

ALL THE PLACE YOU'VE GOT

by

Caryn Suhr

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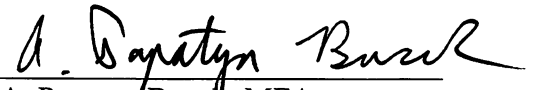
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This thesis was prepared under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor, A. Papatya Bucak, Department of English, and has been approved by the members of her supervisory committee. It was submitted to the faculty of the Dorothy F. Schmidt College of Arts and Letters and was accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

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ABSTRACT

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All the Place You've Got is a collection of short stories inspired by and set in the author's hometown of Warner Robins, Georgia. This is a work of fiction. Names, places, occurrences, and characters are either a product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental. The title is a partial quote of dialogue stated by Hazel Motes, the protagonist of Flannery O'Connor's first novel *Wise Blood*. The full quote reads, "In yourself right now is all the place you've got." This collection of stories was built as a direct antithetical response to O'Connor's representation of dialogic salvation and visions of the divine, a central concern, stemming from dedicated Catholic belief, of her body of work.

ALL THE PLACE YOU'VE GOT

E.D.I.M.G.I.A.F.A.D.	1
And Many Sons Had Father Abraham.....	35
Votum Separatum: The Firstborn Wears the Crown	53
Throw Down Yer Heart	56
Big Man, Upstairs	71
Vox Populi: Becoming the Leatherman.....	102
Gather Up the Fragments	104
The Ballad of Collie Hatchett	122
King Frog.....	130
A Defense on Writing What, Who, and Where You Know.....	138

E.D.I.M.G.I.A.F.A.D.

or

Every Day in Middle Georgia is a Fucking Amazing Day

Spacewise, speaking in terms of tangible spans of land but also as in general emptiness, cruising in what most would consider a forward direction at a Southerly angle, there were eighty or ninety-so miles between our shiftless current hurtling location and the place where I'd first known the absolute truth, more certain than my belief in any preset alarum to maternalism from a so-called biological clock or time bomb, that we would be stopped before and between, in limbo of our predetermined destination deemed "The Happiest Place on Earth." From the passenger side, the place I hate to ride, distance was and is time, though I could not make an educated guess to equalize the two into a unified wave of the hand and was only aware of the former due, not to exercise of my own honed or innate skill at knowing how far you've removed yourself from the last place you remember most, like a streetless forest wanderer who says unsaid to the trees, *I've known this patch of moss, which means I've walked the circumference of my Earth.*

In that sense of lumberjack-like awareness, I'm incapable of even remembering how many stumbled steps lie between my mattress fortress and chilly porcelain bladder release. But I did know roughly how far, yet not how long, clockwise, we'd moved onward through the sheer will of my forcibly, though not uncomfortably so, singular focal energy on the noticing and notation of each green and white number marking civilized distance in miles along I-75. A task which I, whether captain or co-pilot, often self-employed my idled mind in a, recognizably futile though habitually harmless, effort

to make something more of what lies between Here and There.

Here, currently a spot in flux, though contained by the pine-needle green Jeep Wrangler, a finicky, spoiled secondhand-smoked vehicle gifted by my widowed mother on her discovery of the marriage license, obtained in secret and costumed separately as Socrates and Jerry Garcia after escaping a stagnant Halloween party put on and attended mostly by couples who wanted and needed other couples to hold up a mirror to reveal the love they believed they radiated and exacerbated in mutual pairings of Kermit and Miss Piggy, Ketchup and Mustard, and, the only admirable pairing of Van Gogh and his dispossessed ear, though I assumed and was correct in doing so that that couple would be divorced within the year. And There, the vacation destination I'd seen once as a child of an unremembered age though I knew when we arrived it would be as if I'd never been there before, a panhandled place of colorful mirth chosen democratically by a familial vote of three to one, the one wishing we'd spend a weekend among unwashed attendees of a festival where I was told there would be music.

It was the Jeep, as I mention I'd known but not told, that would select somewhere for us to scratch our heads and wonder where was the there we were, because it was in a state of well-maintained malfunction, like an over-aged human who couldn't decide between a languageless, ignoble descent into elderly infancy or death, the easy way.

Though I admit I admired the color of our transportation, which I was permitted to, vaguely, select when one day my mother phoned me and said in her firm, uninterpretable manner, "I do wish I'd been there for the ceremony, if that's what they call it at the courthouse. I was wondering what your favorite color is. You know, I don't

think I've ever known that, but I must've asked you a thousand times before. There's no way a mother could not know her daughter's favorite color and since I know I'd never forget to ask such an important question, it must be unknown because you never told me, Penelope. Is that man, I mean, your husband, still calling you that name? Oh what is it? Oh yes, Pen, like you're some writing instrument and not a woman."

"Or, mother, it's possible I never told you because I don't have a favorite color," I didn't respond to last question which was really a slight that she already knew the answer to.

"That's just silly talk, who doesn't have a favorite color? It says so much about you, you know. I think if I had to make an educated guess, I'd say that you prefer things that are deep purple. Am I right?"

"No, I don't have one purple item in my, our, home. I like all colors equally. Why'd you say deep purple?"

"That is something you'd say, but if you truly liked all colors equally then you'd have something deep purple in your possession. I guessed it because I know you're special and I know that you know you are special and sometimes that makes it difficult for people to relate to you. They think you think you understand everything when really all you know is that you're special."

"That makes no sense, mother. Did you only call me because you felt bad about not knowing my favorite color?"

"No, I do need to know it, for a surprise, but I supposed if you don't have one then I'll have to get you something that doesn't have a color, which is, well, nothing."

I was ready to end the conversation so I looked at the objects around me and my eyes settled on the mounds of my breasts, which looked like two nice grassy knolls, “I’m wearing green so I guess that is currently my favorite color, but mother I have to go on my run.”

“Green? Are you sure? I wouldn’t peg you for a green, too happy, not that you’re unhappy, you’re a wife now. I always knew you’d make some man very happy one day. But still with all that running? It’s not like you’re training for the Boston Marathon. What’s the point of all that moving? Don’t you want to work on building a home? A family?”

“I don’t have enough time to answer those questions mother, but, just so you know, I am making a roasted chicken for dinner tonight and not so I can keep Jay pleased with me.”

“Well that’s nice. I hope you don’t dry it out. It would be nice if you called me every now and then, but I’ll let you go wherever you’re running off to. Green? You’re sure?”

“Yes, green, I’m positive. I love things that grow. I love Christmas trees. I love my breasts. Goodbye, mother, speak soon.”

“What was that about your breasts? Are you with child? You’re sounding unwell. You know you should wear socks always, even in the house...”

“Goodbye, I do love you, mother,” I spoke over her and hung up hoping she wouldn’t assume an unintentional disconnection.

Under certain circumstances, usually involving the insomniac failure of my

should-be slumbering mind, in the dragging fumes of a funeral procession or a guilt-laden screech to buy groceries without a list or coupons clipped because your children, my children, need anything to eat for breakfast or our current one of passenger preoccupation with what unknown location our car would select for us to stay until its revival, this occupation of accounting for open spaces of matter and mind, land and time, returned, for all my efforts, only a sum of immature anxiety that can only be likened to the sensation of stagnant movement pumping through the limbs of the treadmill runner: time, heart-rate and all else save space, increasing without even the slightest possibility of overtaking the armpit odor of your plodding neighbor, clinging, winded to the stiff support arms to suspend step further, until the runner's constant desire to pass in front is pushed aside by staunch stench and causes a sudden ceasing of the strain of muscle and tendon, mechanical speed snapping true stillness backwards in admissible defeat by an unlikely foe, though the mind races victorious in celebration of the animal ability of the body to grow space on the fertile deathbed of Manifest Destiny.

Now, I'm sure the mere mention of that failed philosophy has caused many of you to determine my squandering explanation of my state of mind as attempts at sounding fancy to avoid the facade of my true feelings or it's possible, you may have reached, my meandering mouth means to affect faith that my mind's not yet dead or given over completely to fostering lives and limbs that are not my own and finally, the select few of your who I know can keep in steadfast stride, are still wondering what exactly I'd known of inevitability in the span of those ninety-odd miles within the man-marked borders of Georgia, the Peach State, On My Mind. But for you yet naysayers, might I just

summarize that essentially in these moments of seated, speeding suspension along definitionless—except by too simplistic pencil-marked paths or, for those keen to technological conveniences an arrow guiding by satellite and the estranged accompaniment of an automaton imitation of a navigator, usually female and vaguely Australian in apparent origin with the aimless anger-generating mispronounced translation from human locale into pre-programmed, kindergartenesque computer understanding of the most basic sounds of letters combined in sequence—routes of travel I tended towards a selfish conviction that independent propulsion, whether forward or backward, was the only real motion, afoot or rolling on rubberized friction, was the sole potential for a modicum of control over our current condition. Which is to say the reason why I had to notice the mark of every mile, so that I could force myself into an existence within spaces I inhabited for split hairs of seconds.

At the very least it gave me something to do while my husband, though I never call him that, just Jay, attempted to educate my offspring, though they never sprang off me but rather clung to my skirts, in the appreciation of noodling jam-band guitar riffs and the senseless strung-out lyricism of it all that drove a small portion of my high school graduating class, that consisting largely of my only tolerable social circle, to a wasteful pilgrimage from one venue to the next chasing bliss that faded not in the exhaust from the touring bands bus departure, but in the dingy like dawn afterglow of combined hallucinogenics that, in my own experience, made the music tolerable in the way that you'd maybe jiggle your foot along with a tune you know you despise while detained under the drill and dense gaseous fog of dental inspection. Something I was sure he was

doing only to remind me that it wasn't he who'd decided on Disney World and that, had he been given an opportunity to state his case with a presentation accompanied by a slideshow and soundtrack, we'd already be setting up camp in the Tennessee heat with the promise of future basking in the soundwaves of musical genius, which, given that the lineup included Prince and some folk bands you've probably never heard of, I'd honestly enjoy if it weren't for the two fruits of my loom whose preservation I'd been charged with.

So perhaps it was out of spite for the limiting existence of the five and ten year old children in the backseat—I'd never say that I hate my kids, but I do sometimes wish they never came to exist in the first place—that I decided to maintain my silence and leave my foresight unmentioned to my husband, strange to call him that, he's always been just Jay to me and I Pen to him, never Penelope nor Penny. Not that Jay wouldn't've believed me, like some men, assuming that, because I am a woman who did not grow up on a farm or with Bruce Springsteen for a father, I knew squat about cars, which is absolutely the truth. But I do reckon I've developed or awoken, some uncountable years ago before I received my first kiss at the elderly age of nineteen, a sleeping sensitivity for recognizing when a person, place or thing is breaking or about to be broken. How else would I have been able to predict to the whole high school that the most loathed substitute teacher, Mr. Myne, a man who claimed blindness though could somehow sense a silent folded note passing hands, would, in writing his name in screeching strokes, nose inches from the chalkboard, sneeze with enough violence to crack the bridge in his nose? How else, if not for some intuition inclined towards destruction?

Actually, if I'd said anything ninety miles ago, Jay probably would've pulled over in the middle of Atlanta traffic because he believes me too much, always thinks I'm telling the truth, and not even because he knows how much I believe in the beauty of it, but, because he is certain I am incapable of telling a lie. And although he is right, there are still times when I subside in soundlessness, and during those spans I often think how keeping truth mute can cause more damage than voicing a lie. The lie in this case would've been that I didn't mind pulling over in an unfamiliar Southern city because I didn't want to know Atlanta, a city seeming small and sparse in skyline—unlike our own familiar metropolis via Chicago with its peaks threatening to slash the smogged-screened sky and valleys like stomping feet of flesh-hungry giants, a thousand well-dressed ants scattering for shelter—though once we'd entered Atlanta it swallowed you just the same if not more so suddenly into its hot stomach. Just driving through was like an unexpected bowel movement that must take place in a public restroom where pooping, usually being an almost orgasmic relief, becomes an embarrassing reminder of the organs you carry around, like rocks in a briefcase, and the plopping, obviously audible to the owner of the stilettoed feet of a slim ankled stall neighbor, like cannonballs fired in warning reminder of your lowly function as a coal-shoveler feeding the fires of unknown processing functions of unseen machines, but perhaps even that is too backbreaking a metaphor.

