was bothered by his nose, rubbing it. She could tell he wanted to do something, and She knew exactly what. *Make a scarf*, She hoped, *make a scarf!* But he just stood there and let his chilled septum drip, drip, drip. She gave him a scarf.

He smiled and huddled in it, showed it to his friends, let them use it in shifts to warm their foreheads or earlobes or lips. Then they grew jealous, threatened him, told him he had no sole right to it. The God quickly dropped several more scarves around the frosted hills. That had been close, but soon they all were warmed.

It went like this: they wanted, She gave. She made their lives down there.

The son was deeply let down. He watched Her form lean-tos, then shanties, then houses, then towns. He watched Her string fences along pastures. He watched Her continual involvement, watched Her, watched Her, watched Her, but couldn't pull Her away. "It's the same now," he sighed.

"The same?"

"As the last one."

"No, look, they want. They ache. They love."

"You fill their wants, soothe their aches, and calibrate their loves. They haven't made any of that. It's the same."

She was sure they could make, sure they could follow Her clearly established example.

"Let them," he suggested.

She tried to disprove him. She grew bold and funkified everything. "Why don't you putz around in it?"

He was ready. "I'm going to invert all systems."

"Well, how about only one-third or so."

"Perfect idea; none of them will have a clue which rules have remained. Can I make some inversions run on a temporal cycle?"

The God, though concerned for Her beings, felt proud of Her son's interest in cosmic intricacies, even if only to muddle. But he was growing, yes, he would yet go far; She would mold him well, better than She had been. How he could shine! She eagerly watched him make his moves in the world, eagerly watched how the world moved in response. This was all She wanted. Perhaps She needed to give no more. She reclined and snacked, ready to preserve Herself for eternity.

The beings suffered in the son's reordered world. Suddenly bereft of providence, they ran rampant and abused the glory of physicality: snapping doors, spitting on clocks, shredding octopodes and kittens. They lurched around between dust-slathered huts and bones of old toys. In a final act of collective belligerence, they tore down the Omnificent Ballroom and passed out on the splintery pile rather than walk back to their homes. Night and cold came. They lit a fire in the middle of the wreck and lay close to its twisting flames. The heat warmed them, then burned them, then consumed them. No one pulled himself away.

Mother and son felt shame and stumbled away. "Oh, they were goofy!" the son tried to chide, but it wasn't funny. He admitted, "I feel ill."

The God felt ill, too. "But I won't abandon it."

"It's hideous now."

"Well," She replied, "let's remake it."

In the re-beginning, the God contemplated Her son. Always slouching around the heavens, he didn't seem to have figured out much. Her fault, perhaps, but She, on Her own, had figured out lots. She'd tried. He should have seen that She'd tried,

always tried. He should have known better, should have done better. Still, should She be saying something?

The world, gurgling sloppily, pressed into Her mind. Her compunction about Her *laissez faire* motherhood coalesced with Her compunction about the world's disintegration, and She began again, flinching to feel the whirlpool's tug again, drawing and drawing Her out. It had little left to pull. Shameful, that — how little She had.

In a last burst, She conceived a big rule for the renewed reality: that each being shall emerge only from parents who'd had time to harvest tips to hand down — a head start. "That should settle things, but not too much," She explained to Her son, admitting neither Her fear that it would not be enough nor Her fear that She could do no other.

She breathed across the world, whipping the low-lurking smoke into froth puffs that lightened and lifted into the sheltering sky. Each breath left Her wheezed. The old beings' ruins skittled away like immaterial embers. She grew faint and couldn't see the clean-up. The base surface rattled, then detached, then sheared away. So did her mind, blanketed by a deluge coursing around, through, and out of Her, carrying everything in its stream. The God laid down fresh planetary upholstery, planted life all over, and passed out for a day.

He didn't like Her rule. Always meddling. Full independence was his way to living. After all, hadn't he more or less made himself? Hadn't he? He had. And he had made himself into—he wasn't sure. He nearly asked his Mother what he was, but he doubted She could have said even if She'd been conscious. What was She?

Mother; a Maker, maybe. He doubted She truly knew. She hadn't given Herself much of a head start, yet still She tried. She did, even when she feared. What had he done? Genocide, effectively. But She'd allowed him. She bore that blood, too.

He realized She deeply regretted Her lapse of authority and wished She'd known how to jiu jitsu his violent meddlings into peaceful tumbles. He wished that, too. He didn't know how to rule, but he understood Her new rule. His abhorrence of framework melted into admiration for his Mother's supple, compassionate trellis of parental guidance. She'd put all Her self into it, so he'd support it. Maybe he could give himself, too.

The two first new groundlings complained, "Why don't we have any parents?"

"What about me?" the son said generously.

"You don't count. You're not us." They turned away.

"Look at your bellies."

They looked and piddled at their tiny knots. They were unimpressed. They covered their little pits with leaves and laughed at such a goofy, useless design. They kicked an octopus, then they hiked around like kings. The son got angry and tripped them. "Asshole," they spat. They ran out of their garden.

The God awoke and cried, "Where have they gone, oh, where have they gone?"

"I lost them, Mama," apologized the son, now sure he'd never get his chance as prime architect.

She raged but lost her fury in a flurry of whimpering coughs. “Well, I made them self-replicative. Later generations will get it. Always takes a bit to figure things out.”

“Yeah, right. Do I have to watch another regression? I’m bored.”

“Why don’t you go play down there?”

“With them? Those goofs? Haha, good one, Mama.” He was very frightened now; would he be cast down; had he lost his heavenly place?

“Give ‘em a shot.”

“Good one, Mama, good one.”

“I mean it.”

“Will you come?”

“I don’t think I can.”

“Then how can I?”

“You’re different. Try.”

“Try? Myself?” He slumped off.

Even though his apathy disheartened Her, She let him stop watching. He was nearly of age, badly in need of shaping up, but She preferred watching the earthly play; it had become ornate. Sometimes the beings were idiots, yelling slanders and bashing each other with poles. The God snapped at them; they rarely heard; perhaps She’d lost Her voice. Sometimes they were beautiful, brewing affection, shaping shelters, and making bits to add to the life they’d been given. The God cooed at them; they rarely felt it; perhaps She’d never had their touch. Sometimes She talked to them, to any of them, but they were not impressed. “Don’t you have anything

interesting to say?” they asked. She thought a bit. “Anything new at all?” they asked. She supposed She didn’t. She shut up.

They grew quieter. She at first suspected they were screening something from Her, but it became clear they had grown lazy and scared of messing up. She understood. Her son, lonely, giped at their cowardice — “They couldn’t even finish a fuchsia blob, huh? You’re too good for them anyway.”

She hushed him: “They might call on me to guide them. Any day now.”

The son said nothing until he had watched awhile. “They won’t. Be glad.”

“But I want to help them build lives strong and agile and wise as octopus mothers.”

“Then let them be eaten.”

The beings certainly weren’t being eaten, She thought. They were barely moving. Perhaps it was the summer heat, or perhaps they needed to feel moved from above. She started to hug them, but Her son reminded Her of the Great Shake.

“Besides, with what will you hug?” he asked. Eager to surpass Her, he volunteered, “Maybe I can touch them.” He would try, after all.

“Go touch them. First, though, hide yourself in their clothes. They don’t like me much.” She liked this plan, liked that Her son, so unknowing, would push them onward, upward. In her arose a tingling, a pre-spectre of feeling.

The son, for the first time in eternity, was elated. Fun fluttered at his forming fingertips. Oh, he would feel everything and romp in all that space and listen to the ever-tumbling noises. He rushed down before She could prepare his way.

She waited to hear from him. There wasn't much else for Her to do, it seemed. He didn't call. She wondered what he was doing, but She didn't worry. She didn't have much of Herself to worry about. She figured She was just about done, everything laid on the table, and time to wait for the return on her investment.

She had not juggled lately. Perhaps She would not remember the cadence. Anyway, what did She have to toss? Everything that was, was in so much motion, so very fast. She grew dizzy and had to strain to see if the world was driving anywhere at all. It didn't seem so; what was he doing with his life down there?

EDIBLE PARABLES

He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Continental Breakfast

You, bold Meriwether — you take both soily Nebraska and stony Idaho into your
country.

You, mighty Meriwether — you annex both Missouri's streams and Montana's
badlands into your union.

You, conquering Meriwether — you traverse Kansases and Dakotas, cross Rockies
and Plattes,

find your Pacific crashing over the corner of your country.

And you come home

in pieces.

Galette

Argument: crust or filling —

which nests your soul?

The panlucent flake crown, glazed

baked manna glimmering around, holding beneath

The libidinous custard heart, and its cherry plumps

bursting sweet through dulled skins

Choose all?

Omelette

First let it cool. Take it to your oak chair

hard in the early afternoon sun. Slice,

let the sausagey cheese ooze

out its tongue, creeping

like your cat's creeping

each quarter hour, his rump left

by elusive light again and again and

yet he chases.

At two-fifteen he should be near you.

Pet him who stays

a cat:

gnaws a robin; swats a schnauzer; claws a couch.

Rising, he pads

to his aqua bowl

and laps laps laps.

Risotto

You'll like this start: don't wash the rice.
But measure it, about a half-cup per person,
and blaze two burners halfway. Center one pot
atop each flame, and, from height,
drizzle olive oil into one
until a pad whose diameter,
in inches, equals the ounces (volume) of rice.
Let it heat. Chop an onion. Chop a clove of garlic
per person. Chop whatever else
you want in the mélange.
Goad the onion into the pot,
watch its edges melt,
then add the garlic. It grows a brown crown.
Now add the rice. Stir, stir, stir.
In the other, pour a cup of stock
per person. Pick through your herbs,
add three favorites. Stir the rice.
You have begun.
Is the rice crackling? Splash a gulp of ale
per person. Stir, stir, stir.
Stock simmers; lower the heat.

Rice bubbles; lower the heat.

When do you add the stock?

Later. Let the rice grow

dry, tense, tough

then scoop a slug of stock.

Stir, stir, stir.

Now you have a moment. Select your cheese

and grate until the mound resembles a rodent.

More stock, stir, stir, stir.

Per person, grate one variable rat (papa, bebe, mama, grammy),

stirring at least thrice during its lifespan.

Liquid low, rice bloated, guests coming,

already here inside.

Stir in the cheese, pick out your bowls,

it's all so simple.

Soufflé

The folding, after all
the stirring and beating and whipping,
wants breath in your batter —

cumulus? Or nimbus.

Your spatula turns infuse lift
or pop the spots of air that hold the fluff.

In the oven it will rise or fall.

Octopus

Unfurled,
a supple limb
you will never grasp,
not even swallowed
whole, slipping
into abyssopelagic zones
beneath
your heart.

Duck Confit

Plating is the art
of pretending your meal is not
animal. The duck appreciates
arrangements and accouterments —
had not his plumage been splendiferous?

As now it lies
 sack of scraps outside Quackton Farms
 barnyard dirt, boot-beat
 this quill

His leg on your plate, ruddy shards
of bare meat splintering
from the bone that is a bone.

Foie Gras

How they stuff you!

But you haven't got
muscles that might refuse fat
foodpaste down your gullet.

How they slice you!

And split your bits,
picking just the one
to be throned
on brioche with plum.

Beef Short Ribs

Bones and meat, stiff in the skillet,

searing, spitting fat

on wrenched wrists.

Turn with tongs. Salt, pepper, caraway.

Turn with tongs, upright.

The sheared rib bleeds.

The sinew sheath shrinks

down, off.

You're finished here.

Dump in dark lager and walk out

as tang and spice flood those fibers,

flake them away, drenched

and ruined for good.

Mousse

So it is
yolk sugar cream white essence
of lemon — whipped heated whipped folded
high beyond elementalism.

So you are
blood nerve hair air fiber
on bone — tangled held tangled taut
between this realm and that.

And the froth of flesh
slumps into sludge
as citrus wafts.

Gelato

Choose one, love. Choose rosemary
or ginger or mahlab or juniper or galangal or
saffron or anise or chervil or grapefruit
but not all.

In heated milk infuse
the leaf or zest or flake or seed. Watch
the oils release, tinting the skin.
Flavor, spreading and filling.
Flavor, alone and wholly.
Flavor, thee. Flavor thee. Savor.

The Chef Does Not Visit the Dining Room

“Too much? Exactly!” he erupted at me, sloshing lobster bisque into fishbowls, garnishing them with lopsided sheaves of thyme. I could barely hoist the platter. And when I slugged back to the kitchen a crate of scarcely nibbled sweetbreads, he bellowed, “Don’t clear a single scrap!” Plates I may remove, and bowls, but only to be met by, “Refill it! See what they can take,” as he shoves into my path the barrel of watermelon sherbet.

It’s a badly run place, despite (because of?) the unimpeachable authority. One night, twenty-six new tables get wedged into one hall, while in the next, half the chairs sit empty, their places not even set. We doubt chef knows his clientèle. Though some diners leave swearing to his greatness, more are evicted by the taciturn maitre d’. They whimper to his impassive ears, “But I wasn’t done, wasn’t even started,” dragged irreversibly out. He explains, on occasion, but are the eaters satisfied? Ha. I support his silence. As if a seat is deserved. We take no reservations, but we give no bills. So it’s fine if you don’t tip, but — ahem — feel free to.

Why, then, do we work? I ask you, why do you eat? It is here, as are we. We waiters make no mistakes, but we are not always informed. Complain, sure, if that’s your thing. Proclaim to me, “I ordered quail!” (a fine choice!) — but know there is nothing to be done about it. Object, “I didn’t ask for raspberry ganache!” (a bit heavy, to me) — but know there is nothing to be done about it. Chef sends the courses as he will, and they aren’t going anywhere else; don’t talk about tiny kids in a

dry-dust country. Know there is nothing to be undone about these deposits. My laying a plate on your table is no suggestion to eat, nor an endorsement of flavor, nor an indication of your gastrointestinal abilities. Your guts are yours; I serve you only as I must: bestowal. The meal is what it is, and more, and your table cannot be emptied by me.

ORTS (THE PASSION)

Crackling in the billowing flames fueled by fat, the limp, disemboweled carcass of the little dove would not even fill a cavity of one of God's teeth. At the foot of the ramp three priests are waiting. A calf topples to the ground, felled by a cleaver, my God, my God, how fragile you have made us.