All I'd known was that I didn't want Atlanta to be a place where I'd existed except in passing at fifteen miles over the limit and that had nothing to do with the blue neon sign that proclaimed, "JESUS SAVES," I'd seen to the right of me affixed to a steeple whose foundation was invisible to me so I imagined the whole structure as a

shingled teepee an overturned ice cream cone, crisscrossed inside with support beams, tightropes for rats and roosting spots for pigeons, also rats despite their wings, no doors or windows and nothing inside for humans, only the outside message to be hoisted above the soulless faces of grey-eyed rectangled buildings with no apparent tenants or known business association. In fact, I thought the sign was beautiful and I'd sighed when I'd seen it, which Jay apparently mistook for romanticism and flicked me a white-toothed grin while massaging my left kneecap. I focused on the bone shifting beneath his fingers, because to return a smile would be to lie about my current level of comfort and sexual desire, both of which I felt I'd forgotten to pack and were currently slumbering in my bed back home where I'd awoken hours before dawn and carried one sleeping child, the lighter one, like a limp duffle bag, to the car, thinking of how she'd wake up and not know where she was, but only that she'd been moved, a thought that frightened me though it inevitably delighted her when she woke amidst a shaft of sunlight filled with dust and looked out the window and screamed, "Cows! Oh my cows!"

I'd been chugging oil-slick coffee in the absence of electric kettle and dusty Yerba Mate tea. A beverage considered, or so my imported Argentinian paper packaging informed me every morning, by certain indigenous South American traditions to be the "drink of the gods," and believed, consumed in proper excess and good intention and brewed in a gourd husk, capable of mind-expanding visions of the spiritual sort, though all of nine cups ever did for me can be likened to the sort of alarm clock that multiplies in volume the longer you try to pretend it's just part of that dream you have where you glance away for a second and turn back to see that everyone who once surrounded you,

mostly nebulous faces without names—some with your mother’s thin lips or your dead dog’s sad eyes—have vanished or maybe, more accurately, dematerialized, because you can still feel the reverb of their presence pressured on the drums of your ears, not beating with tribal rhythm, but as if hands, or, if you prefer for cringing realism, a Q-tip testing the tautness of your belief in the negative reality of the dream state until the inexorable inward bursting, like sinking ship portholes, you’ve gone diving too deep, and the rushing fulfillment of harsh, clear vision.

Since the day a sun-stained Brazilian man had, in a voice soft like a lamb’s ear, explained the tea’s health benefits to me and, as if revealing a secret or so not to offend the Americans steering like cattle through the narrow aisles of the farmer’s market, he leaned into me and told me it was gentle like the sunset, but had the kick of a mule and no wars were fought over it like the nefarious coffee bean, I have never found myself fully awake until I’ve finished my first cold, unsweetened cup. I’ve also learned that my preferred method of consumption, which is said to reveal the brewers mood or desires, chilled overnight in mason jars, indicated despise and indifference. Jay, on the other hand, squeezed in honey which, sweetly, meant marriage, or, if overly sweetened, called for a need to speak with your parents. Though it’s true Jay desired marriage more than I, we’d both go guiltless halves of years without speaking to our living parents.

My children, Sage and Josh, though I wished he’d go by Joshua, hadn’t spoken to me, nor I to them in direct address for almost the entire duration of our Southward journey. Some speech emitted from them, like puffs of breath condensed by cold air and released white and smokish like the deceptively clean clouds from factory stacks, seemed

aimed at neither me, Jay, nor one another, but at some benevolent presence or an imaginary friend whose ear was open to receive the thoughtless thoughts that possess the brain of the child.

“Eight cows and eight baby cows. How do they know which is their baby? They all look exactly the same to me. Maybe they’re twins. Can you have a twin from a different mommy? I think you can. I think you should. Everyone deserves a twin. Even a boy twin is better than no twin at all.”

“Can you stop, Sage?” Josh had retorted to her contemplation which I found riveting and a show of her natural attunement to the split lives of humans spent in constant search of their other half. “Nobody is listening to you and you’re not talking about anything.”

“You’re listening. You wouldn’t say I’m not saying anything if you weren’t listening. Somebody’s listening, even if you aren’t. You need to pay attention more. That’s what Miss Peamont wrote on your report card.”

“She’s a liar and she doesn’t say anything either. She just tells us junk stuff like how to find out how much space is inside a shape on a piece of paper. Why would I need to know that if I can just see how much space there is? Why does it have to have a number? It’s just empty space and if you want to fill it you can know it’s full when there’s no more empty space left. You can even fill a paper shape with anything except coloring it in with your pencil or turning it into a robot or a slanty house. It’s all junk. You’ll see when you’re in fifth grade. It’s all junk you’ll never need to know ever again.”

“You’re the one not saying nothing.”

“Anything, Sage. He’s not saying anything,” Jay said from the cockpit, attuned as well as I was to, though with completely different concerns, to the unfolding observations of our combined halves.

“Dad, who’s saying anything?” Sage asked with the air of an ancient philosopher.

“Who’s saying something, honey. You’ve inherited your old lady’s bad grammar,” Jay’s slight towards me was true, but I absorbed it with contempt at the idea that something as pointless as patterns of grammar, like my penchant to add the prefix un- to words that didn’t exist in that form, could be affixed, whether through nature or nurture, in the individual mind. “You’re both saying something, but it’s a whole lot of nothing. You two! Listen to this one. This is where it all started, the whole spinning wheel in the sky. You gotta be Grateful for the Dead, guys.” Jay increased the volume and “Friend of the Devil” spun from the speakers and worked its smooth tendrils, like the drifting actionless arms of jellyfish, through my ear canals and rested at peace among the grooves of my gray matter. I liked this song and sang along with a made-up harmony while Jay percussed the steering wheel with tapping fingers and dueted with me in his own slightly off-key melody.

Set out runnin’ but I take my time. A friend of the devil is a friend of mine.

If I get home before daylight, I just might get some sleep tonight.

“If you’re friends with a friend of the devil, does that mean the devil is your friend too?” Joshua queried to nobody who would answer. Somewhere, Jerry Garcia sighed and smiled.

This moment, now sprinkled sporadically somewhere across the middle of

Kentucky, sandwiched by fields stretching for miles, made me feel like a family, like I had become one with the cantankerous metal-bodied vehicle and contained within myself four separate units of flesh, a feeling I knew could only possibly be true if all occupants within me were also without me, each possessing their own family. I'd felt Sage would understand, even in her bright naivety, if I'd tried to explain it to her.

We were raging somewhere around the tenth hour of our trail, unbroken by sleep or sightseeing, when I felt a pang between my temples, as if someone had struck the bridge of my nose with a tiny icepick, an indication, I knew from experience, that the end was unwittingly upon us.

“What’s going on?” Jay lowered the volume on a twanging banjo, as if a decrease in sound would allow the car to stop and think about what it was doing and where it was supposed to be taking us.

I wanted to tell him the car was breaking down, but he'd find out soon enough so I suspended my vocal chords in quietude. Why take a vow of silence only to warn everyone of its oncoming?

“What’s that noise? It’s like, a pterodactyl. Do you hear it, Pen? That screech?”

It was really more of a squeal, like demonized pigs drowning themselves. All that wasted bacon.

“Pen? What the fuck?” I stabbed my eyes at him. He knew how I felt about expletives, that there were far more creative ways to express frustration and anger. That they were words that made the recipient jump with the surprise of a doctor’s pinprick, but only drew a bubble of blood shocked and squeezed above skin surface.

“All the cars are going faster than ours,” Sage said.

“This piece of shiii-pyard junk,” Jay raised his brows at me in want of some sort of approval for his clever shift of language. I thought I could still hear the comforting pinged banjo and the soft three-part gospel harmony, whose tune I believed though its words failed my faith, but the volume, at its arbitrary decibel of “1,” was overcome by the sound of our engine failing.

“Fuck,” I said in what I thought was only my head and not in reference, as Jay presumed, to our vehicle’s self-appointed resting place, still a couple hundred slow feet ahead, but aloud, more than whisper-loud and in the moment’s remembrance, brought on in thinking that my average mile per hour run was now quicker than our Jeep’s waning motion forward and figuring, with shaky calculation would take me less than forty eight hours of non-stop running to reach Mickey Mouse’s doorstep, that I’d forgotten to pack my running shoes and now, though I had no intention of abandoning my family, truly, and lacking proper footwear, my choice of which many said was improper anyways, I had no place to run off to.

Allow me, because we’re going to be here on the side of I-75 for a while, to pause and explain why something seemingly benign would cause me to break two vows with only one word. So, before I’d even decided to forego my vow against the institution of marriage, I committed to, at a speed averaging on eight minutes a mile, a directionless five mile run, four times a week on the balls of sockless feet sheathed in individually-toed shoes that, though offering the closest thing to running barefoot, made me feel like a toad. My random runs were a task of relished solitude I completed often without fail, excepting

weeks when the bitter slosh of suburban Illinois winter drove me into a hazy hibernative state in which I fueled my body on meals of apple slices arranged like spiral stairs around smooth organic peanut butter into which I mixed by spoon and sometimes finger generous supplications of cinnamon and floral Tupelo the rarest of honey's and refrained my mind from strain, during the luxurious laziness of four years and one semester's work towards a now defunct philosophy degree, on fourteen hour bouts of deep sleep. Sleep like my budget for rare sweeteners was stunted soon after an unceremonious graduation to a five-hour flopping nap, uncured by years of psychiatric trial, which only resulted in error.

There was the time when I fell into a drug-induced unremembered waking-sleep habit which always consisted of particularly consumed, each with individual spoon, buffets of mysteriously plentiful pints of Ben & Jerry's and midnight *COPS* marathons absorbed with the avarice of blind bulging eyes only existing elsewhere in the perfect pitch black of ocean depths on the jagged, pale, unmirrored faces of rare fish, malformed and seemingly existing only as warning of the existence of an evil that, once exposed to the naked day, cannot be hidden back into the myth of nightmares like one hides a drunk uncle under the sheaves of yesterday's newspaper.

Eyes never really meant to see or be seen, were it not for the unquenchable human thirst to illuminate every shrouded niche of our conquered terrain, let alone reiterated in their opaque horror on the face of a young woman who, despite certain circumstances, held onto the optimism evident in her Honor's Thesis, a rambling treatise claiming a cure for current human disconnect in our technological times in which I called for the

recognition of the Platonic power of Truth and Beauty that, if seen in only one other, would lead to a discovery of the Divinity contained, not in some soul, but in the combination of two beautiful minds. Those unblinking eyes, interrupted only by a temporary crazed delight in the unwallied performance of an energetic, grinding rendition of the recurring reggae theme-song, repeating catchy caution to all “bad boys.” I’ve seen my own lips puff in slapstick exaggeration of the central question the show seeks to answer. *Wahchoo gonna do? Wahchoo gonna do? Wahchoo gonna do when dey come for you?*

Hint, they usually try to run.