—Saramago, *ibid.*

Her son hadn't called, but the God hadn't stopped watching him wander in Her world. After his incarnation and relocation, She barely recognized him; he seemed to have shrunk, slowing and looking rather like the groundlings. "Where has he gone, oh, where has he gone?" She lamented as he sloughed into a cave. She considered begetting a second, but She wasn't a quitter. "Ah, there he is, there he is." Alone, She smiled at his clutching at stalactites, pressing on the cavern's walls, stretching his new neck. "There he is." How strong he was, alone, and how upright. How much better than the groundlings and all that stuff, the stuff and groundlings She'd made. And yet, he was sure to struggle as he tried to be in a physical world with dangers and dramas. She felt bad for wanting to see it, to know it.

He looked at his hands; they were smaller than he had expected. Frailer, too, and stubborn in the morning's chill. Perhaps his Mother would be disappointed in them. Perhaps She would be disappointed in him if he didn't become a corporeal carnival. No. He would show her what bodies could do; he would make a comfortable home of his. He refused to fail; he would be flawless for Her, show Her how delightful Her world was.

He used his hands to pick up a stone. Another and another. He tossed one, tossed the second and caught the first, tossed the third and caught the second, tossed the first which cracked the third and fell onto his bare big toe. It hurt a lot. Hurt surprised him. He wasn't so fond, entirely, of senses, of the polarity of pain and pleasure and how easily one or the other could be inflicted. He certainly preferred the latter and thought that these feelings must have been how his Mother talked to him, easing him along. Each spur of pain felt like a judgment, a declaration of having been incompetent. Each moment of discomfort suggested he was not in the right, not absolutely right.

He walked out and saw some of the groundlings. His hands and their hands were the same, but he was sure they could tell he wasn't quite the same. He was sure they could tell he was greater (but how?). He was sure.

Four of them were taking turns at trying to juggle chunks of wood. He stopped them: "What was that? Where did you learn that?"

"Hmm," they said, "we're not too sure. Just something we do."

"Did your father? Or your mother?"

"Could've been. Couldn't say. Probably does run in the blood."

He, if not they, knew these echoes, which they considered piddling quirks, were more than physical. They had not trickled down from their parents but from his Parent — waiting, begging to be seen, held, sprung — infused inside since always. He took the chunks from them and made a few throws; strong at first, but soon wobbly; he got a splinter and gave up.

"But you're good! Show us how," they pled.

“I don’t know,” he told them before realizing he, as practically a co-creator, was supposed to know all. “I mean, it’s tough to explain.”

“Oh, don’t say anything. Just do that again.”

Eager to bring enlightenment, he began a lecture on projectile physics and muscular physiology and how, by using all their senses — such as sight, wherein their eyes and brains conduct a series of differential equations to assemble the position and velocity of things to fling them —

“Stop. Thanks. Just do what you did again. We’ll watch and figure it out. We’ll help.”

Insolence. He didn’t resume his oration. He would have walked away, but he saw echoes of his Mama in their juggling impulse. He liked them for that. He figured doing, too, was teaching (was this not how he learned from Her?), and he would show how well She would have juggled had She been there. Was she watching? Watch!

Suddenly he really didn’t know. Two in left hand, or two in right? He bobbled his arms, relocated the third chunk again and again, but couldn’t get himself to begin. All at once, he heaved them up; they clattered and hit him on the head. The groundlings laughed.

“Haha, good one, that’s a good one!”

“How’d you get so lucky that first time, then?”

“Short memory, this one.”

They stood looking at him as if he was supposed to pick up the chunks and return them. They made no effort at all. He had scurried to gather them, tried to put them back in the groundlings' hands, but none of them had any interest.

His Mother grew enraged at their derisive shunning. She swirled up a tornado quartet. The four mockers observed the silvery funnels burrowing toward them. The beings felt the gales, but they were not afraid. They pointed and smiled, riven by the proximity of power.

The son tried to get them to run, but they refused to budge. He tried to corral them away, but they formed too strong a group. The twisting cluster spun downward, snatching thin branches, snatching the chunks they'd been juggling, tugging their limbs. He was leaning to sprint back to the cave, fearing that She was smiting him for failing so quickly, but he stopped. There were four, all for those four. "Please, Mama. It's okay. They're okay."

The tornadoes disintegrated, and debris began to tumble down. The beings, with hairs swimming atop their heads, were stunned. They hadn't heard his actual words, but they connected the sound of his voice with the termination of the show, and they begged to know how to summon the winds.

"Not now." He began kicking at the chunks as they fell from so high in the sky, and they began kicking at the chunks that fell from so high in the sky, and it was not so far from juggling.

"Two points," he declared, "for going foot-knee-shoulder." And they all tried the upward combo. He got it first, but two of them made it happen, too. "Four points if you can go head-ankle-head-elbow-head." He did it immediately. They begged for

another move. He went shoulder-shoulder-knee-toe-crown-heel-nose and caught it flat on his septum. He held it there.

“Come to our home,” the oldest said. As they walked back, the sun quieted into the evening, and into the rising chill settled a piney, limey aroma. The four were merely happy for the calm, but the son noticed it felt (smelt) like the opposite of the rowdy, sooty smell beat up by the tornadoes.

He stayed with them. They told him their names, their jobs: “I am Kwm; my father is Wm; his father was M. We are the chefs.”

The son did not pick a name of his own. “What do the letters mean?”

“Why does it matter?”

“What does matter?”

“What we do. What do you do?”

He had no answer. They were so different, it turned out, from his Mother. She wouldn’t have riddled him with such questions. She simply cuddled him and played his games with him.

“Maybe you’re another chef,” Kwm said. He led the son to the kitchen, spread rutabagas and eggplants and green beans before him. “Make us something.” They all watched. The son picked up a rutabaga, rotated it in his hand, rubbed all around it. They laughed, “Yes, good, make sweet, sweet love to it first!” He tried to set it on the counter, but it slipped off. He kicked it up, kicked it again, and was preparing to make a brand new sequence when Kwm snatched the knotty bulb from the air. “Keep your games to scraps. Don’t mess with our food.” And then they commenced chopping and searing and saucing and spooning.

He thought they were showing off, now. Well, he could show off, too. And he did. And they were impressed. After each meal, they sat in a circle and watched how he darted and dipped beneath ever-dancing chunks of wood. They made new things for him to juggle. While he tossed and kicked and flipped, they dreamed of new meals to make. When he managed to syncopate his elbow bobble, they thought of pairing porter with chocolate. When he started using his chest to soften the descent of the chunks before toeing them back up, they considered how to assemble disparate ingredients. They fed him their splendidest suppers: roast jowl of pig with figs; peppered octopus on fried rye.

The son tasted anything and swallowed everything and relished all things and grew angrier and angrier at his Mother. He slipped out alone one night to call Her. “Mama, why didn’t you give me any of this before?”

“I didn’t make it all. I never knew, *mi principe*.”

“You should come down here.”

She wanted to. “Well, but I’m up here.”

“I could find someone willing to step in for You. What do You do, anyway?”

Now, with a fine world finally unfurled, She wasn’t sure. But a vacation did not sound sage. Someone needed to be up above. “I’ll stay, thanks.”

“Your loss.”

The kick-chunk game became a village obsession. They couldn’t all play everyday, of course, because someone had to make meals and houses and tables. Kids cut class to play in the afternoon; factory lunch breaks were extended by a half-

hour to accommodate some kicking time. While the broth boiled, sous chefs sneaked off for a few rounds, no matter how Kwm forbade it. Gardens got trampled; chairs were busted up by chunk seekers.

The son proposed divisions. Each person got a break from his duties at least each third day. The son played every day. He was strong and precise, able to bump even with a thoracic vertebra. Sometimes he played standing on his hands. “You get a whole new perspective like this,” he laughed, while most others trudged to work.

Kwm pointed out the unfairness. “Why don’t you use those moves to knead a loaf or sow some seed?”

The son flipped, looping four chunks into the air, and did not reply.

“Can you play without eating?”

“Would you want to live without playing?”

“How can you live without working? Think of it. The feel of your palm in the dough, the hustle of whittling a branch, the elegance of making.”

He wanted so badly to try, to make in their ways. But they would laugh at him, he thought, and call him goofy. He didn’t even understand stew, the simplest of all, just bits and orts in a pot. He stayed inside himself, using his body as he — and only he — knew how. He twisted and, in mid-air synchronicity, bounced two wood chunks against two others. He twirled on his beautiful heel and said, “I make the rules.”

No one dared interfere with this leaders’ quarrel. There was movement, shifts of tides, lopsidedly split for the son.

“But anybody could make rules.”

“Not like mine. Anybody can make bread. Blindfolded.”

“You couldn’t tell the difference between ciabatta and pound cake.”

“Leavenings and ratios, learnable objectivities. You couldn’t judge a foul versus a point.”

The earth seemed tilted toward the son. Kwm left.

The son had just been getting started. He played some more, but he felt disappointed the repartee had ended so abruptly. It was a new form of control, not unlike his Mother’s conceptual juggling. But now with words, another power he seemed so easily to have. This must have been Her gift, Her approval for how he was winning them.

Over the years, he invented flooperball and jamkiting and spinarets, and he drew up leagues. He was no longer just a great player, but now also a great commissioner, a ruler of them all. How proud She must be at his achievements and authority! How much he had done to show Her.

She had trouble following all the rules. “That’s a foul, a foul!” She’d thunder and bluster when, sometimes, he got knocked down. “I’m sure that was a foul.” Despite Her anger, She felt a tingle of delight at all this; She felt! A little, at least.

He always popped back up laughing, clasping hands with his teammates. The God still wondered how that felt and considered making Her own hands. Then She could step in and reach out and feel the groundlings and their ways, since Her son didn’t seem to care to introduce them to Her. But She stuck to Her plan. She would

remain in Her place. “You could visit me some time, you know,” She whispered to him as he geared up for a gameday.

He said nothing.

“How’s it going there, otherwise? Are they learning from you? They’ve been making less lately.”

“We’re having *fun*. Gotta go.”

“Hey, do you ever think of back when...” But he had turned away.

Despite the frolics of seasons and championships (he won 63 out of 72), the groundlings — even the youngest and freshest — grew stale, inert. “We’re bored,” they told him one autumn, sprawled on the floor; all the chairs had been dismantled for goal frames. “And our butts hurt.” He was out of ideas. “And we’re hungry.” The new chef, Akwm, stood in the doorway; a pack of one-way scowls pushed the son from the room. He walked away without arguing.

He went to the middle of the village, the gameyard he had surveyed and leveled. The grass was dusty and dry, speckled with leaves drifted from live oaks. He felt far from his home. Oh, home. The fun they’d had — all Her work, all this world. In it, he felt impressed, intimidated. He had already lost the groundlings’ respect. His Mother still had Her world. He felt jealous and weak, and he wished he could remember how to reach Her. She seemed to have retracted from the world; was She still anywhere. He thought, *Where has She gone, oh, where has She gone?* Could he go there? Would She come? How would he recognize Her? And would She recognize him?

He realized, even before the groundlings tired of him, he had tired of them. Though they gave him new socks and let him sing the melody parts, he found their simplicity dull. Why didn't they do anything more? Why didn't they innovate? Why did they just die? And whenever one died, another invariably, unobtrusively slid up into the vacated spot. They were like a winter lawn: always the same, and not in a pretty or inventive way.

He wanted to go back and live at home. But where was the way? The route of his descent was a threadbare memory. Perhaps, having taken hands, he could not return. He wrote Her a letter asking for directions, but he couldn't figure how to send it or whom to name in the address. He gave up and wandered away. Treading the colorless ground, he wished to be stomped into it.

He tried to play solo flooperball. Without teammates and opponents, much of the game lacked purpose, but he could make his moves. And he did, cartwheeling as if to avoid a midfield trap, juking as if confronted by a lineman. But nothing happened. He grew experimental; he created imaginary adversaries, planting stakes to represent a zone defense. "I bet I can spin and dart through them in...three moves." And he did. "So what do I win?"

He looked around. Were they watching him, over there on the esker? Were they laughing? They were laughing. One shouted at him, "Can barely beat yourself now, huh?"

He won nothing, for no one had agreed to his wager. Not even his Mother had been there to consummate the bet. He planted four more stakes. "If I score in six moves, will you come to me, Mama?" He jabbed, pivoted, shuffled, skirted, slid, and

stumbled and fell to his rump. She would have come; he was sure; She would have come.

No, that would have been too easy, and perhaps not even proper. He wasn't done. He wasn't here just to touch around then report back. She, conceptual creator, wanted to know the world of feeling, and the world wanted to know Her knowing. But how could they? They didn't try. They didn't risk.

They needed to wager. They needed to lose. Play was not enough. They would learn to gamble like Mother and son.

“Akwm, I would like you to be the new commissioner of the OFL.”

“My father hated flooperball. I refuse to play.”

“You don't have to play, and this will get you more hands in your kitchen.”

The son explained how the commissioner would set the betting lines for each match, how challenges lost would result in three days' assigned work, or four or six, depending on the commissioner's discretion. The son explained how other leagues would be run by Trno, the master chairmaker, and Rbbl, the premier gardener.

“What's the catch?”

“Teach me food.”

The potential commissioners met. They welcomed the new distribution of labor but declined the invitation. They unanimously voted to make the son total commissioner. He was skeptical. He thought they were setting him up to be

universally loathed and eventually attacked. They were hiding something. It sounded like his Mother all over again.

He was unable to ponder or investigate. Laying the daily lines became hard. He had to watch all the games, study all the teams. He took a census to be able to track everyone. He wondered if there was fraud. He thought Trno was pulling strings to sneak more workers. He worried Akwm would spike his dinners. He suspected Rbbl had his greedy green thumbs pressing certain players to relax at key moments so he could get a larger contingent for harvest days. Disgruntled players formed a Leisure League to protest his rulings. He feared he was incapable. Was She watching? Don't watch now.

Imagining threats, he moved away and lived in his cave. He slept poorly, fretted constantly, and even began to make mistakes on the field. They didn't laugh at this, though. They didn't say a thing, didn't seem to care at all, except that they passed to him a little less, and a little less. He figured it was time to focus only on being commissioner, and he retired. They had a brief ceremony for him.

He veiled the betting lines, only revealing the outcomes and consequences at each day's end. He declared himself not quite retired, but rather an eternal free agent. If he suspected foul play, he could enter the game and restore order however he saw fit. He battled the Leisure League rebels who griped about the severe significance impressed upon what once was fun. Strikes were rumored, rumbling. He planned a debate against Giml, the Leisure leader.