Evidence, as it so often does, though usually in the favor of the innocent, emerged and despite could-be internet celebdom generating general hilarity to accusations of demonic possession and rambling debates spurned by lonely masturbators about the latent hysteria at the core of womanhood, I maintained my ignorance and denied my own existence, claimed no knowledge of the body of that clearly exploited woman unknowingly though openly recorded in gratefully grainy quality and with poor cameramanship, palsied, due to apparent uncontrollable shockwaves of laughter, in a childish lapse in judgment on behalf of that woman’s better half’s desire for the spread of instant comic relief. I could have placed all blame on the pills, but I refused to accept that there had been moments where I moved without knowledge. Although it may seem I’ve strayed from what I initially set out to explain, all this is to say that, although I thought I was doing myself good in searching for a medical cure, I was putting my own will not in the hands of psychiatrists, who at best seem to be in the business of educated guesswork,

but unknowingly throwing it out, like rancid milk, allowing it to flow curdled into the sewer, to leave me empty and unsatisfied. My mind left me before its time. Self-cure became my only option. I'd thought love would be enough, but Jay couldn't capture my mind. Only I knew the tricks it played, the places it hid, and to surpass and to recapture it required fleet feet. I had to be waiting at the finish line with a better time if my mind was to desire the powers of my body. Running, without measured distance, but for two hours, sometimes more, five times a week, became my cure. But what of the cause?

Sleeplessness was the only sickening shift of self-control experienced first during the third month after I'd aged a supple twenty-four years into which I, believing myself to have reached the embodiment of the philosopher-poet, momentarily rolled with my bearded beau in the dewy mud of our own beatitudes and the wet grass of Grant Park. We were transfixed by our conjoined reflections mirrored by the reniform, globular Cloud Gate; he seeing my presumed royal grace and, I, his profound acceptance of the unwelcome. That moment, repeated and recreated over our years, always felt like gazing up at the perfect forms of ourselves, the truth of us which we desire to hold and keep holding even as the image reflected back to us goes grey and sags at the edges of our memory. We were not, nor will ever be, to blame. The change was to be blamed on the belated birthday surprise of my own fertility, a gift for which I had no receipt. They say, or at least my mother does, if you're lucky, unplanned pregnancy comes with the promise of marriage, lifelong legally-binding documented commitment and care; love goes unmentioned in all that fine print; Believe me, I double-checked. I never wanted to be a wife, to reposition myself in an identity, however secure, which can only be broken

through arduous and expensive legal processes so that you can occupy another place, become the ex-wife of a person you've decided you can no longer tolerate the company of. By the end of it all you've eliminated yourself so completely, you know it would've been better all along to find a place outside of society, a cabin in the treetops, where love can exist freely without threat and multiply amongst one another and the pack of wild dogs you've raised as your children. An idealism I've long since dropped out of; not that I regretted marrying Jay or gestating the combination of ourselves to full term, because I learned he was the sort of person who needed confirmation of his existing and future possession, not of me, but of us, and my word, unbending as it was and will forever be, just wasn't good enough.

We'd rolled to a smoking stop just north of a ramp that led to a place I knew nothing about. If you turned in a complete circle, on either side of the interstate you could see two billboards that seemed to argue with each other over the speeding cars between them. One, among flames of damnation let me know that "LUST DRAGS YOU DOWN TO HELL." And the other, or others I should say, directly above us played devil's advocate. The one on the left faded and featured four lovely, bejeweled ladies with Dallas-sized hair and so many rings that it's probably more appropriate to call them brass knuckles. Probably once-red letters beneath the ladies declared, "WE BARE ALL." It reminded me of cartoon saloons if they were raunchier and in live action. The other, newer billboard featured clean black lettering against a sunshine yellow background, lettering that seemed would be visible from outer space. Two shadowy hands belonging to two silhouetted strippers grasped onto the "poles" of two dollar signs that also served

as two letter esses in a phrase that seemed to serve as both a slogan and the name of the business:

\$TRIPPERS

Need We Say More?

I wasn't sure how to answer the question. It felt like a trick. Like I'd answer it and get dunked into a vat of cold, dirty water. I preferred the slutty Dolly Parton-esque ladies.

“What the hell is a Warner Robins?” Jay walked, safe out of the distance of “swerving, damned dangerous lounge lizard truck drivers who prefer strip clubs over a good nights sleep,” waving his arms, like someone spotting an arrival at the airport, wandering around in some crazy ditch full of knee-deep weeds.

“These hicks probably think we're looking for some drugs we threw out the window. Now why would we go throwing perfectly good methamphetamine into a goddamed ditch? I'm sure one of these motherfuckers would stop if we had a sign that said ‘car trouble, free crack.’”

“Language, the windows are down,” I scolded although I'd already broken my promise to keep the sailor talk to my thoughts and on nights when we found slumber parties to pawn our children out to.

“So I can yell all day about cocaine and meth, but I can't tell some asshat inconsiderates to go eat a dick?”

“Yes, exactly. The one they should know about because it can hurt them, the other is just excessive and unproductive expression of anger, not to mention creative energy. What is an asshat anyways?”

“It’s the kind of person who might chop off a persons butt and...nevermind. All this coming from the woman who would probably roll up a joint if one of her kids wanted to know what it was like.”

“I’d rather me give it to them so I could supervise in the comfort of our home instead of some burnout passing a crack-laced one-hitter at a Phish show.”

“Our children don’t even listen to Phish.”

“And they never will because, Phish sucks dick!” I yelled this as loud as my parched throat would allow before realizing my slip-up and covering my mouth with “Speak No Evil” monkey paws that then stifled my laughter. I had no clue how we’d gotten where we were, but afterwards it felt as if Jay had scripted it and preprogramed the dialogue into some memory chip he implanted in my brain on one of those former nights after an Ambien had calmed my brain and body to a dichotomy.

He clambered up the ditch, grass-staining his pants permanently, and came up close, perpendicular to my side, wrapped his arms around me, which was nice and just the way I thought useless arguments, wastes of breath, should end, until he chose to have the final say and whispered inches from my ear, “They will like Phish, or at least Sage will, and they’ll bring their own drugs to the show and I’ll be there to cover their ears whenever some flunkie in one of those poncho hoodies you love so much offers them moon rocks and then tells them to go fuck themselves.”

Jay liked to get funny when we argued, which was seldom, but often pointless. I would’ve laugh at him if I were watching a couple argue on television. I wouldn’t have wed him if I didn’t like his wit and the full lumberjack beard he sported only during the

winter when “face fur” was a necessity. Although he was now a stubbled babyface so he wouldn’t look like a serial killer, my mother’s words, in photo documentation of our sojourn southward to the magical World of Disney, funding for which was partially provided by her since our jointed incomes from a middle school English teacher and expert organic tea retailer weren’t nearly enough to scrub up even a day trip to the Art Institute. It was those times when Jay used his wit as a weapon that shredded my carefully woven loom of logic to tatters, when he crawled under my skin like a scarab beetle in a mummy movie I never saw, but must’ve dreamt of seeing, these spats left scabs, though the one about Phish wouldn’t so long as I didn’t pick at it as I tended to do.

Other times, Jay could cause convulsions with just a twist of his face. But I liked him most when his humor reveals his generosity like the time when he was pretend-drunk at my father’s funeral. It was funny and unintentionally nice of him because my own real drunkenness didn’t stick out as much next to his faux-Irish Danny Boy singing play drunken pelvic thrusting, which would’ve made my father roll over in his fresh grave.

“Can we just push this piece of shit somewhere?” I gave up and was sure my children would be calling me a bitch within two years although I wasn’t even sure they could hear me from where they sat without air-conditioning in our broken car. We’d walked to the rolled up plastic windows and Jay was still wondering aloud who would name a place something so strange as Warner Robins.

“It’s a city in Central Georgia located mostly in Houston County, but partially in Peach County. In the 2000 census, Warner Robins had a population of forty-eight-thousand-eight-hundred-and-four. The 2010 census showed at thirty-six-point-four

percent increase in population to sixty-six-thousand-five-hundred-and-eighty-eight.

Warner Robins is nicknamed The International City and its motto is 'Georgia's International City'”

My son, everyone. He had my phone in his hand and was reading off a Wikipedia page.

I was surprised by the strength my children possessed. Josh was on the debate team and probably needed glasses and I finally decided on Sage's name two days after her birth and three-quarters of the way into a bottle of red wine, but they, along with Jay, pushed me and our luggage-filled van up the mildly-inclined ramp of exit 146 Warner Robins/Centerville/ WRAFB, whatever all that means I'm not really sure, but that's where we were. I steered us into the parking lot of a gas station that was primarily lined-long for the use of semi-trucks. The same parking lot was shared with a motel and a strip club, which appeared to be connected or at least affiliated with one another. Our van was located about halfway between the strip club/motel and the gas station convenience store and we were sitting in the shade of the other side of the same bright billboard.

“Mother, this doesn't look like Florida,” Josh said. I knew that he knew where we were, but some kid at school called him a smartass and he thought it was funny to feign stupidity.

Pause with me for a moment because I want to point out that I didn't approve of him calling me “mother.” I'd never been able to decide on which maternal pseudonym I wanted to go by. Mother sounds too fancy, which I, sadly, am not. Mom sounds like I do nothing but get pedicures and drive around in an SUV all day and meet other moms for

margaritas at El Caliente's where we discuss that cute boy on American Idol. I'd have to be black of Southern to be called Momma. Mommy only works for a few years; after six, your child is at risk of becoming a serial killer or the sort of person who fetishizes diaper changing. Mum, Mammy, Ma, Mutter, Mater, Madre, Mère. There's something I don't like about all of them. And I couldn't just have them call me Pen, because I was not one of those delusional moms who said, "my kids are my best friends!" while handing them a beer and the keys to the car.

I loved Sage and Josh and they often said they loved me, but I wished there was a better word for mother; to show that these are products of and without me.

"Yeah, mother, where's Mickey and Harry Potter?" Sage asked.

"Maybe they're in there." Jay was pointing at the titty bar.

"Let's go look!" Sage yelled and sprinted across the parking lot.

"Go get her." I said in my best commanding wife voice.

Jay did one of those light jogs that are really no faster than walking and swooped Sage up. I wished I had done it because they looked so pretty. She sat on his hip and he laughed and was saying something to her. Something she probably wouldn't remember ten years from now. They were close enough for me to hear the last few words, "say that it's empowering for women to do that, but don't listen to those crazy feminists, they're all liars."

"What are you telling her?" I asked as he transferred her to my hip.

"Just teaching her about her future job options. We should call a tow truck or something."

“Oh, I was thinking we could just vacation here.”

“This place smells like a gas station's armpit.”

“Mother, my Kindle battery just died and I was in the middle of a sentence,” Josh said.

I took a quick, deep breath, put Sage down, and walked towards the convenience store.

“Hiyee, can I use your phone? Our car broke down, see, outside right there,” I said to the Indian man at the counter; I couldn't tell how old he was. He looked outside at my husband who seemed to be imitating a robot and a dinosaur at the same time.

“You don't have phone?” the man asked me.

“Oh yeah, I guess I do. I forgot, it's really hot outside.”

“Is okay, many people break down here. I'll call for you.”

“Thank you. We're on our way to Disney World, my kids have never been; it's our first vacation. I used to go every year with my family. I used to have an aunt in Macon. We used to stop at her house on the way down, but then we stopped stopping and just drove straight through I think she might have died.”

“Yes, hello, I need a tow truck to gas station at exit one-four-six. Yes, a van and four people. One hour? Thank you. It will take one hour, ma'am.”

“Oh, thanks, um I'll buy these.” I plucked a bag of Hot n' Spicy Pork Rinds from a metal tree and grabbed a pack of gum and pushed them across the counter. I felt like an idiot for not remembering my phone, but at least I could take comfort in that fact that Jay

didn't remember either.

“Spicy pork rinds?” Jay said as I tossed the bag to him. “Do I look like I enjoy eating spicy pork rinds?”

“I don't know. I just grabbed them. Have you ever tried them?”

“No.”

“Well, you might like them. I think I remember hearing that they had high protein levels or something. The tow truck will be here in an hour.”

I watched Jay and the kids eat the whole bag of spicy fried pig skin. I didn't eat any because they looked like flattened out, curled up baby toes.

The air was wet and hot in Warner Robins and there's no breeze and all four of us had gnat haloes. I couldn't keep spending the kids' souvenir money on snacks just so I could stand guilt-free in the barely air conditioned convenience store.

Jay had the car radio on and all four doors open. He's sitting in the passenger seat singing along to Tracy Chapman's “Fast Car.” I didn't know why he knew all the words, but then again, I don't think we'd ever had a conversation about the dreadlocked singer. You'd think that after fourteen years of seeing and speaking to the same person almost every day, you'd run out of things to talk about. I hated the song. It sounded like a melting marshmallow. But I sort of liked it when Jay was singing it.

He wasn't performing it for anyone; if he were, he'd be drumming on the dashboard and jutting his chin up and down when he hit the more dramatic notes. But he was just singing it for no reason other than to sing it. His head facing forward, but in a relaxed way. I watched all of this while standing next to the propane canisters on the

cement sidewalk in front of the store.

The tow truck arrived after an hour and twenty minutes. The driver walked inside and came out smacking a pack of cigarettes against the palm of his hand. I used to smoke cigarettes, when I was fourteen, something I'd never told Jay. I thought about how someone will offer one to Josh, but he'll always turn it down. Sage will probably be addicted to them for a few years in college.

"You folks called for a tow?" The man had a belly that looked like you couldn't press your fingers into it if you tried, like he had a glass dome beneath his blue shirt. The shirt told me his name was Mike, but I didn't trust it.

"Yeah, we think, well, I think it's something with the engine. My parents bought it for me as a wedding gift. I wanted a trip to Paris, but I got a Jeep instead." I didn't know why I was telling this to Mike; his belly was making me a little nervous for some reason.

"Okay ma'am, I'll hook ya up, but y'all will have to sit on laps to fit in the front."

"Oh, that's fine; my kids are skinny."

The five of us piled onto the single bench seat of the tow truck. It had air conditioning. I thought this must be what heaven felt like, or at least its waiting room.

The man drove two below the speed limit down Watson Boulevard, the same road the gas station was located on. We passed clusters of fast food restaurants, a Target, a WalMart, several strip malls, and adult video store called Starship before we hit a red light. To the right of us there is an American Legion with a rock-wall in its parking lot. On the left side of the road there was a steep, landscaped hill. Short bushes carved into the shape of letters spelled out EDIMGIAFAD.

“Ehhdimgheeahhfad,” Josh attempted to pronounce the word the same way I was doing it in my head. “What does that mean?”

“It's one of them acronyms. It can mean either Every Day in Middle Georgia is Armed Forces Appreciation Day or Every Day in Middle Georgia is Air Force Appreciation Day. People use it both ways around here. We've even got our own Air Force Museum.” Mike explained.

Another man named Mitch who looks a lot like Mike told us that they could fix the engine problem but they needed a part that they didn't have and the place that did have the part closed at four on Sunday and it was now five so we'd have to stay in Warner Robins overnight.

“Can we stay at a hotel with an inside pool?” Sage asked.

“And one with free breakfast that isn't just bagels, muffins and bananas?” Josh added.

“And one with separate bedrooms?” Jay winked at me and I smile back.

I started thinking about an episode of *The Twilight Zone* that made me apprehensive about the whole overnight stay. I remembered watching it with my grandmother, or maybe it was my aunt from Macon. But in the episode a newlywed couple's car breaks down in a small town on their way to their honeymoon in California or someplace. A mechanic tells them it'll take half a day to fix the problem so the couple goes to a diner where they eat tomato and mayo sandwiches and complain about the taste of the tap water. Something happens at the diner and the couple ends up staying in the

town for presumably the rest of their lives. They enter the town young and publically displaying their affection for one another; and the last scene shows them old, wrinkled, and bitter. But I can't remember what it was that prevented them from leaving in the first place; I do remember that the wife was the one who kept telling the husband that they better get going soon.

But Jay and I were far from newlyweds heading to California and he didn't seem too fond of Warner Robins so I don't really know why I thought of that in the first place.

We rented a car that's nicer than our broken one and I drove it back down Watson Boulevard, back past the American Legion and the E.D.I.M.G.I.A.F.A.D. and the Target to the cluster of medium-sized hotels located near the exit where we started all of this. There is only one, a Holiday Inn Express, that meets my family's requirements. It has connecting suites, an indoor , heated pool, and free breakfast complete with a make-your-own-Belgian-waffles station open from 6:30 til 9:30 in the morning.

We've basically rented two rooms connected on the shared wall with a door and air sandwich, two doors and a pocket of stale air in-between, so our kids could technically lock us out of their side and vice versa. Five-forty-five, thirteen hours and fifteen minutes until breakfast. I suppose we'll all go swimming at one point and we'll have to get dinner too.

Jay has rolled up two bath towels and used them to wedge the dividing doors open and the kids are running through the doors, slamming face first into the bed that Jay and I are sitting on then turning around and doing the same thing to their bed in the other room. They aren't screaming or anything so there's no reason why they can continue with this

for what I suspect will be the next twelve minutes.

Jay and I sit on the bed, our legs bent into triangles. He's rubbing his pointer finger back and forth across the top of my left hand reminding me that we had sex in Indiana less than twenty-four hours ago.

“What are we watching?” Jay asks.

“Local news?” I guess because a segment about the Mossy Creek Festival has just ended and now there's a blonde man with a bowl cut wearing a lime green polo holding a wedding bouquet and smiling at us.

“Hey, y'all, it's Mark Ballard, the artist, and today I'm gonna be teachin' y'all how to make tussy mussies. Now a tussy mussy is just a fancy word for a bouquet holder.”

I'm hooked.

“Why would you need a holder for a bouquet? Isn't that what stems are for?”

“Shut up, Jay, I'm learning how to make tussy mussies.”

I've already missed part of what Mark Ballard has said.

“metal, but we're gonna make our with plain, ol' craft paypah. Now you can buy some scrapbook paypah with a nice design or if you're just doin' this for fun or for practice then regular construction paypah works. So what you're gonna do is you take your scissors and cut...”

The television shuts off. Sage has landed on top of it.

“Can we go swimming now?” She says.

Now I'll never learn how to make tussy mussies.

I've never been comfortable changing in front of my kids. Not that I'm so

incredibly sexy that my son will grow up to only love women who look at act like me, please don't let that happen, but it just feels weird. So I change in the bathroom and look at my boobs that look pretty much the same way they did before I got pregnant. This is because I didn't breastfeed. Which might explain why Sage was pre-diagnosed with osteogenesis imperfecta, or brittle bone syndrome. I was told if she didn't get lots of calcium then we'd have to carry her around on a pillow throughout her infancy. But I'm of the opinion that pediatricians are always going to tell you that you're child is a risk for some terrible disease so you'll take better care of them. Even if that's not true, it works.

I wrap myself in a bath towel that's too small, or I'm too big, for it to completely close all the way around me.

*

Walking into the pool room feels like the whole room is filled to the top with over-chlorinated water. I notice there are no openable windows in here. Only two minutes have passed and I'm already covered in either sweat or water vapor or both. Every noise we make echoes and bounces off the foggy vending machines and out of order water fountain. The room makes me feel like I'm drunk and wish that I actually was.

“Mother, get in! It's so warm!” Josh draws out the 'm' at the end until I can't remember what word it started with.

“Nah, I don't think I will.”

I imagine the pool feels like a giant bathtub that's in between lukewarm and cold.

“Jay.” I say, but he's busy violently splashing Sage who is either drowning or having fun.

“JAY!!” If it were written out it would be in capital letters with one too many exclamation points. I don't like to yell, but when I do I do it well. The room echoes “ay, ay, ay” back to me and I'm reminded of a song that's been playing on the radio for the past couple of years.

“Yes, mother?” Jay says. It just got ten degrees hotter in here.

“I'm going to go back to the room.” The eight words come out slowly.

“Alright see you soon.” He barely gets out the last word before he starts splashing again.

I fall backwards onto the bed like a kid making a snow angel. I lay starfished on the bed wishing there was a fan spinning above me so I could stare at it. Instead there's a clanky unit beneath the window, puffing up the thick curtains. I cover myself with the bath towel, but I'm still cold. I take the long, thin piece of fabric from the end of the bed and pull it lengthwise over my body. I guess it's called a bed runner because it's like a table runner, but for beds. It covers my body, but not my shoulders and arms. I'll eventually get up and get dressed.

I put on sweatpants that I bought from the young women's side of a popular lingerie store. They don't really make sweatpants for middle-aged women. They're only for young college girls to wear to class and for old ladies who don't care anymore. So the one's I have say LOVE across the butt, but they're comfortable so I don't give a damn.

I pull the laptop from a pocket in the suitcase. Before we left, Sage asked me to buy the Twilight books for her to read on the trip. I told her I'd think about it, which really means I'm going to Google it. I lay on my stomach on the bed and type “Twilight

series” into the search bar.

Google tells me that the author is Mormon, which I already knew and could care less about. Sage is eight, but reads at the level of a thirteen-year-old, which I'm not sure really means anything. I ask Google, “Are Twilight books appropriate for kids under thirteen?” Google gives me a list of message boards where this is a hot topic. Nine year old Gracie writes, “I loved it soooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo much. It was vampires against werewolfs what more do u want?”

Scroll down to, “I'm a middle school English teacher and I don't think it's so much the content that I abhor as it is the horrible abuse of the English language that...” Shut up janeaustenlvr253. I decide, solely on the fact that it will make this woman (I assume she is a woman) miserable, that Sage can read whatever supernatural romance book she wishes to. Really, there were so many JaneAustenLvr's on a Twilight messageboard that you had to add three random numbers to the end of it?

“These things never work.” I hear Jay at the door, presumably struggling with the key card.

“Here, let me try, dad.”

Josh gets it on the first try and the three of them bring a fresh burst of chlorine into the room. Jay falls face first onto the mattress next to me.

“Watcha doin’” he says into the duvet.

“I'm going to buy Sage those Twilight books.”

“Okay, you alright?”

“Yeah, everything here smells weird.”

“I know. TV?”

“I don't care.”

We watch reruns of The Office and weird local commercials. One for a barbeque restaurant boasts that they use the whole hog from root to toot and red arrows flash at the snout and the butt of a smiling cartoon pig.

Josh and Sage are in the other room doing something quiet. Jay pushes his fingers through the elastic of my sweatpants, but doesn't go any further, just leaves his finger there for no reason at all.

*

We eat dinner from the vending machines. I have popcorn and coffee. Jay has Diet Coke, peanut M&M's and ranch Doritos. I restrict the kids to non-sugared, non-caffeinated items. I used to make fun of people who eat this stuff. We pull the chairs from the kids room to our room so all of us can eat together at the same small table.

Jay didn't take a shower and now his chin is on my shoulder and he's kissing my neck and his hand is under my shirt and all I can think about is the corners of pools and how people don't go in the very often and there's something creepy about that and that gets me thinking about the corners of other wet places. Jay's hand has made its way in between my breasts and has apparently fallen asleep there along with its owner.

“Really?” I nudge him.

“I'm sorry. Pools make me tired,” he mumbles and breaths hot Dorito breath onto my neck.

“Don't fall asleep on me.”

“Rude.” He rolls away from me. We don't normally sleep in the same bed unless we're drunk or our car happens to break down in a weird town that has hotels without separate beds. My mom once told me, in a dream, that I should talk to a therapist about it. But it's hard to explain to someone, especially in a dream, that you just don't like sharing a bed, even with your husband.

I wait a few minutes and then say, “You awake?”

“Barely.” he said in the same voice he used to say “rude” a few minutes ago.

“Have you ever been to a strip club?”