“These are just games,” Giml opened, “and they are being turned oppressively into workmills, methods for fat cats to control us and produce whatever they want.”

“These are not just games. These are essential.”

“These are just games. These are essential only because you are telling us they are essential. How fine and fertile our village was before you came.”

The son looked at the three chiefs, who seemed unconcerned. Was anyone on his side? “How fine? How inert, you mean. You ate potatoes and sat on spindly chairs. That was it. Fine? You were functional, nothing more. Industrious results are not enough. I am not talking about games as essential for function. I am talking about greatness. I am talking about entelechy. I am talking about becoming all what we can become.”

“Then why do you shackle us with enslavements?”

“Because I was afraid and small. The betting was wrong, too interested in productivity. That’s what you all love. I felt alone; I didn’t dare upheave anything. I’d done that before and everyone died. But I must do it again.” The three chiefs now became interested. “Let it all end, all the labor bets. Let’s just play the games.” He pulled out three chunks of wood and began to juggle them. “Destroy the rules. Do not destroy the games.”

Giml flung papers toward the son’s podium, interrupting the cadence and forcing the son to scramble for the deflected chunks, shouting now, “The games must be destroyed! The games are your rein and your only foothold. What do you make? You make games to bind us. What do you make? You make us adhere to your rules.

What do you make? You make yourself appear perfect and dominant. You have no usage in this place.”

“Do not destroy them,” the son pled from his knees, resuming the juggling. “The games are good even if I am not. My Mama played games, made me able to play them.”

“Nobody cares about her.”

“She was the Prime Maker.”

This revolted the crowd. “Prove it! Show us! Make something. A son must make something.” But he knew he could not make a thing. Once, wanting to find out what it was that made the groundlings’ crafts more than just assembly, he had asked Akwm what *happened* when lamb and rosemary and potatoes were combined and heated into something. Akwm had told him, and it had made sense, but, as they sautéed together, it was clearly not for him. His fingers still felt the burns from how he’d mishandled the skillet.

Those same fingers prepared to juggle as everyone watched. “Watch, try, do these yourself.” Higher went the wood pieces — left, right, left, right, reverse, double left, off-the-head, behind-the-back, over and under and swirling as he walked through sprouts of basil, tickling the scent from the leaves. “Don’t destroy the games. Destroy me.”

He let the juggling end. His hands dropped; chunks plopped in no particular rhythm. No one moved. But it was their turn. Now they were supposed to rise, applaud, commend his valor and sacrificial willingness. They would call him a champion again, call him their model, admit that now, now they understood. Now

they would live like him (as he had tried to live like She lived, unconcerned with preserving Her boundaries, only wanting to release; was She watching? Watch!) No one moved.

The son sat among the fallen blocks. Well? Weren't the groundlings going to applaud his surrender? Wasn't he done? Mother, make them. What else is there to leave behind?

Not that, no. Not him. Not all this. His hands trembled.

Yawping at each rip, he yanked apart his body. No one moved. He began by snapping off his toes, cracking his ankles, shins, knees — up to his waist. Someone began to laugh, and a few people walked away, muttering, “A showman. Always such a showman.” He tore open his navel; organs plopped out; he slipped on his pancreas and fell on his liver, spewing blood onto the ground. Those who had stayed began to think differently; could he, would he continue? How? He plucked extremities: ears, hairs, floating rib; he was a mess; he was lovely. Even the crowd's whispers hushed. He clawed out the jellies and shell of his head. Many winced. He parceled all things, grouped in particularly sized servings, onto a cart: four bones of a foot; a patella; the instruments of the ear; half a liver's lobe; an intestine link; the cerebellum; his heart; his hands. A child sniffled. When he was emptied and uncrowned, he dethreaded his arms (muscle strips, nerve whips) until only his fingers remained. A father wept. Wrists wrenched each other away; the pinkies linked and pranced off; a thumb and two fingers, folded, finally flopped on top. No one moved (all were moved). The cart lurched forward, gained momentum, bumped some

strands over its edges — streamers of flesh and sinew. As it rolled, it creaked, “Maah, maah, maah, maah.” A Mother heard.

She had been having a long nap. “Where is my son, oh, where is my son?” She howled. She watched the cart; She understood; She approved in the swooping way that mothers can.

The cart rolled faster; its wheels sang; the streamers flew, now eight of them, tentacles tickling the air. Those who heard it going sambaed after it. Any scorn for the son was trampled by how they danced, by how they juggled, following the cart rolling around the village heart even as they wheezed and their own muscles burned.

“Idiots,” yelled Giml. “Idiots. He’s finally gone and still you play his games?” He, backed by half the village, stomped and hollered, trying to get the juggling, dancing fools to quit the nonsense. But the revelers were moving so fast. They could not be stopped, not even by exhaustion. The objectors gave up trying, instead laughed and mocked. “Really? Do you really think you’re at all like him? Take a look at your goofy selves.”

The games went on all morning, then all afternoon, then into the evening. “Are we going to eat?” Giml asked. “Are you going to do your jobs?” Some of the objectors gathered rocks, building piles of them, rubbing them and making them comfortable in hand. The revelers were worried, but they didn’t want to stop. Still, their dancing took on a new pace, uneven and afraid. They bumped into each other, bruised each other, and sometimes even bled. The objectors hooted all the more. Still, the play continued.

As the dusk swam its way into night, the revelers felt finished. They fell into a slumber. The objectors stilled. They fell into a slumber. The cart slowed and stopped outside the main kitchen. In the silence, Akwm looked at Giml, saying, “We’ll eat in a bit. Have a little patience, for once, on this of all days.”

Back at the kitchen, he looked through the son’s parts. At first he picked gingerly, afraid of the mess. But soon he found himself welcoming the blood stuck on his fingers, glommed in creases. He counted the parts, and the figure seemed familiar. He consulted the son’s league records; the numbers matched. He whisked a savory cake batter from an oat and wheat flour he’d milled himself. The stone oven grew hot. He lined up pans and placed a part in each, drowning it in the batter. In the oven, they rose, and steam seeped out, filling the kitchen with lemon and parsley. He opened the door, took a spare apron, and fanned the steam into the courtyard.

Everyone arose. They ate together.

“Go home,” Akwm said. “Go home.”

No one moved. “I can’t remember where that is,” someone mused, and the rest concurred. “Where will we go, oh, where will we go?”

“You’ll figure it out. Get up.” And they did, aching and moaning. Yet they felt strong, already rebuilding inside, already yearning for more.

The God was nodding. She was up, too, and She watched them run. Oh, how they ran! Confused, some bloodied, some irritable. Some wound up in their beds, and they slept again. Some wound up back at work, and they made up for lost time. Some went back to the courtyard and played; some mourned. Some wandered away. Some pestered Akwm for another cake. Some wrangled over the chunks the son had

dropped. Some did what they'd always done; some did only what seemed new. Some took a walk to an old stream that seemed familiar and deep. Some thought they understood. Some counted all their things. Some made things. Some forgot, and some wrote it all down. Some added it to their memories, and some cut out old memories to make place for it. Some cut out old friends to make place for it. Some cut out all. They refilled it with the things they'd felt and seen, and they made their lives in there.

M'AIDEZ, MAMAN (THE ACTS OF AN APOSTLE)

I am there. I hear your siren's song. I am there, almost there.

—John Banville, *The Sea*

Mother scurried fast into the kitchen and leaned over the table toward me, blood seeping out from behind her lips. She said, “Daughter, don’t ever want something — not a man, not a house, not a job, not even a kitten — for seeming spotless. It’s not.” She turned away. She made raspberry pancakes the size of her small breasts, one at a time, putting another onto my plate each time I finished one. It was 7:38 a.m., my twelfth birthday.

As I ate I could see her, her lean blue-bloused back to me, standing and holding a spatula holding a flapjack holding glistening crimson berries. “Julie-jewel,” she said. She said with her arpeggio voice that if I kissed a raspberry the perfect number of times, it would turn into a red diamond. She said with a tremolo that if I always ate things in sevens, I would never starve. She said with a waltzing rhythm that if I did get hungry, by running in one direction I would find the food I needed. As I finished each pancake, she twirled around, her ruby hair bouncing, to give me another and another. I tried to eat them all. I ate six. The seventh, as she spun to give it to me, dropped on the floor for a brief moment. “Oh, but look, it’s fine,” she assured me. I examined both sides. I couldn’t see dirt, but still I refused it. Mother wolfed it down, as if someone was soon coming to stop her.

Father strode downstairs and gave me \$144. “This one’s easy, daddy,” I said. “It’s because I’m twelve and this is twelve squared.” In his charcoal suit, he smiled at me, scratched the dog’s ears, asked me to straighten his tie, and walked through the kitchen to the door that went into the garage. And he went out. Cringing, mother watched the door shut. She stirred more batter, dribbling in raspberries by twos and threes, reaching into her chaotic, overpacked pantry for who-knows-what. She swabbed a stick of butter over the griddle. I could smell its warmth as it sizzled. “I’m really stuffed, mommy,” I pled, “they were so delicious and I’m so full. I’m not hungry.”

“I am.”

Infatuated with the idea of the dozen, mother themed my birthday party around twelves: a carton of eggs for tossing, games with dice, a dodecahedral piñata — embarrassingly childish amusements for me and twelve close friends, peers I saw as a jury. The home-printed banner showed *The Last Supper*, and she was Judas, spending well over thirty pieces of father’s silver on a twelve-layer ganache-laden ice cream cake.

It had melted, of course, by the time she summoned us to cut it. Twelve long tapers had been burning in it the entire party, sitting out on our lawn table for hours. She gave me a knife to make the first slice, and the dull edge mushed the layers, spurting gooey streams of reds and browns and greens. Laughter sprang up around me; I tried to look only at the cake.

Mother found a box. She put it over the wounded dessert, and I was relieved, for once, that she could spin attention wherever she wanted. But then she whispered, “Gather ‘round, young ones,” pausing as we clustered, “and place your hands on this box. We will say, ‘Cake, remake,’ twelve times, and everything will be tasty again.” Everyone reached forward, and, soon enough, twenty-four young hands touched the corrugated sides and chanted. Mother whipped away the box, but not quite vertically. The edge clipped the cake, toppled it, and chunks and sludge slopped on several shoes. Three girls squealed; the rest howled in hilarity.

“Food fight!” mother called. “Julie, you get the first throw.”

“No,” I said.

“Well,” she replied, “then I will.”

“No,” I said. Mother stopped, her fingers plunged into a heap of sweating chocolate. Toward the house I walked, cringing. She would call my name, and I hoped only to reach the door, with everyone following me, before she could. I didn’t. She sang it: “Julie-jewel,” and when I turned I saw my friends still back there.

But it was my birthday, and I was rich. “I’m going to the pastry shop,” I declared from the porch step, “and I’ll buy everyone an eclair or a danish or whatever.” The screams now were jubilant, and my friends came running. We toweled off each cake-soiled shoe, and we promenaded in a block, taking up entire sidewalks, forcing powerwalkers and baby-pushers onto the tree lawns.

Father grounded me for neither coming home that night nor informing him where I was, but he knew I already regretted it. Mother had called twelve houses and talked to twelve parents about her snotty little twelve-year-old. She got the answer on

the third call, but kept calling anyway. “Hello, and I’m so sorry to bother you, but my Julie-jewel seems to have run off with your daughter. ... Yes, girls do get like that. Do you happen to know where they might have gotten? ... Oh, thank you. Do please tell her I called, and that the cake was so delicious no matter how she thought it looked.”

Chère maman: I’ve stayed clean, you know.

I’m twenty-eight now, and I’ve grown tired of moving from messes. My neat life has a job and an apartment with a covered parking space and clothing for several occasions and a few selected friends. I have just enough, calculated as enough to go on.

I’m twenty-eight now and tired, inspecting slaughterhouses and restaurants daily, carefully noting each cockroach, each non-hairnetted line cook, each potentially unhealthy protocol. I’ve arguably saved lives, but I’m sorry to say you haven’t missed much. I am OK, though.

Two days ago I went to Lolita, and that chef, that ass, was there. “Already time for my yearly A, huh?” he smirked as I stepped in. This time, I ran my fingers not just along the prep lines, but along the grout between the tiles. I looked for the slightest drips of oil from the refrigerator bins, the smallest gaps in their coverings. I checked every date on every container. But there was nothing. A perfect disappointment.

He brought me a little lamb burger as I wrote my report. “I know, I’m just so boring, huh?” he said, rolling his eyes as he sauntered out of the kitchen. Sliding the

plate toward me, he bumped a ridge of the bar, and the top of the bun fell to the ground along with some arugula and a sliver of roasted red pepper. I watched excitedly as he bent to pick it up. I knew he wouldn't serve it to me like that, but I wondered what he would do. Toss those bits? Toss the whole thing? Keep only the lamb and ditch the rest? Hustle back to grill another half-bun?

But he placed each piece right back on the burger, topping it with the dented bun. "Still hungry?"

After scanning the list of Server Procedures, I admitted, "I am," and capped my pen.

I'm twenty-eight and tired, and I need a few days off. I'm driving north (For a quick visit? Or more?), wishing I could take you, but at least I'm going up to the town you loved, promised. Carry me there.

"People, get ready," mother proclaimed at breakfast several weeks later. Summer had come, and my eye was eager for a boy at the swim club. "Tomorrow we are going to the Great Smokies. Imagine driving slowly through the road of the woods, dreaming of the lavish houses we could build there. Oh, what could be more wonderful than sleeping on a forested mountain shrouded in mist?"

Father had an idea: "Staying at home and working so we can pay off this big house and keep it up."

"Oh, the house will remain."

“So will the mountain,” I observed. I expected that her suddenly declared outing would, like so many others, be quashed by a few of father’s practical words. He always kept control, and I liked being on that side.

Mother huffed. “No one ever wants to do anything interesting. You all just move around and do your things with no adventure.” She whimpered down into a chair. She melted onto the floor. She rose up rapidly and snatched the chair and thrashed it around, scratching and clunking on the varnished hardwood.

Father whispered behind me, “Let’s play along for her sake. It’ll be fine. Trust me.”

We packed the van that afternoon, stuffing it with fishing gear we’d never used, with hiking boots we’d never worn, with sodas for the road and oddly colored cheeses and wrapped tubes of meats for the picnics he knew mother would want as soon as we got deep into the foothills and knobs of Kentucky. As I lugged my duffel across the driveway, I saw him shouldering the tent into the back. This was too much.