“Yeah, a couple of times. Mostly in college.”

“Did you talk to the strippers?”

“No not really. I don't remember.”

“I've never been to one. I wouldn't know how to act.”

“That's good. You just act normal I guess.”

“I mean, I've seen strip clubs on TV, like on HBO and stuff. Do you think this room has HBO?”

“Not sure, probably.”

I grab the remote from the nightstand. “Twelve-thirty-six,” the clock would tell me if it could talk.

I flip through the channels. No HBO, but there is a Pay-Per-View preview channel that runs a loop of clips featuring dull-eyed, moaning girls. I watch the loop a few times.

“What if the kids see this?” I nudge Jay and he rolls onto his back.

“I'm sure they know what porn is.”

“How? Who told them about it? I didn't.”

“Probably some douchebag kid at school. I don't know.”

“Shouldn't we do something?”

“Like what. They're not going to watch porn together in their room. They're probably asleep.”

I kick up the bottom of the bed, cursing those expert hotel bed makers. Both separating doors are unlocked. Josh is sitting up against the headboard reading. His sister is asleep on her stomach next to him.

“Hey, why aren't you asleep?”

“I just wanted to finish this chapter.”

“Oh, well I just needed to come in here because your TV is broken and they need this part of it down at the front desk.”

I unscrew the cable cord from the TV and the wall and circle it around my hand.

“Don't stay up too late.”

“Can't I just sleep in the car? We still have six hours to drive. That's three-hundred-sixty-one miles. I looked it up.”

“Yeah I guess you can. Goodnight.” I try to remember if I said goodnight to my soon earlier.

“Night, mom.”

I walk back through the dividing doors and I put the cable cord in the nightstand drawer next to the phonebook. The TV is off, Jay is snoring and the room is freezing. I

slide under the covers and breath in the hotel room smell that I'm getting more and more used to. In six or so hours I will walk down to the lobby in my sweatpants. I'll make myself a waffle and fill up two more plates with a variety of breakfast food. I'll only eat half of a muffin though. Then I'll bring the rest back to the room. I'll make a plan to bring it with me so I can have some cold bacon to eat when we're passing into Florida, but I'll accidentally leave the plates on the nightstand and they'll be thrown away by the same lady who tucks in the corners of the beds so tight. It was a stupid idea, anyways, to bring loose, uncovered plates of food into a moving vehicle on unfamiliar roads, I'll think. And then I'll put on some chapstick and figure out how we're going to do The Magic Kingdom in one day instead of two.

And Many Sons Had Father Abraham

At the annual Warner Robins Christian Homeschooling Bookfair, held in the capacious steel-walled “Banquet Hall” of Shirley Hills Baptist Church, in between a blue tableclothed setup selling teaching planners with daily Bible Study lessons and another manned by two ladies in patriotic sweater vests seated behind stacks of Christian math and science books featuring multiplication of bread and loaf type problems, next to the almost full trashcan stood the groundskeeper, Rodney, watching Caroline Zauer, a few tables down, pluck hot-glued silk butterflies from the black tablecloth for a booth of “Catholic and other textbooks.” He watched her watch her mother who didn't really seem to notice so Caroline would slide her long fingers out from the stretched out sleeves of

her teal Arizona Jean Company Sweatshirt and swoop up three or four of the decorations.

Rodney wouldn't have even looked at Caroline in the first place if he didn't think he'd seen her somewhere before. She, and the rest of her family, stood out, not solely in appearance, from the rest of the homeschoolers. Caroline was dressed like a construction worker. And Rodney should know, he used to be one, for a week, until they found out he didn't know how to use a nail gun. The tag of Caroline's sun-faded sweatshirt was sticking out underneath her frizzy dishwater blonde ponytail and her jeans could only be said to be practical, they were too-blue and too-saggy all over, and they hit just too short of a pair of bright yellow Timberland boots. Rodney remembered where he had seen the girl before. He had actually seen her twice before, with her family, playing at piano recitals in the congregation hall. She had some brothers and sisters who played, Rodney thought, but he remembered Caroline because she played Aerosmith's "Don't Want to Miss a Thing" from memory and that was the only thing Rodney liked about *Armageddon* when he saw it in a movie theater the previous summer.

But remembering how she had played and leaned into the big notes, Rodney wished he has never seen this girl stealing those butterflies that were only meant to add some life to this strange and somewhat boring event. Rodney wished he hadn't agreed to come in to work, but Mr. Trudy had told him the homeschoolers were in town and he knew Rodney's weakness for a good opportunity to people watch. The homeschoolers were one of his favorite groups to observe. They didn't seem to run on the same schedule as everyone else, as people who went to normal school with teachers who were not their mothers. Rodney was here to clean up after them, but homeschoolers, at least the

Southern Christian ones, had abnormally good manners and they almost always put trash into the garbage. Besides a restroom check and cleaning up a puddle of urine from an overzealous juicebox drinker, Rodney hadn't cleaned up anything for the five hours he'd been at work and he appreciated that such large families could be so courteous when it seemed so many parents had trouble controlling just one child.

Five, eight, Rodney had counted twelve children in one family. With just one brother, who was seven years older and barely called, Rodney couldn't relate without multiplying his brother by seven and that terrified him so he stopped trying to relate.

Caroline followed no less than two tables behind her mother, who would pick up a book, fan slowly, slower for illustrations, make a face and set it back down. She picked up free pens and bookmarks.

A Christian radio station blared from a table selling Christian music courses and books of sheet music that did not contain "Don't Want to Miss a Thing."

Caroline was holding the stretched out ends of her sleeves in balled up fists. There were no butterflies on the floor or in Rodney's trashcan, so he knew they were stashed in her sleeves. Caroline's smallest sister, Julia, walked just behind, holding the sleeves of her own sweatshirt that, instead of Arizona Jeans, featured an angry red bull and the number 23 on the back. Ahead of Caroline, their mother Mary was the third sweatshirt-wearing Zauer, matching Julia except for the number 33 on the back. Three other Zauer's appeared wearing a soccer uniform, an AC/DC t-shirt, and round, thick-lensed glasses with businesslady grey pants and a terrycloth polo shirt. They looked like they were going to Disney World in late November, not the Homeschooling Bookfair the day before

the Fourth of July. They looked strange because they looked like normal school people who were educated in large grey buildings instead of sprawled out on bedroom floors or in the same place you eat your breakfast.

There was a particular fashion sense that set apart some of the larger homeschooling families, but it also existed more sporadically in smaller units. Rodney felt this homogenized generic style, although he would not use those words, was the result of some instilled Christian modesty, but that it mostly sprang from practicality. The task of dressing nine children seemed insurmountable to Rodney and felt he was in no position to judge fashion sense as he contemplated the holes in the bottom of his shirt that were covered by his work dungarees, but when such a contrast as the Zauer family had created, however subtle, Rodney felt it was his duty, or at least hobby, as an observer of mankind to absorb interactions so he, or somebody else, can make use of them later. It was Rodney's way of preparing for the future. The Christian homeschoolers, or the females, sometimes wore long handmade dresses, but they also wore long bluejean skirts with big pioneer woman blouses. The males, Rodney had mostly only seen young ones, dressed normal enough but their stripey polo shirts were a bit too ironed and a bit too tucked into the waistbands of their jeans. And their hair was always gelled up nice and the girls hair always had a ribbon or a bow. They always looked like they were on their way to church.

These were the same families that possessed the most extreme genteelness that Rodney had witnessed in his five years of working at the church. It wasn't just that they threw away their trash; they said "Excuse me, sir" and "May I use the restroom?" And it

was so consistently true of all the homeschoolers Rodney observed, he figured it, the good manners, along with the fashion sense and several other defining factors was the direct result of something in the homeschooling process in combination with Southern location and strong Christian values.

Of course, Rodney could have just asked any of the dozens of mothers around him, even Mary Zauer, and they would, bouncing a baby on their hip, give him their breathless summary of how they balance teaching and mothering multiple children, but Rodney is genetically predisposed to shyness and, ultimately, something about being surrounded by all those homeschoolers was unsettling to him. Sure the kids had good manners and most of them seemed to mean well, but Rodney had noted a few families who seemed, quite frankly, like they were aliens from another planet. The children in these families would smile at him when they threw away trash and he would look into their luminous faces and see all the evil children in every horror movie he'd watched with his brother, the only thing they'd ever bonded over, in his thirty-eight years. He wondered if maybe they were being brainwashed or drugged. All of these conclusions were open to Rodney. His observations didn't hurt anyone so long as they stayed in his head so if they were extreme, so what. People who worked at the church always told Rodney, on the rare occasion that he did speak his mind, that his opinions came from the gut. Rodney's older brother said that was just something Christian white people say to underemployed fat, dumb white men. Rodney had lost sight of the piano playing girl, but then Caroline was heading towards his trashcan. She opened her fists and shook out the contents of her sleeves, fifteen realistically sized butterflies, on top of some half eaten generic Oreo

cookies. People always threw out the generics, but Rodney thought it was funny that they still called them Oreo's instead of Walmart brand or whoever it was that made those disgusting cookies.

The butterflies perched atop the cookies made Rodney think of fruit flies and more trash so he bundled up the bag and lugged it to the dumpster.

Mary Zauer was speaking to a woman in a bluejean skirt holding a toddler by the hand and baby on her hip.

“We're not doing much tomorrow. Y'all are welcome to come over for hamburgers and hotdogs and swimming”

“That would be so wonderful, Mary! You don't know how much all of us would enjoy that. Guys, don't you want to go to the Zauer's tomorrow to swim?” The woman said brightly.

“YES!!” The six of her eight children who could speak replied.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, ma'am!”

“So Mary, we'll come tomorrow around ten? We can come right after church!”

“Noon would be better, Stacy.”

“Noon it is then. Where are your children Mary? I only see three of them. I hope you're all excited about swimming tomorrow,” Stacy Gilmore smiled at the three Zauer children scattered around their mother.

“Caroline is watching Julia.”

“You should keep an eye on them. You know they found another gun in the

backpack of some hooligan at Northside High School. And, you know the schools are the root of the problem since they don't teach Christianity. My children are learning math alongside the ways of the Lord. I'd like to think that's how it was done in Jesus' day.”

Mary laughed and shot Stacy a barely perceptible quizzical glare. “We'd better get going. I have to find Caroline. We'll see y'all tomorrow. Bring your swimsuits!” Mary's voice was raised, matching Stacy's enthusiasm. “Wave bye to the Gilmore's,” she whispered to her kids who quickly obeyed.

When Rodney returned to his post next to the trashcan, first, he grabbed the extra empty trashbag that he always left at the bottom of every can on the premises and snapped it away from him until it ballooned with air. He scanned the room and saw that Caroline had returned to the table with the butterflies. Her sleeves were puffed out around her wrists and the ends were balled closed again except for when they would open briefly to allow a few fingers to drop one or two butterflies to the floor. Rodney would have continued passively observing, trying to figure out why this girl was stealing butterflies, if she hadn't been littering them in a slow trail behind her. Her baby sister, walking in front of her, didn't notice a thing. From where Rodney was standing, when the butterflies dropped from the sleeve blocked from his view, it looked like they were materializing through the backside of Caroline's sagging jeans, which she was attempting to hoist up using hooked pointed fingers and the unbelted loops, but somewhere in the middle of wiggling, her fingers popped loose and her sleeves flopped around spraying another dozen butterflies across the floor and into the face of a lady selling fortune cookies containing Bible verses.

Rodney didn't know if the girl would apologize to the woman but he felt he could assume that she wasn't going to clean up after herself and that annoyed him. He would have to pick up the butterflies since their wings and wooden peg bodies would clog the pipes of the ancient industrial vacuum cleaner. So Rodney decided to take matters into his own hands and crossed the room as quickly as his thick trunk legs could carry him.