“We’re camping?”

“No. But she wants to, and she will insist. Don’t worry. Don’t say anything. I will. She just needs the illusion of hazard. When we’re out there, I’m sure she’ll turn to beds and showers. We won’t let her trick us into anything.” I had seen this, over the years, how father could reel her in.

He stood up and looked over the van toward at our street’s hill. “Always foisting,” he mumbled, “her dirty tricks.” Then he turned to me. “No, no, not always.” His voice wilted as he leaned to cram the tent between the cooler and the

emergency repair kit. “Not then.” He stood to look at me. “It’s not a trick if you let it happen.”

I imagined “then.” I imagined my parents, with flighty hair and flapping clothes, cruising in a small car, laughing over loud music. He promised to drive; she said she’d navigate, sort of. She tossed the map as soon as they crossed a bridge. “Drive me west, James,” she said affectedly, “and north. It is Tuesday, after all.” I never figured where they were going, or if they got there, or if they got back, but I wasn’t sure any of these things mattered. The idea of that trip terrified and lured me, but I doubted this one would be anything like it.

On this trip, father drove south, and the GPS chirped. On I-75 near the Tennessee border, I saw a sign: LOOK OUT FOR FALLING ROCK. “Shouldn’t that say ‘FALLING ROCKS?’ ” I asked.

“Yes Julie, that’s probably more accurate,” he stated.

“Oh, no, no, not at all,” mother cried, turning around. “Everybody has it all wrong. You see—”

Mother turned and jabbed her finger in my shoulder. “This is an important tale for you. Listen carefully.

“Once. Over by the Mississippi River, an Indian mother had an Indian daughter. She was very heavy coming out, so her mother called her Falling Rock. Falling Rock grew to be the most beautiful girl in the tribe, and one day she realized it. ‘I’m leaving to the big city by the ocean,’ she said, ‘and I will find a strong white man to give me guns and corsets. I crave the life of lighted nights!’ Her mother wept. ‘But you will never have my corn-trout cakes again. And where will you find

cougar bones for catsup?’ Falling Rock stomped away saying, ‘I don’t care. I’ll get much fuller in big buildings and ocean liners.’ She ran off late that night with some friends, and the wildcats were howling.”

Mother paused and turned to look at me. “*Enchanté, ma petite?*” she asked in the glamorous tone she could afford when she knew she had, against my intent, caught my heart again and pulled me through my stubbornness. “Her mother knew the dangers of these mountains, so she rode her horse all night and all day and all night. She passed Falling Rock and put up signs like that one. There were others, too: HELP FALLING ROCK GET WHERE SHE’S GOING and GIVE FALLING ROCK DINNER.”

“So, dear,” father mused, “why aren’t we seeing those?”

“In the Thirties the WPA took them down because they were so confusing. Plus, everyone hated rocks because of the cave worms.”

“So what happened to Falling Rock?” I asked. But I knew. She certainly didn’t assimilate into normal society, not without a consequence.

“The mountain men of Tennessee gave her berries and fish. They helped her through the secret passes and showed her how to stare down bears. She made it to the great old port of Maytown (it doesn’t exist anymore) and easily found a man to let her live with him. She was happy, although he didn’t share his shrimp cassoulet. He made her catch her own seafood, and she wasn’t very good at it. But she thought she could learn. She did. She learned how to be clean and fast like the city, and, each night in their crisp-sheeted bed, she told herself she was content and full.

“Each night on the dirt in her rock circle, her mother danced for the gods to bring back her daughter. She wrote letters to Falling Rock of Maytown, but Falling Rock had changed her name to Olive Enchanté, so the letters never arrived. Finally, her mother wrote to The Most Beautiful Woman of Maytown. Falling Rock got this one. It was one sentence long: ‘Have you not gotten hungrier?’ Falling Rock ignored it for a day, and then a week, but finally the craving for the tastes of her home overwhelmed her. She left town that very night. But she had forgotten the secrets of the mountains. Whenever she thought she found the right bushes or the fishing holes, they seemed so ragged and dirty. She dared not eat. She starved, probably somewhere near here.”

“Speaking of starving, how about we stop for a meal?” father suggested, pulling into a rest area.

“Yes, please,” I exclaimed, and asked mother more about Falling Rock. She told me more and more and more.

As we continued on toward Gatlinburg, mother slept in the back, snoring mistily. I sat up front.

“Pick a hotel, Julie,” father said.

“But mom wants to camp.”

“I promised you we wouldn’t.”

“But she said we will.”

“We won’t. She won’t trap us in her idea of fun. Fun for her, at least. If that. Just a sloppy vision.”

I didn't say anything. He sounded so right, as usual, and I knew he would get what he wanted. Our car curled along the highway, tracing the fast rocky river, diving into and out of tunnels — the engineering and the dark beneath the mountains. We passed through them easily and unthreatened.

"Do you want to know a secret?" mother asked me that night, crawling onto my cool, soft bed. I nodded and smiled. "It's about your father. Do you know you've never met him?" Confused and expecting a scandal, I shook my head. She leaned back on her arm. Her hair fell onto my knees. "I remember how he told the greatest fables in the world. He told me of a town in Michigan called Paradise. I wish I could get him to drive us *there*. Your real father might burst out there."

"Maybe he could come here," I said, trying father's strategy of redirecting mother's thoughts.

"Your father won't let him." She looked away.

I wondered about real father versus current father. Current father slept, and he had gotten this room with my own bed. So I told real mother, "Maybe someday."

She asked each month, then each summer. I kept declining — a big date, mother; have to work, mother — with plenty of neat, practical excuses until college saved me forever.

Chère maman: as I drive north I see no signs for Falling Rock or for falling rocks. No rocks at all, in fact. Just dying factories and flat fields of thin brush. Oddly tidy. Southern Michigan is becoming a cast-off husk, eaten and left empty, skeletons and ghosts. I understand.

I, for awhile, believed everything you said: “If you ever need something, all you have to do is get a container big enough to hold it. Wrap the box with beautiful paper, then open it seven days later. It will have what you need.”

I tried it, of course, my tenth Christmas. I found a 36”x36”x24” crate to hold — I dreamed — ten Cabbage Patch Kids. I covered it with seven swaths of tin foil and four yards of lace ribbon. “Beautiful, Jewel, beautiful,” you crowed. Christmas came; the box remained empty. New Year’s came; the box remained empty. “Well,” you said, “Isn’t that interesting?” and only years later did I see the solid meaning of the word *need* within your rococo lie.

It was always like that, bitter seeds within a tempting fruit. I didn’t want to deal with both, so I refused it all and ate crackers. I was the Falling Rock who’d run away. I knew that immediately and was glad for it. I’d make my life out there in a solid town, I vowed; I have made my little life out there. But now I know you were (and I’ve become) the Falling Rock trapped in busy Maytown and unable to go home.

Your signs: I am haunted by them still.

After college, at an elitist New Year’s party in Cambridge, a tall blond boy kept walking between the food table and the drink table. He carried a heaping plate. His forearm had a deep furrow; he was a strong one; he looked delicious. I walked up to him and asked, “Not too hungry, huh?”

He turned abruptly and stepped back. “Have to try all the combinations. What’s the point of eating if it’s not an exploration?”

“I know some kids in the Sudan who could answer that.”

“Oh,” he grimaced. He tried to say something, but couldn’t, and so he just looked at me with his dark eyes and bit the side of his lip. I smiled and chuckled; he began to fidget. I thought he was about to walk away, then he leaned close to my ear. “I’m Hans. Want to know a secret?”

“You’re Sudanese?”

“What, no. Do you really think— Do I look—,” he stammered. He leaned in again. “I’m a fabulist.”

“A fabulist?” I had chosen a freak, I feared. His unkempt hair now looked crazy, not suave.

“One who tells fables. Let me tell you one.” He looked down and grasped his chin for a moment. “I was born in Paradise.” I gasped theatrically. He smiled and continued with a suddenly mellifluous tone. “Very near there runs a river as red as a summer dawn, but in the winter it freezes. The angels come to sculpt it, but some of them get trapped, caught up in cold earthly things. You can hear them breathing beneath the ice. They’re OK, so don’t worry. When the spring thaw comes, they fly free again.”

He intoned it like mother; I was stunned. I could only say flatly, “Nice story.” Oh, but I loved it so much more than I admitted.

“Y-Yes,” he said. “That’s why I told it. I wanted to impress you. I want to take you to Paradise.”

I laughed; in any other context the line would have been the feeblest come-on, and I suspected he knew as much. “Well, not *now*.”

“Why not?”

“What would I do there? How would I live?”

He shrugged. “It might be a disaster.”

“My mother thought I was fated to be a disaster because I was nearly born on May Day. ‘You would have been a crash test dummy,’ she’d tell me. She managed to keep me waiting the extra day.”

“Are you still waiting?”

I don’t remember my reply. But he didn’t wait for midnight to kiss me. I ignored that breach of custom, but when he dared to talk a little dirty, I sharply warned him not to be hasty again, and walked home alone. But I already had given him my number, and he found me.

“We met on a first, so let’s keep meeting on firsts,” I told Hans after our third date. He smiled when I proposed the pattern (of course, he interrupted it by getting me to visit him on random evenings; I’d already learned how to sacrifice sleep) and honored my suggestions. The communist bar in Cambridge. The graffiti nook on Longfellow Bridge. Places I liked. In April, he insisted I follow him, and I was suspicious of being fooled.

“There are two ways to change something,” he said to me, grasping my hand as we walked up Mass Ave, “hug it or hold it.” I didn’t respond. Initially he had needed prompting before explaining these fabulous proclamations, but over three months with me he learned to pause, let it be there, then proceed. “If you love something and lavish it with kisses and affection, it will melt and change for you. If you box something up and keep it contained, it will melt and disappear from you.”

“So what are you really saying?”

“I want to go home.”

“Why ever would you want to?”

“It’s Paradise!”

Somehow, the joke didn’t get old, and I, again, was thinking narrowly. My job was trivial, and so was his. We could make time and space. But I worried he meant to move there for real, and the untamed Upper Peninsula sounded rough and rowdy.

We walked out on the esplanade along the Charles, separated from the regular shore by a string of lagoons. We had walked there before, but I knew he had something new. His delight in mystery and secrets never waned. He stopped by the oak. He peeled back a section of bark to reveal a hollow interior — a deciduous cavern. He crouched and entered and beckoned me in. Crawling toward him, I pulled the flap and sealed us off. “I suppose,” he said, “containment can also be liberating, like shelter.”

I drew his face up to mine. I kissed him so many times, sloppy and full of want.

I wanted him so much that I couldn’t help telling mother about my love. “Eat it up,” she said, “and if it’s real it will always be there. I promise you he’s not spotless, but that’s no reason not to love.”

“I wasn’t asking for your thoughts,” I said, “and how would you know anyway?”

Oh, she knew. I had seen it, sometimes. I couldn't entirely piece it together, but I had glimpses, lovely glimpses. I never heard how they met, how they courted. But, once — Once. She leaned over the couch toward father, dancing a raspberry toward him like a baby's spoon-food-plane. It slipped from her hand onto his shirt, and he shoved it up her nose. He sputtered, "You mess up everything, especially the nice new things." I thought she was going to cry. Instead, she kissed him, rosy juice dripping down her lips and onto his. He gripped her face. "I forgot about loving you," he said. "I forgot your desire." And he kissed her.

I was six. I missed (or they hid) what happened over the years after that: did he forget again, did he shield love from his view, did he wrangle it down and box it in until it wheezed, spat, choked, and stopped?

Chère maman: I am driving sporadically. I am stopping for anything lush or wondrous: Depot Town in Ypsilanti, the Whitmore Lake Yarn Company. An eternal Christmas warehouse is coming up in Frankenmuth, a name I choose to adore despite (for?) its monstrous insinuations. It's easy to know that you would have loved these places, mystical in their innocence and raggedness, and, indirectly, you have guided me to them.

In that sense, I wish you were here. But in a similar sense, I need you not to be. You would have forced those stops, and I am not like father who can sternly refuse. I have a part of your heart in me, and what a mess it likes to make! I don't know how to handle it, and I suppose that's the point.

I passed Flint. It's not the booming Flint you might have known. It's thin and dusty. I'm surprised General Motors still lets that city proclaim itself as the birthplace of that once-hulking corporation. Then again, Flint probably isn't flattered by formerly bold GM's gaunt state. They are us — you the withered down city, I the too-tight company. How did we both crumble down from opposite perches?

One month after Hans's tree, I called father after I listened to the tape mother had express mailed. It was ludicrous, starting with a claim that she would be dead the day after I heard it.

“Do you really think it's true?” father asked.

“No,” I said, “but I should come see her anyway.”

“Perhaps tomorrow?”

“I'm turning twenty-three.”

“She loves your birthday.”

I agreed. I consented.

My birthday morning was cold, even for a Massachusetts May. I awoke early to make pancakes, eager to spangle them with twenty-three raspberries. I ran out to 7-Eleven to get some buttermilk, but of course they didn't have any. I bought a pint of whole milk and two lemons. “Do you have a knife?” I asked some low-eyed man buying coffee at the counter. “Could you cut these for me?”

I took a big gulp from the carton then squeezed in three of the lemon halves, shaking it gently on my way home. When I walked in, Hans was standing by the stove, stirring in a bowl. He looked at me with a grimace, “You didn't have any

buttermilk, but I curdled some old milk with limoncello. It should be something. Sit down, warm up. Where were you? I had to climb in your window.”

I hid the carton in my jacket pocket. “Just walking. I have raspberries in the fridge.”

“No, they’re in here now,” he said, showing his batter. He had overmixed, breaking all the tender ruby beads. I watched him slop ladlefuls onto the griddle in no pattern or shape. One was an eggplant, one like an octopus, one an amoeba. I thought of sushi and dysentery. He plucked the finished things with his fingers, tossed them in the direction of a plate.

I shook my head. “I’m not hungry.”

After his breakfast I kissed him on the neck and brought him to the couch. He fell asleep. I washed dishes and checked my email. Father had written.

Daughter:

Your mother has died from an illness she refused to tell anyone about. I have attached a file with the requisite details re: logistics. I will see you soon. Happy birthday, Julie.

I Attachment, 8 KB: WifeFunDir.doc (8 KB)

I wrote back.

Guess I’ll keep the same plans. She would have wanted it fun, wouldn’t she?