“Hey, girl!” He wanted to add *who plays piano* but instead he chose, “Girl with the butterflies.”

But Caroline was speedwalking and her stride was long and fast. Rodney had to lunge out and grab her by the shoulder. “Hey now. What do you think you're doing throwin' all them butterflies on the flo?”

Caroline turned, but only partially, looking over her shoulder at Rodney. He thought she looked surprised, but not scared. Maybe she was just shocked that anyone was watching her. Rodney believed this girl had no manners, stealing and littering, who cares how good she was at piano. He saw the tag sticking out of the back of her sweatshirt—HANES Adult S. The Timberland's must've added a good inch to her height, but she was only a few inches shorter than five foot six inch Rodney. Caroline stared at his gut.

“Come on now. Why would you do a thing like that? Throwin' all them things on the floor? You know somebody gotta clean that up?”

“Yes.”

“Well then why'd you go an do it?”

“I don't know. I didn't like the butterflies.”

“You didn't like the butterflies on the table?”

“I don't like butterflies.”

“Well. What kinduvva little girl says a thing like that?” Rodney tried to peer into the girl's eyes since he'd heard they could reveal the truth, but her's were sleepy and almost closed, like someone drugged or in a partial trance. Or maybe that was just the way her eyes looked. The hoods did seem heavy and her eyes seemed to go back further in the sockets than most people's eyes. “How can you not like butterflies? You are a little girl. How old are you?”

“Ten. Eleven.”

“Which one is it?”

“Ten.”

“When are you eleven?”

“December.”

“It's only July.”

“So.”

“Well you should still like butterflies. There is no reason not to. Heck, even I like butterflies. Hey where are you going? You know I saw you play piano here a few weeks ago. You did a very good job.”

Rodney had, through his brief interaction with the girl, determined that she was not completely unreformed and that maybe all she needed was some human interaction with people other than her own family. One of his more recent hypothesis was that spending too much time around your parents, whether they are brainwashing you or not,

has a negative effect on the independence of homeschooled children.

Caroline's eyes widened. She looked around over her shoulders. "Thank you," she eventually said, "I have to go find my mom."

Caroline stomped away in her boots faster than Rodney could add a final remark.

"What was that fat man talking to you about," Kathleen, the middle sister in her soccer uniform, asked as Caroline rejoined the fold waiting in line at the bookfair checkout counter.

"He worked here, I guess. He was a weirdo."

Mother Mary cocked her head. "Don't call people that, Caroline Renee." She held a paperback book out to her second born, "I'm buying this for you. Mrs. Gilmore was just telling me that you are required to take a fine arts class."

The book, in off-center yellow text on a clover green background, was titled, *Drawing With the Saints: Art Lessons for Young Catholics*.

"I take piano lessons with Miss Emily. Don't those count for anything?"

"Care-oh-line. Shut. Up." The oldest, Elizabeth, snapped.

"Car-, Kath-, Elizabeth, don't talk to your sister that way. You may want her to like you one day."

Elizabeth squinted daggers at Caroline through the thick lenses of her glasses.

"I don't even know how to draw," Caroline muttered.

"You'll learn. You weren't born playing piano either, now look at you."

"I'm not that good at that either."

"Miss Emily says you may beat Vivian at festival this year."

“I hate Vivian.”

“Don't say hate, Caroline.”

“Mama?” Elizabeth's voice was docile but she physically interjected herself between Caroline and their mother Mary. “Can we go to mass tonight instead of in the morning? If we leave now, we can make it on time.”

“I think we should do that too, so we can sleep in,” Caroline seconded.

“We could, but none of you are dressed for mass. Look at your sleeves, Caroline.”

Caroline had tucked her arms inside her sweatshirt, hugging her naked chest inside, and was whipping the sleeves back and forth like a deformed, or genetically blessed, elephant shaking its trunks. Kathleen and Julia were laughing and Elizabeth was glaring again and when Caroline stopped, the sleeves hung five inches past her outstretched fingertips.

“Nobody has to see me,” Caroline said.

“Yeah, it's not like she's taking communion. Noone'll see her cause she's too sca-”

“Elizabeth, hush. Don't bring that up.”

“What? I wasn't doing anything.”

“Okay, we'll go,” mother Mary conceded.

“Home?” Michael, the little blond boy, asked.

“No, mass.”

In the massive beige Zauermobile, on the way to Saturday Vigil mass, the A/C was on full blast, circulating the smell of sweaty shin guards and moldy water coolers. The blond bowl-cut-haired boy rode shotgun next to his mother, slid a CD into the player,

and the six of them sang along with The Backstreet Boys for the ten minutes it took to cross from the residential area surrounding Shirley Hills, which, viewed from above, looked more like a small school complex than a church and was surrounded by two story houses, every other one of which had a pool, to the side where Sacred Heart Catholic Church and School was located, between a Dry Cleaner's and a high school football stadium, currently being set up for the fireworks that would take place the following day.

“Why'd you have to invite them to our house? They are weird,” Kathleen protested, “That one Hannah told me she was gonna make me a friendship pillow and she can't say my name. She says 'gasoline.’”

“Miss Kathy is my friend and her kids are nice so you can be nice to them. Now hush, we have to go inside and I think they already started.”

The six Zauers entered the sanctuary at five after five, crossing themselves behind the procession led by Father Fred and the altar kids who were already heading for their seats.

Caroline led her family to split up between two rows, she took the back with Kathleen.

Ronnie The Rhino immediately recognized Caroline Zauer's frizzy ponytail the second she sat down in front of him. She sat in front of him for several First Holy Communion Sacrament classes, but suddenly dropped out. Ronnie heard a rumor that it was because she was afraid to take communion when she heard that Catholics really believed that those foamy pieces of what they said was bread was really body and the wine, blood. But she didn't really seem like that sort of person. On the first day of class,

they had to tell people where they went to school and Ronnie had said with a speech impediment that turned his R's into W's, "I'm Wonnie, Wonnie the Wino. I go to Warner Wobins Middle." Caroline went after, she stuttered and spoke slowly, but she told everyone how she was homeschooled and joked about how she got extra credit for cleaning her room. Ronnie and the rest of the class agreed that she seemed okay. Ronnie would watch to see what Caroline did when it came time to take Communion. He looked down and straightened his tie; it was lined diagonally with a navy rhino silhouette pattern on a deep red back. A swishing noise buzzed Ronnie's ears. Caroline was whispering to her sister, but he could not hear what they were saying.

"I'm probably going to hide in the attic in my closet while those weirdos are at our house tomorrow."

"Mama won't let you."

Elizabeth turned around and shushed them with a finger to her lips.

From back to front, the congregation lined up for wafers and wine or blessings, but Caroline remained seated. Ronnie looked behind him, still five more rows until his would move. He looked down at the back of Caroline's neck where he could see, among the tumbleweed of hair escaped from her ponytail, the tag of her sweatshirt hanging out for all the world to see. He didn't know what he was thinking; he reached down and tucked the tag down into the neck of the sweatshirt, his fingertips grazed her back.

She snapped her head around and looked like she wanted to hurt Ronnie, but her face relaxed, Ronnie thought, because she recognized him.

"Why aren't you taking communion?" he asked, feeling bold.

“I can't.”

“Why not?”

“I didn't finish the class.”

Deciding not to push his luck—his dad was always telling people to not push their luck—Ronnie changed his line of inquiry.

“So do you remember me?”

“Sort of.”

Ronnie pointed at his tie and Caroline nodded, but said nothing.

“Wronnie,” with the help of a speech therapist and under the threat of constant teasing from his public school mates, Ronnie had trained most of the W's out of his speech.

“Ohhhh....the Wino.”

“Rwhino. I have to go take communion now. You should at least go up for a blessing.”

“My mom says I'm dressed inappropriately.”

“Nobody cares.”

Caroline shrugged her shoulders, stood up and made her way towards Father Fred. She crossed her arms across her chest, her stretched sleeves flopped over her shoulders. The priest reached out his hand to Caroline's forehead and said, “May the Lord bless you and keep you.” Caroline said nothing, but the person behind her said amen. Ronnie smiled at her when she returned, but she didn't seem to see him there.

By 6:30 the Zauer's are home and most of them are napping on the new leather

couches in their young home, still being broken in. The house is quiet for a stretch until their father returns. His belly enters the house first and then the rest of him, tired from looking at light shining through pictures of bones all day then angry because he sees dishes on the counter and the plastic-wrapped lasagna that has been left out for him. He does not see his wife, or anyone, in the kitchen or the two adjoining rooms. He does not see Caroline or Kathleen sunken into the couch cushions so he enters the living room to perform the almost daily routine of straightening the almost always askew fourteen foot floor-runner that ran the length of the room. He would pick up one end of the carpet and make waves with it until it fell perfectly, then he would make smaller adjustments until only a thin strip of the carpet underneath the carpet appeared between it and the wall.

The father heard a snort from the couch and saw his daughters, open-mouthed, and close-eyed. Caroline was getting huge, he noticed, her legs didn't fit the length of the couch and were propped up on the rounded arm. The father thought he should wake them up, but he'd never really done that before. He left for work before they even woke up. He remembered eating breakfast with his parents before they went to work and he to the bus stop. The father went in search of his wife. She was the one who woke the kids up and taught them everything they know.

The morning is noon for Caroline and two of her sisters on the Fourth of July. Mother Mary screams their names up the stairs as a small school bus pulls into the driveway.

“What the hell?” Mary says peering through a lifted blind slat at the actual short bus that, not eight, but eleven children were disembarking from and walking in a straight

line towards the front door of the Zauer home.

Up the stairs, Caroline was pulling the straps of a damp one-piece bathing suit up above her shoulders until the bottom half of the suit snapped onto her hips. When the doorbell rang she was on her butt, “Boomping” down the carpeted stairs behind her sister, Kathleen.

“Your dad is at the store buying hot dog buns. You guys better get into the pool before he gets home.” The foyer of Mary's home was now full of sixteen children between the ages of one and fifteen. Every girl wore a one-piece suit, some had longer ruffled shirts attached, others wore knee length shorts like the boy's trunks which some had paired with long-sleeve t-shirts. Caroline had on an old lady floral print swimsuit; Kathleen was still in pajamas.

“Gasoline, you aren't swimming with us?” the girl Hannah asked with her hands perched on the water wings of her smaller sister standing in front of her.

[I have a planned but unwritten Fourth of July celebration scene that will be going here, but due to time constraints, I decided to skip ahead to the end. The Gilmore's have overstayed their welcome. Six hours have passed since they arrived and the Zauer's (even Mary) have been trying to hint that they want them to leave for the past two hours.]

Mary and three of her children held a secret meeting in the the spacious master bathroom. Caroline stood in the center of the dry bathtub, dripping chlorinated water around her feet.

“We could just tell them we don't want them here,” Caroline proposed.

“That would be rude, Caroline. And it's not that we don't want them here, we just

don't want them here right now because we're tired and want to go to bed.”

“I don't want them here and I don't want to talk about sewing anymore. I hate sewing.” Kathleen whined.

“I have a plan, guys,” Caroline said quietly, “but some of us are going to have to get naked.”

She turned on the faucet of the large bathtub and explained that their mother should give the youngest Zauer's, Michael and Julia and Kathleen if she was willing, a bath together because nobody would stick around while someone was trying to get their kids ready for bed. Kathleen and Michael refused to participate, so Caroline poured excessive amounts of bubble bath into the hot water and turned the jets of the tub on full blast. Kneeling in the middle of the mountain of suds, Caroline slid her swimsuit down around her knees and pulled it up empty and limp and her naked with her mother still in the room. Her naked little sister was plopped down next to her and Mary tried to convince her only boy to join his sisters.

“But you always bathe with you sisters. It'll be easier for me if you do it.”