Hans awoke in the middle of the morning and began rubbing my shoulders. “My mother died,” I said. He waited. I waited. I said, “She is dead.” I pulled him to my room, and I was ready to make him take my virginity.

He stopped. “We should stop,” he said and put his hands around my face.

“You don’t want to be doing this now.”

“I do.”

“No.” He arose and went to the kitchen. I lay there, nightshirt draped over my breasts, gazing at the ceiling. I rolled on my side and looked out the window: a policewoman ambling down the road on her horse. I was transfixed by the gentle gait, but also impatient, as if I knew something was waiting to burst. Suddenly, the policewoman yanked the reins, and the horse galloped down the street. Wondering what crime would need even the mounted patrol to be summoned, I realized the scene was like one of mother’s stories, though I couldn’t quite recall it.

Hans came back with a bowl of dark gunk. “Triple chocolate cookies.” I still don’t know how that’s possible: one for the dough, one for the chips — where’s the third? “Have some.” He stuck out two fingers; they looked mud-dipped. “It’s urgent; there’s no time for baking!” I shook my head. “You must.” I opened my mouth a hair, and he rammed in his fingers. I squirmed at the viscid texture, but, oh, how delicious. I licked every slimy spot, shoved my hands in the bowl, and glopped dough into my face by fistfuls.

He laughed. He grabbed a mirror, plopped beside me, and showed me my face. I resembled a savage, young and unfit for the world. I looked at Hans on his back, smiling, a fudgy beard of his own. I lay there for a minute, and I was ashamed.

“I have to leave soon,” I told him. “You have to go.” I tried not to but began to cry.

“Your mother?” he asked.

I lied; I nodded: “Yes.” He left, and I recomposed myself.

I found myself on an anti-plateau — level, but lower, and far from the contentment I had had. In a moment of great chaos, I, too, had lost control and made a mess of it all. Just like mother would have done. I cleaned my face, curled my hair, put on a black dress, and drove.

Chère maman: I realize how you tried to get me to move marvelously. I worried over picking a way, going the right pace. You smiled about it, whispered that measurements were not the issue, but I never listened. Sometimes I wish you would tell me again. Sometimes I wish to hear the music of your voice again.

I can. I push play, and you say, “Julie-jewel, you are a woman now. But you are still my daughter. I will die, but not until tomorrow — I refuse to crash on May Day. Did I ever tell you about the crash I saw when I was a girl? Once, I was using my old walkie talkie out on our farm, and I heard a voice crying, ‘Mayday, mayday, I’m going down!’ I looked around, and there, probably a mile away, trailed by a dense plume, a plane was falling. All so slow. I know it was spiraling, but it looked like it was going back and forth, back and forth so primly. I thought, Pick one fully, my sweet pilot, and you’ll turn out and up again into the skies. And then it hit like a cough, sending up a cone of smoke and dust from the MacGregors’ cornfield. That poor man, trapped inside. Oh, we’re all so easily trapped inside anywhere, runners on tracks, and we run, run, run around in an unending zero.” It goes on like that, more dark stories that, I admit, I doubt — some about father, some about dying. You had lost your hold. I can barely stand to listen to it.

The sun is up. I am driving across the Mackinac Bridge. I am there, almost there.

A little bit outside of Boston, I picked up mother. Or rather, I began to imagine her riding with me. She stepped in with a red dress and rolled the windows down. “Julie-jewel, you look like death.”

“Isn’t that the point here?”

“I thought you thought I would have wanted fun. And you said I sounded ready.”

“Fine.”

She left me alone for an hour as I stewed about how she, again, had invaded and captured my day. “You aren’t going to say anything,” she prodded.

“No.”

“Did you have a favorite of my stories?”

I did. “The girl riding through the woods.”

“Ah, yes.”

“With the crows and the river.”

“What? No.”

“Fine, you tell it.”

“You were so sure you knew it. Go.”

“There was a bear, I know that,” I claimed. She coughed. I continued, “And a valley.”

“There were large men, not bears.”

“It doesn’t even matter.”

“Julie-jewel, this is my story.”

“You don’t even matter anymore. If ever.”

“But the story! Who are you to piss on my story? Just an untouching shell of a so-called daughter.”

I pulled the car onto and then two feet past the shoulder. I grabbed the passenger seat and throttled it back and forth and back and forth until I wilted forward onto the dash, wheezing.

“I’m sorry,” she apologized. “I didn’t mean that.”

“I didn’t either.”

We sat on an old Massachusetts road looking into thick trees and wiping our eyes and noses every two minutes or so, flinching each time a truck tromped past. “We’re going to be late. Father is expecting us.” I started the car and drove on. The air was loud; we didn’t talk for several miles.

“The girl fell asleep and her horse ran off,” I remembered.

“That’s right. The storm scared him.”

By the time I got to father’s I had stitched it together, my assembly interspersed by all the tiny moments I could remember of mother — sitting and gluing together the blades of a window I’d broken and tried to hide from father (he noticed and called me a fool for thinking I could fool him); the rosemary lavender scent of her hair in the morning; the jewel quality of her eyes when she started a story; her mouth moving like a sad guppy at the story’s end. This particular one went something like this, in a voice that trills and lilts:

Once. A girl rode her horse through the road of the woods, passing every single house. “Too ugly,” she scorned each one, “too quaint and too small — barely wide enough to fit my suitcase, even if they weren’t so obviously cluttered and miskept.” She tied up her hair and spurred on her horse. The houses got tinier, messier. The road ended in a fresh-mown dell, and she purred to the clear sky, “Now this is a space for me.” And she lay down and slept peacefully. The next day she awoke surrounded by fat strangers. “Who are you and where do you live?” she asked them. They chortled, “You rode past our houses yesterday, silly girl.” She scoffed, “You can’t fit in those,” and lay back down. Rain came but still she slept, growing cold but not awakening. Her horse snapped its tether and left. Three hours before dawn she shivered out of slumber and knew she needed shelter. She staggered back onto the well-covered road of the woods, but the tree leaves trickled the downpour onto her head. She noticed a gaslight and stumbled up to a house. “I missed this one,” she marveled, for it was a manor four stories high and eleven windows wide. She felt sheepish at her disarray and kept going in search of one of the small ones. The next one was even broader and so was the next, but she could walk no farther. “How was I so blind,” she wondered aloud as she knocked feebly on the ruby red door, “to pass all these splendid homes?” A fat man opened it and said, “You only see thin slices when you fly.” She collapsed into him, and he carried her against his paunch into the den, arrayed with several bearskin rugs, half-empty goblets, and crumbs around the couches. When she awoke, her cheeks were flush and full of blood, and a salver lay before her: grilled fish, warm bread, fresh salad, soft cheese,

splattered across the tray in what seemed like it had to be a pattern. She studied it all morning, sure that it was a test, but she grew faint again. So she just ate.

Chère maman: that email's information sheet cited the time of death as 11:47 a.m. It means nothing, I know, but sometimes when I get a number in my mind it just sticks and sticks and sticks and pricks, pricks, pricks. On any given morning I might see you boxed up and heaved off and winched down — a lid and some mud forever closed over your ruby lips. When I imagine it, I dig with my hands — in the real dirt, not the ceremonial pile — and pitch it in.

North on M-123 through the backwoods, passing a town called Snug Harbor, it happened again; you just went under again. And I am deceived again.

There was no burial; there had been no death. Mother had sneaked into father's email and crafted an elaborate situation, down to a rare illness and a particular grave site. Who knows how long she had been plotting it all. She greeted me at the door and hugged me while whispering, "Julie-jewel, Julie-jewel," her deep red hair twisting down my back.

Fiercely, I hugged her back for a moment, then my rational comprehension took hold. Once more she had attempted — and succeeded — to lure me in a desperate grab, to usurp my life. I pulled away and tried to turn. She held me by the shoulders. "You must take me away. We must go. Anywhere. North."

I went back to Boston, alone, and generally behaved as though my parents — father had thumbed his nose at the whole thing and called it unsurprising; he said the

only surprise was how little restraint I seemed to have — really were dead. Mother left messages, said she tried to send letters. Father passed along basic information and happenings via email, but his life was of no concern to me.

Hans and I diverged after the un-funeral. He brought his pillow and a toothbrush to my apartment, and I said not yet, that I hated sharing space with someone. He mentioned rings; I told him that was far too much for the moment. Then, the afternoon of one of his famous firsts that fall, I pulled away from his kiss as he reached into his coat pocket.

With his hand stuck oddly in his jacket, he understood.

My excuse was easy and unarguable. “It was the trauma of mother’s prank. It changed everything, even me. I’m sorry.” It wasn’t. It was how he wanted to change everything, even me.

He knew. He gave me space without giving up, but once I had picked an apartment in Cleveland, he told me he would return to northern Michigan where he grew up. We got together (I don’t remember where) the day before he moved away.

“Jul, I loved you. If you had wanted—,” he paused. “If you want—,” he paused.

I didn’t wait. “Yeah,” I replied, avoiding his eyes but unable not to look at the long veins streaming wildly down from his bicep. I did manage to look up before I left. “See ya,” I said stupidly, probably giving him all kinds of hope — I saw his eyelids flare — but he never did call or write.

Chère maman: you are a Schrödinger's cat; you are alive, you are dead. I cannot see you anymore, for you ruin my life, but I can feel you, can hear you. You have a Schrödinger soul; you are right, you are wrong. I can't handle both at once, the muddle.

I keep you with me. I keep your tape. If I play it past your maudlin, fabricated tales, you brighten for a moment and tell me how to make raspberry pancakes, even without buttermilk. I don't need to hear this part; I've memorized it; I can hear you chirp it. I've blended a version, churning the heart of yours with the mind of mine. Sing it with me:

Add 2 T lemon juice to 1 C milk,
Whisk in 2 eggs until smooth as silk.
Stir in 1 1/3 C flour,
don't forget 2 t baking powder.
Splash in vanilla and honey, *chérie*
then rain down palmfuls of raspberries.
Be a bit lavish.

Chère maman: I hadn't envisioned Paradise as deserving of its name. Or rather, I hadn't envisioned anything about it. I hadn't really cared. If this little Michigan hamlet is at all like paradise, afterlife extravagants will be disappointed; that's their just desserts for craving. But so will those who expect a new world order; man has only a loose foothold in this mostly wild landscape. Hans had grown up at 8374 Whitefish Point Road, I remember, and I hope I'm right that he has returned

precisely here. The house looks small, surrounded tightly by a forest with the densest underbrush I've ever seen, but a stone path hewn through the shrubs leads out to the bay. Some red tulips are budding.

His father, with a gut yearning to burst through a stained khaki canvas shirt, answers the door, "Hans? He's out fishing. Day off. Bet he brings a couple back for dinner. How do you know him?"

I explain, somewhat, with edits.

"Oh, he'll be real glad to see you." Which I doubt. I even doubt my notion of seeing him. I doubt my ability to apologize. I certainly doubt that we'll know each other like we once did, but, still, here I am, way up north.

Hans's father tells me about the mating patterns of steelhead, a salmonid: where they like to wait in the streams, the rivers they run this time of year, the fly patterns they chase. "But these are just guesses. You never can really tell." I thank him, saying that, with his discourse, I have already become practically an angler. "Oh, that's a sexy trait up here," he nods, then suggests I practice out on the lake. "But don't get cocky and think you know it."

He naps in a chair. I take a rod to the dock in the bay. I catch something with my very first cast: a tall oak behind me. The shock of this hooking terrifies me. I fling the rod around, see its bamboo bend in impossible parabolas. I might break it, I fear, but I don't. With one firm flick, I snap line just above the fly. I grab another. Threading the tippet through the hole, twisting and coiling it into a knot, I wonder more about how Hans will react. Then I think about how I'd react if I actually catch a fish. Would I go squealing to Hans's father, asking him to pull it in, to grab the

viscous thing off the line? And I realize I'm more afraid of success than rejection — as though the former would be a disruption — and I can't help but feel very, very ashamed of the apathetic spirit I've shielded and guarded so long.

I learn the rhythm. Every stroke equal, every stroke complete, letting the cord extend behind, then in front, pulling out more with each flip. Back. Forth. Back. Forth. And when the fullness of the length can reach where walleye and salmon lurk, I throw it all the way forward, laying the line light on the water.

I catch nothing, but I am glad to have tried. Another UP lesson: fishing exorcises anxiety. Hans returns, and indeed with fish: a brace of steelhead as long as my arm. After a startled pause at seeing me, he holds one out. He shakes it, moving its mottled, blushing flank closer to me. I nearly touch it. "They're dead," he says as if my cautious fingers would be made confident by knowing the twin fish aren't just deeply dozing.

I turn and grab a picture on the mantle: black and white, a young girl with tan skin and a long braid. "Who is this?"

"Hmm." He holds the frame, turns it a bit. "Oh, that's an old lady who was famous around here for the stories she used to tell. She's dead now, but they say her tales would hit you like a falling rock, so that's what everyone called her." He puts it down and turns to me. "You've had a long trip. Are you hungry?"

"I am."

"Let's make grilled fish and warm bread and fresh salad and soft cheese."

I pause and only whisper out, "I suppose I'd like all that." Oh, how I'd love all that! He goes to the kitchen. I follow. Instinctively, I inspect it: mobs of hairs

there in the corner, a film of dust on clunky appliances, something leaking from the refrigerator. Yet oddly tidy. In a grimy sink, Hans plops the larger steelhead, its crooked gummy mouth gaping up as if to eat me. “So what have you been doing here?” I ask with more caution than touching a fish.

“Very little,” he says and waits. I wait. “Fishing. Guiding tourist fishers.”

“Do many come up here?”

“Very few,” he says. “Barely enough.”

He hands me an onion and lettuce and a lemon and some wild blueberries and assumes I will know what to do. And I do. I slice and tear, squeeze and sprinkle. He is behind me, his back near my back. I see nothing of him, but I hear him chopping, scraping. I look at the fish. It has slumped down. It looks as though it is crying, but maybe that’s from the onion. A chop startles me. “Are you carving the other fish?”

He laughs. “Gutting. It’s called gutting and cleaning.” I am belittled; I know nothing. “But no,” he continues, “that one’s for another time.” He is slicing ciabatta firmly with a long serrated knife. As he saws, his fingers on the loaf do not move and are very beautiful. I do not see his face. I do not know what to say.

Fidgeting in my salad, I take care to stratify the berries throughout as evenly as possible. I rearrange the red rings of onion into a spiral around the top of the leaves. I make it a mound, a butte — Devil’s Tower! I am in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. “I should go,” I say, turning to see him.

He pulls another slice. “Steelhead are delicious.”

“You hate me.”

“Not anymore.”

I pause, but go on, “I shunned you.” He turns to the fish and lays his hands on its speckled side. “It was my fault, all of it.”

“It was.”

I am staggered, accused. “OK, but not really all of it, right?” He doesn’t answer; he is being unfair; I cannot wait. “You leapt forward in love awfully hastily.”

“And I was the one to fall. You backed off without loss.”

“I had loss.” But not like his. He is right; it was easier for me to slip away and let him tumble alone. “It can be better, it can be lovely.”

“We can work on it. It can’t just suddenly be lovely after you dropped me.”

“We can work on it.” I look at him, and his eyes are gems.

He flips the fish in the sink; its pearly belly faces him. “It’s your birthday,” he smiles. I nod. With a long chef’s knife he slits from tail to gill then slumps against the counter. “What has your mother done this year?” I shrug and shake my head; I cannot possibly know. He reaches into the fish and pulls out coils and blobs. He runs the faucet and slaps the entrails into a carton. “Great bait.”

“Chop off the head, chop off the head,” I laugh, and he laughs.

“No. My dad loves the eyes, roasted and shriveled.” He shakes the emptied fish, gently lays it on the counter. “Now look at this,” he says. “It will pale when it’s cooked, but look now.”

With his thumb crooked in the flared gills to the cold snout, he snaps back all the sheen flank, and I look long at the spiked spine and the ribbed meat of the slick flesh: almost red, almost ruby — not quite, but very near.

GO (A LOVE LETTER)

Cincinnati: 6/28: Take Her Mark

A thousand men, ten thousand men. I don't even know. Who can keep count of those nights? Why would I?

Every man runs for the Olympics. The entire sport is a tournament building to the next Summer Games. Thousands are weeded out by qualifying standards. Some can't make it as best of their nations. Several get defeated in preliminaries. And then three stand on the podium, one above the rest. But that one won more than that one final race. He won dozens, maybe hundreds before that — a thousand, even ten thousand if you count training days — each one a necessary trial moving him a step closer.

That's what I say. I've always wanted to go to the Olympics, but I never had a sport.

I know the guy by the citrus; he really might be going to the Olympics, although I haven't seen him in awhile. I wonder if he remembers our hookup, or if he's banished it to prehistory. As if college and a one-night woman could be selectively erased. He was drunk, I'm sure — he'd finished as many beers as anyone at the party — but still walked like a beam, pausing at his apartment before I bumped

him on toward mine. Some guys get uncomfortable and afraid in another's room, but others are abashed to bang in their own. This guy Alexi seemed like the latter, quiet and hiding. His footsteps were silent, and I, despite being ashamed of my sandals' slap-slaps, called him out: "So, Mr. Track Star, what's on your mind?" That called for a pose, hand on jutted hip (so much slimmer then), buoyant boobs up, to put something(s) on his mind.

"Track star?" he slur-sneered. Evasion is good, signifying shame, probably of filthy thoughts. "None of us is a star. Plus, plus — we burn out more quickly than anything in the sky. No nova, just a pop and a whimper."

So he was the gaming sort. I toyed back, "How about planets? You go around, and people watch you."

"True. And only through tubes, rarely up close."

I leaned close. He twisted with a subtlety that didn't register, and rather than falling into his chest, my shoulder rammed his mid-back and pushed him. I had to grab him, so I went ahead and kissed him, though waiting until inside would have been ideal.

I always kissed them. It was easy for me then and still is. A kiss is all the guy needs to get his foot in the door, so to speak. Other entries follow. Alexi, though, did not accelerate.

In my room, I stopped and pulled away from him then took a shot at his pride. "You're a quitter." This riled him up for a moment, and he brought his hands into the affair and into my upper affairs. But again, this waned shy of my satisfaction.

"You're so good at finishing first that you're afraid of that now, huh?" Another shot,

another burst of energy. Conditioned reflex, I figured, after so many starter's guns spurring him on.

I tried other barbs and jibes, but I could never get him to just bang. He kept himself separate. He did stay with me, his sharpened body near for a night. I wanted to run my hands along the lines of his bold collarbone and his trim quad. They showed so strong in the dawn, but I didn't feel dominion over him. Couldn't touch anything more than his shoulderblade. A porcelain man, fragile, powerful only in forward motion, protective of his ligamented mobile.

He stirred; I swept my hands away. "Want an omelette?"

"I have to run long later, so I need carbs," he said, rolling and pulling a shirt over his shaved chest. "Olympians don't miss a day." Even though I knew he was serious, I laughed, I howled. He darted away. Which left me to find someone else to bang that night. Maybe that afternoon.

Three years later, I see him again, now in Cincinnati. Which is where I'd moved, unfortunately, caught up in the typical way of living. Find a job and all that. I'd forgotten about Alexi entirely. In my history, he was a footnote, a curious aside of one who neither rejected nor accepted. A limbo man, presumably off to the races out in Colorado. No altitude here in the Midwest, grimy winters and brutal summers, bizarrely oversweetened cuisine, uptight people. Some good hills, though.

When I see him at Pipkin's Market, I suspect a girl is involved. Which has never stopped me. Among pomelos and pluots, which apparently are a blend of plums and apricots, I ask.

“No.” His terseness, though hesitant, is a far and splendid cry from his previous timidity. I’ll have him yet. “Any guy involved with you?”

“No,” I lie. I’m engaged, and sometimes that fact will turn guys onto me, but Alexi doesn’t seem like the sort. Most Cincinnatians aren’t, so I usually remove my ring as soon as I leave our apartment.

“Not one? You always had one.” Some acid in this.

“Usually more than one.”

He smirks, and I fondle a large pomelo then drop it on the floor so I can bend over. An amateur move, but, with this lushly full body, always a good one. Lowering my rack, I listen. The ultimate hope is to hear a blooming boner stretching cloth from zipper, but the usual giveaway is a complete lack of sound — all the guy’s energy focusing through his eyes and down my chest. I don’t hear Alexi move an inch, though hopefully seven (at least) inches move. I realize I may be off. Maybe he doesn’t like my build. Maybe he only wants stick-figure gals, their filament arms dangling from sheet-like chests.

“Alexi,” I say, rising casually, giving him time to turn his eyes back to my face, “why don’t you call up a ladyfriend and meet me for dinner, along with this guy I know?” Which means my fiancé. “He’s kinda cute, likes books, religious, pushover, that sort. We could set him up. You know many people around here?”

“I grew up here, graduated from St. X.” I’m surprised; we’d gone to college in Oregon. I’d only moved here to work for P&G. But so much makes sense now — his presence, yes, and also his odd blend of curtness and morality. I begin to see him more clearly. Content and comfortable, a little embarrassed to be stuck back in his

hometown. Living with his parents again, perhaps not even making money. Just training all day for the Olympics or whatever there is during the other three years. A pathetic vision, and my interest wilts no matter how his muscles line out his slim shirt.

Then he says, "I've got someone I can bring."

As his confidence regrows and angles toward some other, I want to bang him in this bin of pluots, or any cross-bred fruit for that matter. Even those gnarled Buddha's Hands. "Seven-thirty, Boca. Want a ride?"

My fiancé doesn't see the big deal about a world-class runner. "Toughest part probably is not getting dizzy, going around that oval again and again."

"It's hard work, love. Imagine investing years, all to be won or lost in under two minutes."

"Too short for me. I could never finish so fast." Which is true. He holds out as long as anyone, really. Which maybe happens because I don't try as hard with him.

"You might want to shower. It's getting close." He grumbles a little and keeps reading. I let him, and I wash some dishes he'd let pile up the previous two nights, when I came home late from "work." To delay, I go get a drink after it all, just to be sure he'll be sleeping. Seeing him in bed is terrible, but at least I don't have to talk. I always fear he'll wake up and realize. Walking in, I'll imagine a spunked condom stuck to my hip, or cum suddenly cascading out my nose. Maybe a disembodied dick protruding from my mouth. After the first few (all drunken

accidents), I figured the more, the better. Grow numb. I have, but to him, not to the shame. So when I read the notes he leaves on the kitchen counter — “Beloved: you are a diligent dove making our nest; how I adore you!” “Beloved: in your work you shimmer so bright that I see you in my dreams.” — I never feel beloved at all, but exposed, as if each word is a cynical, knowing stab. I want to shed our home like a skin, but how can I hurt such a man? I pray he’ll cheat on me, confess, and make a break unavoidable. That’s not from pride; it would be easiest for him and his self-reliant ways. He’d be more okay with causing the wound and wholly blaming himself than feeling that some failure of his forced me to it. Another Cincinnati.

But then sometimes I think I might change, might stop having “girls’ nights” in which the only girl I talk to is a bartender. My fiancé bangs me well enough, if sometimes too lovingly. So I don’t know what it is. I don’t really care, obviously. I enjoy it, and I’m quite good at it. Olympian, even.

“Love, now we’ll be late. I’m going to pick up Alexi and his friend; meet us there.” Exactly as I’d planned and promised.

The impeccable maitre d’ seats us sagely: woman across from woman, ensuring the couples will be next to each other, no matter the arrangement. This is important. I have to wear my engagement ring, but I want to shield it from Alexi. He has to be on my right. Cincinnati chivalry means I sit first, and it takes a deft pull to get my fiancé to the right (meaning left) place.

Alexi’s gal really is gorgeous, and I admit she’s the belle of our ball. Probably just his type, slim and dark. She is not, however, really awesome; she’s dumb and

quiet, and it's not hard to keep Alexi looking at me and/or my tits. My fiancé discovers that the girl likes some author he adores at the moment, and the pairs are set.

To show interest, at least three touches are necessary. I use a progression. The first goes for the elbow, an innocuous and outlying region, as if accidental or reflexive. Next I aim for the shoulder, trailing off with a sliding rub down the back. The third — at the table this will be the easiest — is a thumb squeeze just below the side ribs. The fourth, if available, is an overt hand in the crease where leg meets loin. Which also offers an exploration of his, shall we say, terrain. Tonight, I plant them like this:

First: with concern, when Alexi tells of a training session in which an errant soccer ball knocked his knee and nearly caused a tumble.

Second: with comfort, when he mentions his nerves about Europe. I promise to come up with a project to keep his mind occupied.

Third: with tease, when I poke fun at whether ladies like a man who finishes first. He shows no memory of that jest, only blushes, yet keeps his eyes on me even as I laugh to the rest of the table.

Fourth: with abandon, when my fiancé is driving home the girl, and Alexi is my passenger. Which is shortly before he tells me he is flying to Europe the very next morning so as to overcome jet lag before his first meet five days later. So he's sorry, but I have to go.

“So what's your project to keep me from getting nervous?”

“You'll find out.”

Scene Sickness

A thousand paths, ten thousand paths. I don't even know.

Beginning a story, who knows what it will become? I'm as eager to find out as you. Your humble author relishes the potential of uncertainty — glory is possible, albeit unprecedented — but it's sickening in the same way that our leading lady feels like vomiting as she hands over her (expensive, but that's the benefit of a fiancé, who, knowing her disenchantment with the Midwest, has concern for her mental health and for her travel lust (among other lusts he does not know)) ticket and boards a plane to Ostrava the day before Alexi's first meet: perhaps all will be a joyous jaunt, perhaps she will fail and her fiancé will find out.

The thread is laid and must be followed. I have ideas, plans. A thousand plans, ten thousand plans. Each is nothing, but the accumulation is necessary for discovery. Each is a practice race, examined in my mind against the standard of What Is Real, of What Would Be if these people lived in real history — each is a choice I must make. I am ruled by an undulating, nauseous terror that what I select will be a facade and a fraud: a hideous progeny of grafted fruit parts: schizoid, grotesque, unholy, unhuman. Despite my intended series of delicate touches, this story might turn and flee from my plot, flying across an ocean, jumping between genres and forms like a strumpet between beds, incoherently angry like a man would be if he discovered his fiancée had, on his own dime, flown to Europe for a torrid affair with some athlete. But he hasn't, this hasn't. Yet.

A thousand paths, ten thousand paths — is there a right one? I don't even know. I keep a sick bag close at hand and run back from safe metafiction into the terrible tale.

Ostrava: Golden Spike Invitational,
7/3: Finishing First

His first race, and he wins easily. He has perfect form, flawless strides, a great butt, and, with his junk jangling, he finishes well ahead of the rest. Bored for most of the meet, I obscured myself to avoid tripping his tender superstitions. I'm the only person beneath the warm Czech sun with a fat jacket and a big hat and old-folks' sunglasses. He probably noticed me, but not me as me.

No fear now. He can't be anything but pleased — as am I: gone is his runner's pre-race taboo on sex — and here's the time to surprise him and suggest celebrating a big victory with a bang. He's talking with a not unattractive man in Canadian-logoed warmups.

"Look, Alexi, you know I don't push the pace, so don't get snotty for me pulling out." I'd get snotty if Alexi pulled out.

"You could have tried surging earlier. We could have tried a new race."

"I've been racing seven years longer than you. My tactics aren't changing. I know what my body does. Don't need to risk getting stepped on by some eager young American."

"Protect the body, I know. But how about a run for fun?" I'm surprised at his tart argumentativeness; maybe you can take the Midwest out of the midwesterner.

“Look. This is not fun. While for you it’s new, all this running around Europe, pardon the pun, the reality—“

The Canadian notices me watching Alexi. He smirks at Alexi and slides away, tossing his eyes in my direction so Alexi will see me. Alexi does but grabs the Canadian, saying, “Come jog my warmdown with me.”

“Perfect, I’m about to loosen up for my workout.”

The Canadian glances at me again, now probably thinking I’m some stalker. Untrue. I’ve been called it before, but other slurs are more often applied. I don’t care. I squeeze between them, bumping Alexi from behind as they walk slowly toward the stadium’s exit.

“Hey, champ.”

“It was a weak field, Joannah. This guy dropped out.”

The Canadian says nothing, stops and sticks his foot on a low wall, leans over to grab it. Our eyes catch again.

“Look, I need to finish up. We can meet later, if you want.”

“Oh, no, that’s fine. I just happened to be passing by. Go along your way. Far be it from me to intrude.”

He turns to me and lets his eyes close, lets his breath flow out. He sees what an ass he is being, but he doesn’t know I find his aggression promising.

“I will take you to dinner later. You’re right; I’m a champion here.”

I smile.