“If he's not jumping in, one if my kids can.” Kathy Gilmore appeared in the doorway.

Before mother Mary could protest, Kathy has undressed two of her youngest kids and dropped them into the bath on either side of Caroline who was frozen and staring at her mother.

Kathy used a plastic cup she had been drinking lemonade out of to pour suds over her kids' heads.

“Caroline, why don't you help me wash Sarah's hair?” Kathy suggested.

The suds were thinning and Caroline's knees were mounded above the water like barren islands. She laced her arms beneath her knees and pulled her knees into her still-flat chest.

Kathy began singing a song and asked for Caroline and Mary to sing along.

*Father Abraham, had many sons
And many sons had Father Abraham.
I am one of them and so are you
So lets all praise the Lord.
Right Arm!*

The Gilmore's in the tub began slapping the water with their right hands and pivoting their arm like they were holding a hammer. This continued until right arm, left arm, right foot, left foot, and whole bodies, except Caroline's, were wiggling in praise and cleanliness. Mary had left the room and was calling for her husband.

The father could not hear his wife from where he was floating in the pool. The late-afternoon sun beat down on his back as he breathed through a snorkel. His herniated disc twinged beneath skin that used to be a nice California tan, before he met Mary, but was now streaked with orange and red tones from twenty sunscreenless years in Georgia. He did not know his wife needed his help that moment or that his home had been invaded by bodysnatching homeschoolers. He just floated face down and hoped the phone in his office wasn't ringing.

Caroline walked into the living room where her mother Mary was standing in front of two sliding French doors that took up almost the entire wall. She was looking out on her husband in the pool.

“Caroline, you're dripping all over the floor.”

“Sorry, I had to get out of there. I told her I drank a bunch of lemonade and was this close to peeing in the tub.” Caroline had wrapped herself in her mother's plush pink terrycloth robe. “He looks like a manatee,” she remarked looking out at her father.

“Should we go get some lettuce?”

“Yes, but I think he'd like it more if we threw him dollars.”

Votum Separatum: The Firstborn Searches for a Crown

I left myself for another man. But in the figurative or maybe it's metaphysical—though I'm unsure of the definition of either—way Caroline, only thirteen months younger than I, likes to speak—on the rare occasion she actually does make contact, usually by an accidental drunk dial from whatever state she's currently drinking, and claims to be painting her way through—she'd put it that, because of me, “two men had to leave themselves for other men,” leaving me the winner.

“Of what?” I wondered aloud.

“Of living your life, no wait, your love or maybe just the winner of people. I don't know, but you should make yourself feel special because...” an unapologetic burp crossed the wires between our separate Georgia cities, “because, you're my sister and...poop...forgot what I was gonna say but I'm pretty sure it would have made you laugh. Remember how you used to sit on my lap like I was some fat-baby shaped pillow in that gray carrier?”

“No, I don’t remember and neither do you.” A sudden rudeness at my sister, emerged from darker grey matter, shadowed by Atlanta Braves baseball, lists of our favorite beers, and the now emptied area that used to contain RPG’s and memorable bong rips. Cultural remnants of a man I once love and a man I hope will commit himself to me. So much for a BA in Psychology.

“But the pictures remember,” her voice sombered, “I was gonna sculpt it and maybe call it Lil’ Bit. At least most everyone forgot about callin’ you that. It reminds me of horse porn.”

“I don’t want to know about it.” But part of me wished she would begin ranting, but after becoming an adult in her own eyes she chose the side of silence. One Christmas, when she was fourteen, she closed herself in her room for so long I was sure she was on some drug, of which I knew no specifics at the time, and I convinced our mother that Caroline was going to kill herself. I was scared for her soul then, but now her health was the only way I could see her. “Your accent is out tonight, so you must be too. How drunk are you?”

“Only a few whiskey-drinks drunk, but I shared a blunt with a possibly homeless man who called himself Rainbow Bill, but not ‘cause he’s gay. It was for the cheesy reason about constant pursuit of gold pots or pots o’ gold, whatever.”

“Is that Matt B. or T. or whoever with you?” What I really wanted to ask was if she was being watched, voluntarily or not, because my sister is the sort of person who gets glanced at more than once, but, unlike Kathleen, typical middle sister, Caroline, upon catching glances would too often return glares. I often think she will live her days

out alone.

“Oh, fuck no. Fuck that bitch. I’m by myself, don’t mention it to mother.”

Our Mother Mary. I left her family plan as soon as she made the announcement that she had turned our multi“fun”ctional smartphones into tracking devices. I’ve found new love in technological developments.

“Oh and just so you know,” Caroline hiccupped several times and I heard the Doppler effect of male and female laughter pass by the bench where my sister was most likely lying on her back, always looking more drunk than she really was.

“What statue are you by? Do you know the name of the square?”

“Hell if I know. I don’t go out in the sun and my glasses, the Coach ones, ughh, my favorite ones..” she paused for what my phone told me was thirty whole seconds.

“They’re gone” she seemed to be choking but then I realized it was the sound of sobs or at least light whimpering. I never saw my sister cry except when she was laughing and now hearing it coming from real sadness, regardless of from what loss that sorrow sprang—a lost pair of signature glasses, giving up the countertop deep fryer, or your own self—I felt the distance between us closing in and Caroline must have felt it too because she snuffed up her nose and insisted she had to go speak to the river. So I let her hang up first.

Throw Down Yer Heart

Somewhere close to the middle or, for the sentimental reader, the heart, if you prefer to think of arbitrary borders as if it were something that could swallow you so it's ventricles keep pumping steady red subcutaneous essence boiling, rising, receding and repeating, like the gospels, the spirit of state called Georgia—sometimes pronounced Jaw-Juh—there is an intersection of two highway veins trickling, in one direction, clotted traffic towards a swift seventy-mile-per-hour escape—north or south, you choose—on Interstate 75, though not before zooming past vignettes of the swelling central South which, in spite of some tactless tracts of land that remain uninhabited, chafe at your expectations of hospitality and blister a heeled boil between sweat-soaked socks and the tourist tennis shoes that let everyone know you're not from around here until it

becomes apparent that you will either be forced to limp back to a place where you feel familiar or lance the pustule, preferably with a pocket knife though a chomp of the canines will work in a pinch, release the ooze, peel to reveal fresh flesh stinging sanitary with a swish and swig of moonshine you bartered for your constrictive, lungless footwear to a man with purpled-black skin streaked in red clay who tied the laces together and flung the pair to land like two dumb pigeons on a wire. Now you must sit behind the Home Depot and wait to heal and cake your feet in the cooling muddied clay, eating the clay to replenish your iron deficiency and coat the pockets of your cheeks and eventually your entire naked form with a coat of skin the color of dried blood; it dyes you and dries you, cracked pale tributaries shining though and always giving you away, a tourist who has decided to stay.

That, or you can wobble away on tippy-toes towards the ramp that leads to comforting absence though the growing abscess ever-filled by the viscous yellowed visions that lined all sides of your wounded retreat from a place you assumed you knew to be an enveloping retreat into a puff of a cotton boll. Take note of the minimized fields of stalked corn with furrows like watching a film strip with no visible pictures, comforting blurs of green topped gold, until abruptly cut and spliced with separate strips of stores that could, each in their own asphalt-heated lots, sustain small settlements of tenants who prefer not to move more than twenty paces from their flapping tent to reach their basic human needs, submarine sandwich and Chinese takeout diets, utilitarian hospital scrubs turned pajama providing daytime cultish unity amongst the people therein, who could not only survive on the limited options provided by the U-shaped fronts of eight to twenty-

one retailers supplying extravagances—hot stone pedicures and assorted blank trophies awaiting achievement, a church shaped like a giant metal warehouse if you're daring enough to cross the highway. Yes, there are peaches and pecans easy enough to steal and savor, but no beds of cotton to lay your weary head upon without a weevil burrowing to your brain to feed upon the fluff of such stuff, until you know not even the place that resides inside yourself.

If you find yourself, face towards an easy digression, at this unsafe crossing, with no walks for pedestrians—because nobody walks in or across a place that intersects only to move outward—and you begin to believe your self-actualized revelation that the red-clay spattered flanks of pickup-trucks are actually evidence of the flocked massacre of manners and mysteries exhumed from below the delicate and rich topsoil mask, you, false priest, must turn bodily towards your Sodom, henceforth referred to as Warner Robins, one-hundred-and-eighty degrees and get you to the air-conditioned haven on the northeast corner that flows not with the hidden sins of red hands scoured clean and red with lye soap, but pumps from underground the sweet, delusional gasoline that fuels that which makes us move onward.

But swing inward one or both, if you're inclined to dramatic entrances, of the submissive glass doors and bring with you the fumes of fuel and creaks of knees that prefer to pivot freely not hover at ninety degree frozen fulcrums paraded by burning rubber; collide, for a moment, with the blast of machinated refrigerated troposphere scented by rotating burnt-umber hotdogs and the local delicacy of hot boiled peanuts served from a crockpot; stick your head inside the wall of beverages to dry your

moistened brow and select bottles of diet drinks containing fabricated fuel and never forget that you failed to notice the name of this respite, selected by a man who desired to create an oasis amongst the concrete heat of the outside world, which did consume him in the end. Though his name no longer serves an existence—for Arun Aseem’s only orphaned offspring, Curtis Asbell Montjoy, with his pale-olive features, was given a name more palatable to the tongue of the native Southerner—the Highway Haven, red-bricked and boasting the “Cleanest Gas Station Bathrooms in Middle Georgia,” shrines the refreshing cheer and optimistic utility that once possessed a man who once whispered to himself that surely he was blessed with a corner of heaven hurtled to this planet like an asteroid particle, a marvel for all the passing bodies seeking filtration and fuel, wedged, immobile upon the pliant and supportive mud-earth stained red as the retreating sun.

Curtis' eyes and the top half of his blonde, bowl-cut haired head hovered behind the counter, his nose pressed to the sharp linoleum edge. For Curtis, the man started at his cracked leather belt, continued on to a torso covered in a once-white t-shirt, and ended in hair that reminded Curtis of the grass on the lawns of the Warner Robins Air Force Base—cut so close you could see the dirt it was attached to. Curtis knew the man didn't have a woman because, as his grandma always said, “no self-respectin' Southern man allows his face to look like a goddam dog's ass” and this man's countenance, with its pursed, chapped and cracking pink lips and four-month-old dirt-brown beard looked just like Franklin, Curtis' dog's, puckered backside.

The wrinkled man next to Curtis was related to him in one way or another, but Curtis' grandma said to call him Uncle E.L. There was a slight wet velcro noise as Uncle

E.L. unstuck his lips and leaned over to pour some low mumblings onto the spot where all of Curtis' golden hair seemed to spring from.

The man couldn't tell if Curtis understood Uncle E.L. Curtis' eyes were fixated on the man, yet, at the same time, he could've easily been looking at the potato chip tree directly behind him.

The soft oval of Curtis' mouth gaped for a moment before he translated Uncle E.L.'s ancient South Georgia dialect. “He says, 'we ain't got none,' jerky, he means, mister.”

The man thrust his thumbs into the loops of his jeans and rounded his belly so that the furthest point of it cut over the countertop. Curtis thought it would spill over the counter towards his face.

“Well, what kinduvva gas station ain't. got. no. jarky?”

Curtis noticed his voice had changed; this new voice reminded Curtis of his half-cousin Bubba, whose real name was Nathaniel, but Bubba better suited his slow nature. Plus, it's much harder for his mama to yell, “Goddammit, Nathaniel” when he's playing Civil War in the muddy poison oak filled ditch. Curtis didn't care much for Bubba, but he wondered how the man could sound so much like him when he didn't before.

The man released a burst of air and, instead of turning on his heels, walked a slow half-circle followed by a straight line towards the slot machine by the door. But he didn't leave and Curtis' eyes didn't leave him. Another slow, leaning turn placed the man in the aisle that contained everything from adult diapers to motor oil.