“I do need to finish up. Be back in twenty minutes, unless you think you can run with this international champion.”

“You a runner, too?” the Canadian asks.

“No, not really.”

“You’re figure isn’t a runner’s.” I know. I wink. He winks. I feel Alexi gazing at me, but I doubt he understands just how much these looks are saying. He has a sense, though, and he’s probably feeling some jealousy. Good.

I flop down until they return. I watch them do their drills, curious about their lean machinery though not envious.

“Do you have a room? There’s an extra bed in mine.”

Perhaps the coldest invitation I’ve ever received, but a wide opportunity. I accept.

“So you came to give me my project.”

“Kinda. You haven’t figured it out?”

He, idiot, looks at me flatly. Since he can’t seem to read me as the project, I jostle in my purse and pull out a leather-bound journal I’d bought to manifest love to my fiancé. “Write your story.” This might work, actually. It might liberate him from guilt, like the guilt I can tell he feels for sharing a room with a hot girl who’s already once seduced him. Sort of.

“My story,” he murmurs.

“Write about what’s haunting you, what’s on your conscience.” Then let that conscience go.

When I awaken in the evening from an extended nap, Alexi is stretching on the floor. I see the journal, opened, beside him. He places it in his bag. I roll onto my stomach and groan into the pillow. He steps into the shower.

I sit up. I leap to his bag and snatch the journal. He's filled it with questions, nothing but questions, questions about life's meaning and his purpose and how to connect with people and what to do with his talents and what his talents are aside from two fine legs (at which point I think of his third) and the like. None of these questions is about me. Nothing physical. All metaphysical.

I walk into the bathroom. The shower has an opaque curtain. I sling it back and pull off my top. He is standing cross-legged now, hands cupping his dick, looking down and away, turning away. "Come on," I say. "This is Europe, not Cincinnati." I unhook my bra and begin to lower it; he laughs, he howls. I dart away, wondering if he'd been waiting for such a chance to mock.

At dinner, I am a sulking lion. He knows he must make amends, but I greet his compliments with sighs and eye rolls. I out-terse the midwesterner. I bustle through doors before he can open them, and I pay for half the meal and all the taxi.

He sits on my bed to apologize. I speak first, "Alexi, you must be just so occupied with all your soul searching. I'm just so sorry my presence got in the way."

"You aren't in the way. Can't you see, you started it. You came here to be with me. You're changing my life. I'm growing."

Men get terrified when a woman says, early, “I love you.” Sometimes I use it to push them off. As Alexi tries to make me a soulmate in his maturation, I know now how they feel. I push again: “Get your rest. I’m going for a drink.”

The Canadian is in the hotel bar. We order whiskeys but go to his room before finishing them. He’s okay.

Stuck in the Middle

Flannery O’Connor once told a story about writing a story and noted that she didn’t know a certain act would happen until just a few sentences before she got to writing it. Your humble author thought her notion sounded like romanticized ignorance. I vowed I would never let myself be so out of compositional control. But I was wrong. Here, I have been surprised by our leading lady’s infinite capacity for selfish indulgence. She was supposed to soften, to discover interior depth and metaphysical interests, not harden and betray me by insisting all the more on her physical hunt. I, like her fiancé, have been betrayed. Our leading lady knows all about that sort of thing (betrayal, and also control, though Alexi’s foiling her narrative as she foils mine), but she doesn’t repent because she thinks her fiancé should be smarter, wiser. (He would say the same upon learning.) Hers was a calculated move; she snared him because he was kind, fast on the path to a good career, and trusting. Like her dumb father, who thought (as she thinks now) love meant providing for needs and wants, but otherwise very little else, only an occasional moment of delight from the beloved: a school play, a hot night. If only (s)he knew what lies within a real love. Alexi knows, or is trying to know.

Sometimes I am ambushed by what lies within the characters, leaving me overrun, overwhelmed, unnerved, nauseated. And sometimes I have to admit as much, and implore them, “Please, tell me.” But you knew that, right? You know where they’re going, right? Perhaps I should ask you. I would; I do. I am trapped inside, but I can try to guess what you are thinking, and, despite being a mild-mannered Cincinnati, I can try to betray you, because what upholds this character-author-reader dance is the constant cutting in and switching partners. New controls, new twists. Two to tango, three to write, twisting and spinning and the sick bag and twisting.

Oslo: Bislett Games, 7/7: Going Cold

I’m numbed and stuck. I’m surprised, after how I scorned his introspection, he invited me along. Perhaps, after Ostrava, he sees me as luck. Whatever his reason, I persuaded my boss to let me “work at home” while “recovering for a day or two,” and, putting on a joyous voice, charmed my fiancé. Which made him encourage me to stay. Even suggested I take a (fully funded, of course) shopping trip in Paris after I feigned uncertainty about where I’d go. “Just watch out for cute Parisian boys,” he chided, laughing like he always has about infidelity. I chuckled and reassured him, and at that moment I did face the very real possibility that I might not end up being unfaithful at all, except in my mind, which continues to stir with images of Alexi in skimpy racing bits, then out of them. Which are nice but not good enough, these mental pictures. I don’t know why he can’t be quick about it, just let his urges run loose.

As “the eight hundred meters dash” (Alexi scoffs at this title: a *dash*? Really?) is announced along with the twelve competitors’ names, not one athlete removes his warmups. Oslo, with a staunchly chilled wind, is flaunting its Nordic pride and preference for wintry games. But the time comes to strip down and simply race. The starter has a quick gun — the less shivering, the better; the less time to fret, the better — and dash they do.

He’s near the back. Not quite his goal. The goal, he said, is to keep contact with the leaders, try not to be humiliated. I understand the frustration he’s feeling now, but there’s still time. The three frontrunners have stretched a lead approaching the midway point. He’s in a little pack of four that has fallen off, but he’s caught inside along the rail, and I doubt he can see the growing gap. I’m surprised I’ve come along. I’m in more than I meant. He’s noticed. He’s begun to tell me things. On the backstretch he moves outward, probably elbows someone, and now he certainly sees his deficit. He’s trying to pass the pack. Things, desires. He hasn’t surprised me. Everyone has this early life angst, and he’s only noticing how far his athletic life is from the real world. No wonder he keeps up his moral wall and won’t do more than stick his hand between my legs. Which might be too fat for him. At the curve, he’s still trapped in Lane 3, and the pack creeps back to even with him as they curl toward the finish. He’s spent too much energy, running at least ten extra meters around the bend. They’ll all pass him soon. I doubt I’ll go to Rome with him. He’ll be angry tonight, and maybe he’ll say my presence disturbed him. Ostrava was different, he’ll say; there, he didn’t know. The final straightaway looks agonizing. His form has

collapsed. This part I can appreciate, ambushed plans. I think he comes in 7th, maybe 8th, well behind a few he beat in Ostrava.

We don't talk in the taxi, but he doesn't seem furious. He's humble about his stature; Ostrava was a golden gift. Beginner's luck. He writes in the hotel; again, I read it while he showers, but stop when I see my name. I really don't care at all now if he sees me with his journal, but he takes so long that I get bored and head to the bed to nap. When I awaken, he is watching me.

"Actually, you are small. I can hold all of you."

He tries to prove it. He walls around my body, entwining our legs, and he is right: he can, he does, and we grow warmer, even as our pants stay on.

For now. Do you know how many people out there are like me?

Stomached

If I'm betrayed by my leading lady, why am I writing this? Perhaps I don't care about her, but about you. It is you that I want something from, not her. I know what she gives, and I want none of it. What do you give? That is what I write to find out, and it is only through a storyline's connection that I can learn, as can you. Perhaps I just want to influence you, even a little. I can hold all of you, if only for a moment.

A strip of paper can be coiled into a ring with an inside track and an outside one: parallel circuits that never meet. A strip of paper with a single twist, however, becomes a one-sided object travelled singularly, eternally, entirely. The twist connects the opposite sides; all boundaries and walls are subverted.

Our leading lady twisting within our leading man, both of them twisting within your humble author, now I twisting within you as you gulp down her telling you about being encompassed by him.

The effect (she hopes) is, by becoming enclosed, to gain power over the encloser. It is a frightful twist, this submission. She (and I) accepts that perhaps the story will write itself to her goals. She is all the way in now, and only cowards and cripples quit in the middle of a race.

There are animals, mostly snakes, that harvest their prey by swallowing it; cold-blooded, they are feared and hunted. There are others, like tiny worms, that live by being swallowed; surrounded by heat in your stomach, they are ignored and influential. Eat up.

Rome: Golden Gala Meet, 7/10: Going

Alexi taught me race visualization last night after he finally went down on me (yet keeping his boxers on). At the meet, he checks the entry sheet, memorizes who is in which lane, then, during his warmup, imagines how each competitor will start, where he should position himself, who will push the pace, who might cut him off on turns, when to surge, when to sprint, and how it will feel to finish first.

“You always expect to win?”

“Can’t hurt.” I don’t disagree, but strange, if not necessarily bad, things happen when plans go awry.

But perhaps very bad. I visualize the emails and voicemails waiting for me, but I can’t trick myself into thinking anything remains unbroken. I should tell my

fiancé that I'm fine, at least. He worries. I don't even know what to say to my boss. So I don't even try. There's a race at hand, after all.

Waiting behind the tall Ugandans, Alexi looks ahead at the front-running Russian, whose shoulders have begun to clench up: he is fading. Go, Alexi, take that delicate, valuable inner position. Uncurling his fists into flat palms and tilting further up onto his toes, he powers six passing strides then drifts down into a slot behind only the Russian and the Kenyan just as the group reaches the curve and the old bronze bell clangs out the final lap. Now hold. His stride is loose and long but not too fast; his body has more; it has plenty; we know it. Before the toll dissolves, the Canadian darts out from the low rail, moving in front of the Ugandans one of whom nips his elbow which muddles his bearings so his escape angle across the lane turns out to be a couple degrees too shallow which is why (as Alexi shifts sideways to go around the drooping Russian) a bright-red-maple-leafed left foot comes, with its seven quarter-inch spikes, down onto and into and across Alexi's right calf. He goes right down, and the rest of them leap over. I watch them finish the final 330 meters only to know when I can go to him.

I arrive with the medics; they must think I'm one of them. The Canadian gets there, too; we look at each other, differently now, and Alexi speaks with caustic knowing, breaking our gaze. He knows it all.

"Care to apologize?"

I begin to, but he's not looking at me, and the Canadian answers first.

"That's just part of track. Look, it killed my stride and left me in sixth."

"Yeah, well, you killed my season. At least."

There is blood, and it's growing.

"It happens. No one meant anything."

"It happened to me because of you."

"It happens."

Every "you" feels like me.

"Do you know how hard this hurts?"

"Physically or mentally?"

"The combination."

"Nope. That's all yours."

"I truly wish I could help you know it."

But the rest of the runners arrive, and I get crowded away. Alexi hops and hobbles unaided across lanes 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, amid undiminishing applause. He slumps into the athletes' tent, turns and waves to the cheers, and the flap falls shut.

We bang.

My phone is ringing on the bar, but I can't talk to him. I check the name anyway, and I can't talk to that him either. I won't again. I'm going, now. I know (he and he and he knows) what's been happening, now. I know it's a serious thing. Every it — the trip, the Canadian, the job. I order another Sambuca *com la mosca*.

"Did it, how you say, finito?"

I don't want to talk to a fathering Roman barman.

"You were in the love, yes, and now no more? The end, the break up."

“It was diff—si, finito.”

“I know how it is. Have another.”

“Grazie.”

I take the heavy liqueur and ignite it. The blue flame swirls in a cone above the demi-tasse, and I’m drawn to it. My eyes bore into the pith where the flame is not blue but black and empty. Still cool in there, I think, and I point my finger toward it, perhaps into it.

“Idiota!”

The barman blows out the flame and glares at me.

“I wasn’t going to touch it.”

“I not care about you and your stupid finger. You are wasting my alcohol for fire. Drink it. Not waste my alcohol.”

I look at the barman and laugh, but I stop laughing and pour it out with a sneer. “Too late.” I flick and toss a match onto the thick puddle, and a blue flame whips across the bar as I walk from the shouts and curses.

I return to the hotel. Our room is empty but ravaged. I gather the jerseys and shorts and shoes he apparently flung all around. I fold and arrange them in his bag where I see his journal. I open it and read a few new sentences. They are surprisingly cogent. I want to stop before seeing my name surrounded by fucks and whores, but I also want to see my name in any way. Which I don’t. But I do see “my fiancée.”

I take my bag and a taxi to the airport, a terrifying, dizzying ride of drunkenness through streets older than I can dream. At one of the international gates

(might just be mine, I hazily hope) I sleep below a row of chairs and am awakened too soon by Americans.

Bindings and Loosings

Vanity of vanities! All is vanity, even — especially — your brazen author. What a vanity in this meta-fictive conversation. What a vanity in dramatizing writing/reading as a conjugal act. Were we ever in it together, you and I? By now, I'm long done with all this tale. Indeed, at this point it's entirely yours, and soon you'll be done with it, and our only connection is in our histories, which don't even coincide in time, not even close. My notion of relation has betrayed me; its idea was only inside me. How real it all felt. Vanity!

The vanity of storytelling masquerades as philanthropy: *listen to this; you'll love it. It'll feel good. Just do it. No, I don't know what's going to happen either. Still, let's go with it.* But it's always an ambush. You let yourself be encircled, and suddenly you're bounded by the imagination of the teller, thrusting his values into you then, in a cruel twist, leaving. His story becomes your history, and there is no escape (memories are shackles) although he is liberated by the telling.

Your humbled author confesses he has been binding you to this tale in order to be free of it himself. For I am afraid of being in this story. I am the one who is affianced (though neither rich nor Olympian), and these are my fearful thoughts about cuckoldry — if she has built a wall and hidden her banging life. I can imagine it, can see it, can forcibly interpret frivolous signs: that girl who banged all those Duke athletes had the middle initial F; my fiancée's name starts with F; perhaps all those

stories F tells about cheating men and women are just to mask her own. It becomes likely: so many nights borrowing the car to go “driving.” Just like Joannah worked late. It becomes certain: Chase (and Chet and Chuck and Chip and a Canadian...) subbed in for Chris; “running errands” means errant liaisons; the nights I must stay at my own apartment so as to rest and arise early are nights that F counts on and elates in at her own, not alone.

Vanity to put this all on you. What a waste. I ought to keep it to myself, but I cannot. Have pity on me? Mercy?

Stockholm: DN Galan Diamond Meet, 7/14: Go

After the first stage of his warmup, Alexi sits on the infield and opens his journal once more. In Cincinnati, it is 11 a.m. My fiancé, too, is opening a book — a new one, for it is Saturday. I sit high in the stands.

Alexi ties on his spikes and walks out to the infield for his customary set of five drills. Many are watching him, but as he runs through forty meters of highknees then butt-kicks then legswings then longbounds then straightlegs, he fixes his eyes on the giant picture of a diamond. It sparkles above the scoreboards at either end, representing the glimmering prize for anyone breaking a Stockholms Stadion record. I received a diamond once. I read in the program that this is a good venue for speed: a springy track sheltered from Baltic Sea breezes, impressive and historic, with castle-like towers at the far end.

They announce him as Alex — the unvoiced end sounds strong, and I stifle an urge to cry it out. Did he notice the change? On the track he looks at the others,

lane by lane. I know this part; he is reminding himself when to pass each. He knows many will be hesitant and slow, not wanting to betray their tactics so near the Olympics, and maybe he's deciding to bolt to the front. He checks his laces twice and stands on the large 2 well behind his line, then crouches into a forward curl as the starter calls them to the set position.

At the gunshot he plows out hard and in five steps falls to the track clutching his calf. Thighs and shorts and soles all fly away from him — so fast so far already so far gone. Alex, Alex; how quickly it goes. The gun shoots again: there was a false start! The thighs and shorts and soles slow, stop, turn around. He gets up quickly; only the Ugandan in Lane 1 saw him crumple. A warning is issued; subsequent violators will be disqualified.

The others prepare for the restart, bounding and dashing, but Alex stands, leaning greatly on his left foot. It takes a long time. When the starter calls them to their marks, the others high-step and hop like springs while he stays rigidly upright, only coiling his body when the set command is spoken. He eyes the stone tower on the far side of the first curve — there is where he must get to. Which is what he tells himself. Get to there. And then the rest. He is listening to nothing outside, only watching for the puff from the pistol...and he pushes off and I can feel the searing with(in) him — lye pouring through the back of his calf — but he runs and he goes and he goes.

Gone

Your deceitful author's most fearful thoughts are not about being engaged to a Joannah, but about being enthralled by a Joannah (or a Jill or a Janine or a Jessica). What if I am like Alexi, resisting, resisting, but invariably giving in, like Flannery to the course of her story. I already have been a bad man, have entertained thoughts, gawks, and stories transgressing the midwestern values which were imparted unto me. I have not done anything, neither banged nor been banged by sundry strangers and assorted acquaintances, but does that matter? I have played it in my head. My teacher said that whoever commits adultery in the mind has committed adultery for real. And he said that whoever breaks one law breaks them all. So, as a full, 100% sinner in those eyes, can I say I'm any good, any less likely to go out and sleep with some peripatetic Joannah one confused night? "All things are possible..."

What's more: if, while claiming/aiming to live within the moral boundaries I have defined, I still can think and write the preceding episodes — indeed, feel that they *must* happen like they did — can I not as easily do them? Patterns of the past (real and imagined) form a matrix out of which decisions for the future are made and enacted. What I will do springs from what I have done, from what I have known. Mental patterns can, with repetition and practice, be tricked: that I ran 1:47s rather than 1:55s, or that that fish was twenty-two inches, not seventeen, or that I didn't bang that girl, or that I did. With repetition and practice, I can prepare myself to react automatically to scenarios, like how I used to envision a slight gap forming between Rob Leventhal of Emory and Bernier Lauredan of NYU, and, physically at practice

but mentally at a race, between their shoulders I would dash. After repetition and practice, I saw that gap at UAA championships and dashed for real.

In imagining Alexi, twisting through his walls and watching/making them weaken and shred, am I not also imagining it for myself, paving the way to action, from the fruit market's first glimpse to the Roman debauch? Am I not establishing mental patterns that will beget physical actions? Through repetition I refined these pages and Alexi's eroded values — can practice be far away? And these are not my first trysts of imagination. I have entertained fantasies. Long, long ago, before F came and won my attentions. Perhaps these patterns are too old, too deep of wounds to let me run. Perhaps, one day, I'll be mowing the lawn, and someone like that once-wanted tanned neighbor Jenny O comes down the back hill in a bikini, and F isn't home, and inside we go...

What's preventing me? What's stopping me from leaving lovelight and falling into the dark? You're too late to catch me. Cincinnati doesn't protect me. F has read this and shuddered at it, but admits it is within me to do what is right, or not. I am the castle, the only wall, and on the inside I have already gone out. Can any second gun call me back?

I had meant for this story to end in Rome, in shame. But, after repeated revision practices, I had to let Alexi run away. During repeated revision practices I felt his regret. In repeated revision practices I knew he had to run again. I wrote and I wrote; he fell and he fell; but he could not stay down. I found he would not. As I raised him up and away from her, I keep myself away from her. I can be more, a fine man, away from her — I am not just an I but a we now, bound in a diamond. How

small a sacrifice to flee the Js of the world, burn them out by this tale like lye through my synapses; how great a joy to be beloved beyond (and also between) the bedsheets. For with repetition and practice I have made and still make and will ever make a love, whereas this story has ended.

O my dove, this has ended; o my dove, our story will go and go.

REVEILLEATIONS

And the kitten paws after the fish, and he mewls at her fluttering, and as she swims and swims and dives, he rolls over to sleep and dream of fins and oceanic snacks <<

Julie's Mama closes *Lullaby Kitty* and walks to the light switch.

- Now sleep, Julie-jewel, will come to you, too, with fine dreams.

Outside, a whistle and a rumble.

- But Mama, that —

Mama hears it, calls it settling, but, my, it sounds unsettled even to her.

Standing in the doorway, she winks in progression to the four corners, shackling all monsters and ghouls by the ritual only a Mama can know. She will teach it to Julie. Julie, too, will wink-lock for her own daughter, and they will rest safe.

Mama doesn't fully shut the door before going downstairs. Will Julie rest safe? Does she know it? That. That was a rattle from the bedroom. Julie's father tells Mama not to heed it; such babying will keep Julie fixated on so many unreal things. Julie, Mama thinks, just don't cry, don't cry, don't cry; your Papa won't like that. But Julie does. Oh, she does, and clearly for a Mama, only a Mama can save her now.

- Let her cry, Rosalind. Don't indulge her imaginations any more than you already do.

- She's only a girl.
- Let her cry.
- Now louder, Julie shrieks for Mama.
- Let her cry. You go up there, I swear...

Mama calls up — Julie-jewel, my Julie-jewel — and runs up the stairs, but then: through the floor comes a thwomp (the clatter ripples) up the bedposts, and Julie feels it, and silence crashes down.

Julie slowly lowers the pillow from her eyes and sees in the hall Mama down on the carpet, Papa mad behind her, poor Mama with one brow cut, kicking back, rising up, getting grabbed, running again anyhow <<

Francis switches off the TV and turns slowly toward his basketball teammates as they erupt.

- Dude, she was totally about to be beat.
- No, she was gonna slip away and be saved. Boring.
- She was gonna get killed.
- Whatever. Good move, Francis.

Francis looks at these guys, sport shorted in his basement, as usual, sitting beneath him. Tell them? He leaves his hand on the power button, teasing it as his secret teases his mind. Tell them? No. But he's eleven and ten months — practically twelve. It's okay to like a girl now, right?

- What's it gonna be this week?
- Yeah, man, tell us.

Tell them. Francis knows he should, could; they always take whatever he says. They've got nothing on him, leading scorer, leading rebounder. So he wonders, should he, could he? He imagines the revelation; he sees it as being cut and sliced open before them, guts spilling out like the pie pulp he licked from her belly in this basement last night.

- What's your new awesome story?

- Tell us about when you told off Miss Martin.

- No, we know that one. I wanna know what you said to Joannah after practice.

- Ooh, yeah, I bet it was harsh. Did she go off crying like Kelly last week?

That was badass, man.

Harsh. Badass. Manly. So they all think. So he wishes it was. But Joannah. She was pretty fine. Her swooping hair beams within his thoughts, which he suppresses by staying strong and in control: say it, hide it; say it, hide it — a pulsar threatening his sleek, cosmically cool rep.

- Come on.

- Maybe he's in *love*.

- With *her*?

- She's alright, man.

- But it's Francis. In love?

- I bet he gave her a rose and nibbled her toes!

- Ha! Gave her a rose, nibbled her toes! Gave her a rose, nibbled her toes!

Francis tries speaking, but too softly under the chants. Then louder comes his phone, chirping on the ground. Ricky snatches it and blurts *her* name. Someone guffs. They weren't supposed to find out like this. He sets his phone down and turns to the TV. A fourth ring. They are staring up. He grabs it and snaps it open; he calls her My Cherry. The boys again start, but he stays on <<

The middle-aged widower snaps off the radio and lowers the stove as the paprikas simmers. Kids everywhere these days, taunting his lack. Won't even let him keep his cooking ritual, his steam-shower to wilt away the paper-pushing of each day. And tonight, the latest new lady is coming.

He creaks over to a box draped in a quilt. Inside are binders he has filled, with Eva or after her. Carefully labeled: Events, Personages, Achievements, Dining Rooms, Where We Visited. Each day he wonders who would get them if he and his name die together. His long, thin fingers flip through the spines; he selects Our Items.

No, not that one. That one will have the ring Eva gave back to him, telling him just before she went, "This is right for you. You always were a chef, not a husband." Of course she wouldn't even let him protest, just talked over him (what strength she had, even then), "Buck up and live on. Don't fool yourself after I'm gone with shrines and mourning."

He grabs the nakedli he'd rolled, perfectly. He assembles them on a sleek triangular plate, their pearly lumps slick with oil, and pours the whiskey-colored paprikas over it. A sprig, a dollop — finis!

But at the door, she says things and steps away. At the door, he doesn't especially try. There are, of course, other ways to give birth, and he looks for the binder labeled Possible Menus <<

Joshua starts groaning about the film's predictability, and he gladly listens when his Granny Josephine gets to telling him the Sears Tower is on fire. "Fire" means she wants to go back to her nursing home, which is kinda a big and weird deal. Joshua jumps on the chance to drop her there.

- Worms squirm in the sidewalk, Josh.
- Yes, always, Mother.
- So small, but so many. Do you hear them?

Joshua has to make her think that what she considers amazing is in fact common knowledge. Worms singing in the sidewalk? Everyone knows.

- Josh, sometimes they sound angry.
- Yes, but now they're playing Zeffifinci.

And this usually shuts her up. His key is to be a step ahead, to take control how he wants, to find out how she is. Meaning, is she basically alive? Not any sort of real interest in her various states of mind and wild concerns. Nor to solace her sprawling wants — go home to Kentucky, cook fish in a cave? Easier to catch nebulae with a net. Obviously, Joshua makes ways to get others to tend to her.

- Mother, how's your handsome friend?
- You are my friend.
- I'm your son. What about your handsome friend, the man down the hall?
- He...

- He...?

- He touches.

- People touch. Friends touch.

- You don't touch me.

Maybe she's right. So Joshua hugs. His hip juts into her side all jumbly against his firm core. Kinda gross, but he holds. On her shoulder blades, his hands feel skin like curtains, draped and cold. He squirms, she squirms, but he holds, he touches, he asks her to tell all about the worms, and she starts with a thrilled stammer, and he holds and listens to her small voice describing tunnels of untold <<

Pain slivers the old sushi chef's mind, snatches it from the story he was hearing. His knife has run through the octopus and into his thumb. Thumb does not matter; octopus does. Must never miscut, never does. But this slice looks skew. His son, that lazy assistant, is still just charming the waitress with a story. The chef could hide his slips, recut. Then he looks in his wound and sees teacup-white one inch from last month's scar. Quickly, he lifts his hand from the octopus.

- Hm, Mr. Eight. Perhaps for us time...

He wraps the thumb, cleanses the knife, returns to parceling the octopus.

- So what got you caught, Mr. Eight? Greed? Hunger? Sacrifice?

Senescence?

He arranges each tentacle ribbon on a plot of rice, aligns them on a tray, nods to the waitress.

- *Itamae* Kuribata-san...

- Yes?

- These are, hm, a little...crooked.

- Hm. Tough bug, this.

He thumps the octopus twice. She waits. He shakes his head and looks down until he hears her step away.

- Mr. Eight, here not much is left.

He returns the creature's husk to its tub, rolls his knife in a towel, surveys the tables filling and filling, bows to his son, gestures for the kid to man the counter. The *itamae* walks out into the gloaming, his uncut thumb stroking and pressing the cloth-cloaked blade. Its point's fine end brings comfort: such precision, such certainty, finality. It will feel...

- *Itamae* Kuribata-san, your son. He's uncertain...he isn't yet...he feels...

The waitress. He waves her off but pauses, looks up, holds his hand for a moment. It quivers like it did in his own youth. He turns back and envisions Mr. Eight: how to slice him straight all the way to the head so his son could see <<

The God grips the cord: eight-arm galaxies and nebula nets, the oldest supernovae and the youngest pulsars: all could slough and swirl inward, inward, and the coalescing whorl could put a new spark in Her eye: a dream of what to make tomorrow, a perfect world where all would know Her. It would be worth the hurt. But where would these go, oh, where would these go? She stands from bed and, tying Her robe, waits, watches, winks down >>

I hold my sleeping kitten. Who does not swim. Who stays near. Curled, he fits in my hand. His calico coat is greasy, blotchy, stretched thin over bones. I drag two fingers around his head, over his short neck, down his ribbed flanks and his foot

pads. His mouth smacks; he dreams of sardines. I lay him on the bare pillow on the bare mattress in the middle of this cave-like room.

Near the grocery, my eyes scan snow drifts for coins. I collect enough to get a quart of the milk from free-farm cows. Walking home, I pick up a crumpled magazine page: lime candy ad on one side, a zesty yellow dress modeled on the other. I make folds and creases. A square, a diamond, a trapezoid, a boat. I try new angles (my fingers chill; my legs numb) and give it planes, ridges, dimensions. Broad triangles, bent back, partly overlap, and out sprout the fish's lemon-trimmed fins >>

Sardine, sardine, come to my paws; feel peace — these? I swear they're not claws. Sardine, sardine, glassy and lean: meant for me? Or for the sea. Shimmer, swimmer, in spit-topped waves, away, away, away. I'll just have milk today.