Curtis didn't notice that as he monorailed his nose across the counter, the sharp

edge of the linoleum—hand cut by Uncle E.L.--was slicing the soft, pink tissue of Curtis' slightly pug nose. He slid along until he reached the part of the counter that lifted up to form a gap so you could go pee or restock the Italian style pizza Pringles which were the number one seller at the Hobo Pantry. A line of red smeared across the edge where Curtis' nose had been. The same red bubbled to the surface as Curtis stood in front of the still closed opening.

Uncle E.L., unwilling to move from his post, was trying to tell Curtis something that ended with 'goddammit,' but Curtis ignored him, crouched down, and duck-waddled under the countertop. He continued this sumo style walk until he was five feet away from the counter; he'd hit his head that way before and as his grandma held a bag of frozen peas to the freshly laid goose egg she said, "Curtis Joiner, you've only got so much brain up there."

Curtis toddled to the peanuts and corn nuts and pretended to straighten them while stealing sly glances down the aisle at the man. The man was wide when you faced him and strong-looking, like Hulk Hogan, Curtis thought, but when he turned to the side to look at the cat food selection, he was as thin as the switch that daily threatened Curtis from the corner of his grandma Ruby's kitchen. Curtis has once seen a cartoon coyote run flat by a steamroller and he guessed that something similar happened to this man and he was slowly re-inflating his skin with each rattling smoker's breath.

With a steady side-shuffle, Curtis shortened the distance between himself and the man until they were close enough that Curtis could have reached up and held his had as he did with Mrs. Debbie when they sang 'Hallelujah' every Sunday.

Curtis pretended to stare at the Fancy Feast can with the big fluffy white cat on the label while he tried to make his eyeballs see around the side of his head.

“What do you want, kid?” the man said in a new voice that was low, sharp, and cold. It was like a yellow jacket sting, without that warm, itching spread of pain that follows the initial piercing. Curtis had heard voices like this before, coming from some of the grey and green, baggy uniformed men who would come to the Hobo Pantry to fill up their cars that weren't trucks and then disappear forever heading Northbound on I-75.

Curtis sometimes felt like he, grandma Ruby, uncle E.L., and a handful of likeminded souls were the only people who wanted to stay in Warner Robins.

Ten years earlier, when Curtis was just a small, red, wriggling, screaming thing, Grandma Ruby organized a petition to fight the expansion of highway 41, which threatened the well-being of the row of forty-year-old crape myrtles that sat on the back edge of her property.

A man from Atlanta had knocked on her trailer door one June morning and Ruby answers it with a wet, naked, Curtis propped on her hip.

The man was young and already beginning to sweat through his tailored suit. He started speaking as soon as Ruby's face was visible, “Good morning, ma'am, Mrs. Joiner,” his supervisor had told him to call the women 'ma'am' and the men 'sir,' especially the older ones because they respected manners. By the time he finished those three words, Ruby knew he was a little shit. “I'm here representing the Georgia Department of Transportation...”

“If you're here about that goddamn expired license, I already told the police...”

“No ma'am,” the young man raised his voice and a bead of sweat dripped from his nose, “I'm here to explain the highway 41 expansion project to you. You have heard about the project, haven't you, ma'am?”

“No,” Ruby said. Baby Curtis just stared at the young man who noticed that something appeared to be wrong with the baby's eyes—one looked like it was a good quarter inch out of line with the other, but then it could have been the way the old woman was jiggling the baby on her hip. He shook it off.

“We, ma'am, if you'd invite me into your lovely home, I could explain it to you. It's a bit complicated.”

“Fine, but I ain't got no sweet tea,” which was a lie, “you'll have to take plain tap water, no ice cubes either,” another lie.

Ruby backed away from the door and let the young man into her home which began with the dining room and kitchen.

Ruby bounced the still-naked Curtis on her knees as the young man explained how Warner Robins, “otherwise known as The International City,” was growing rapidly due to the steady influx of people coming to work at the Robins Air Force Base, young people, couples, who liked to have babies. He gestured at Curtis whenever he mentioned babies. And he talked about how more people and more babies meant more cars and more minivans and more SUVs. And how more cars and minivans and SUVs meant more roads were necessary, more lanes, wider lanes for wider cars. And highway 41, even though it was nowhere near the Air Force Base, was one such road that the Georgia

Department of Transportation had deemed it absolutely necessary to expand the lanes by two feet on each side. Because, even though highway 41 was nowhere near the Air Force Base, the area was quickly filling up with subdivisions full of identical pinkish brick houses with no backyards so all the new people and babies would have somewhere to sleep at night. “The suburbs,” he called it.

“And?” Ruby said when the young man stopped to catch his breath.

Ruby never got him that glass of warm tap water and his esophagus felt as if it were coated in half-dried glue. “And? Oh, and this means that the four foot expansion of the road will require some concession on your part, of course, the Department of Transportation is willing to give you monetary compensation for your troubles.”

Ruby understood money and she understood trouble.

“What kind of trouble are you talking about?” She asked, knowing that the little shit was up to no good.

“Well, ma'am, if we could take a stroll in your backyard I could show you what I'm talking about.”

“Alright, but let me put a Pamper on the baby so he don't pee on me.”

Ruby and a freshly diapered Curtis led the young man through the sliding glass backdoor, onto the screened backporch that Uncle E.L. had built, down three rotting wood stairs, and onto a square of concrete, the only reminder of human existence in Ruby's garden.

The young man's sleeves snagged on thorny rose bushes as he followed Ruby deeper into the heart of her backyard. Rotting Bradford pears squished under the raised

heels of his shiny shiny shoes and the still-solid pears hid in the tall grass, waiting to send him rollerskating.

The central point of the garden was a Magnolia tree, which was more like a sleeping giant wearing a leafy, flowered loincloth than a tree, under whose low-hanging branches, Curtis, age seven, would hide from Grandma Ruby when it was bath-time. And where Curtis, age eleven, sat atop a bed of fallen petals and leaves and held daily meetings of the “Don't Hurt the Animals Club.” Current membership: Curtis and eight of his favorite Beanie Babies.

The young man was just beginning to wish he'd brought along a machete when suddenly the garden ended and the three of them were standing on a five foot wide strip of mowed grass. Grass, and then a wall of bright pink flowers that seemed to float a few feet off the ground. Just beyond the crepe myrtles, the muffled zoom of passing cars could be heard.

The young man pulled a measuring tape out of his pocket. His supervisor said it would make him seem more official, you can't argue with numbers. He crouched in an opening between two trees and extended the tape until it hit the paved edge of highway 41. The two foot mark ran straight down the middle of each tree.

“Ma'am,” the young man twisted his neck around while trying to hold the tape in place,” if you look right here,” the tape snapped shut, “damn,” he stood up, pink petals resting on his head, “these trees will have to be removed.”

“No they won't,” Ruby said. Curtis was now crawling on the grass.

“Ma'am, the government will pay you a significant amount for your land.”

“No, keep the damn money. Nobody's chopping down my myrtles.”

“Actually they would be uprooting them, but, ma'am, you can't get around this, they're beginning construction three weeks from today.”

“Okay,” Ruby said.

“Okay?” The man had expected her to argue with him, to call him a 'dirty sumbitch' and chase him off the property with a shotgun aimed at his head.

“Yup, okay, have a good one, son. I expect you can show yourself out? Curtis and me are gonna sit right here for a bit.”

“Thank you for your time, Mrs. Joiner,” the young man stuttered as he reentered the dense jungle pink petals falling from the top of his head.

Ruby could hear him struggling with nature for ten minutes, then the whirr of an engine starting, then she was left with nothing but Curtis blowing spit bubbles and the woosh of the occasional car carrying a person who was late for work.

Ruby spent the next two weeks gathering signatures for her petition. She collected one-thousand-two-hundred-and-fifty-eight signatures and drove on an expired license to Atlanta to present them to the Georgia Department of Transportation.

One week later, sweaty men were chopping at the tangled roots of her crepe myrtles. They shook the trees in an attempt to loosen them from the ground, neither seemed to want to let go of one another, and the bright pink petals went snowing all around them, sticking to their wet skin.

Curtis swallowed the mouthful of saliva pooling underneath his tongue and

looked up at the man's armpit encircled in varied shades of crusty yellow, reminding Curtis of the wavy ossified edges of Grandma Ruby's slowly dying goldfish pond.

“He's lyin' ya know,” Curtis said in a firm whisper.

“”What?” The man flicked his head down at Curtis, his eyes, which looked as if they'd been covered in white donut glaze, caused Curtis to jump back, lose his balance, and fall flat on his rear-end.

Uncle E.L., who had been sleeping standing up, awoke and shook his head at the boy who was scrambling to his feet and patting imaginary dust off his shoulders and knees.

The man forced an amused burst of air and spittle between his pursed lips. Curtis made a very serious face.

“He,' Curtis jerked his head towards, once again slumbering, Uncle E.L., “is tellin' a fib,' he paused, held his had up near his cheek and spoke out of the corner of his mouth, “about the jerky,” he leaned in closer and lowered his voice further, “we got a ton in the back room.”

“Well, well den! Why dincha say so boy?” The man said in a loud voice that sounded a bit like Bubba again, only now mixed with the force of Grandma Ruby's across-the-street neighbor, Mrs. Yvonne, a cushiony black lady who, every Sunday morning, absorbed Curtis into her floral-patterned boson and whispered strongly in his hear, “My, my, Curtis. Every time I see your rosy cheeks praisin' the Lord, I just want to throw down my heart right then and there.”

Curtis thought something might be wrong with the man. Not wrong like Lenny,

Warner Robins' only hobo, who liked to yell made up Bible verses at miniskirt wearing pre-teens dropped off by their mothers at the mall, but wrong like sick. He couldn't understand why his voice kept changing. His skin up-close was splotchy, the yellowish-brown shade of rotting magnolia flower petals.

“He told me not to give you any,” Curtis said with an emphatic raising of his nearly translucent eyebrows, highlighting the asymmetrical fact that his left eye socket was one-fourth of an inch lower than the other or his right eye socket was one-fourth of an inch higher than the left, which was caused by a strange combination of many factors, the most important being his mother's small birthing canal, his soft skull—the doctor's compared it to Play-Doh—and his ten month stay in the warm, dark, maroon interior of Mary Lynn Joiner, who died giving birth to her first child.

“He's practically dead up there,” the man's voice was cold again, “Why don't you just walk your little feet back there and get me some goddamned jerky?” A dull-blue vein swelled in the center of the man's forehead.

“Because, I cain't.” Curtis lowered his eyes to the man's feet which sat inside a pair of white white sneakers. Curtis jutted his head forward, toward the shoes, and widened his wonky eyes. The sneakers were whiter than heaven. Curtis knew he'd never before seen anything so pure—not milk, not powdered sugar, not toilet paper before you use it—and he imagined the man had lassoed two clouds from the summer sky and strapped them onto his undeserving hooves that probably smelled of poop.

Curtis wanted, no, even though he knew it was a sin, coveted, those sneakers. By day, Grandma Ruby drove between the two local Dairy Queen's and decorated ice cream

cakes. But even though she made the best frosting roses in town, she never could afford new things, so Curtis' feet were always in a pair of Goodwill sneakers. His current pair was dark grey, but they used to be black and on the bottom you could see the spots where someone's mama took a kitchen knife to the multiple wads of gum her child had stepped on. Curtis didn't care whether the shoes were too big. He figured he would just wear ten pairs of socks, and then nine, and then eight, and so on until his feet grew big enough to fit them.

He stuck his mini-sausage thumbs in the belt loops of his Wranglers, pushed out his round belly and arched his body to one side like a parenthesis. This always worked on his grandma when he wanted extra chicken nuggets or for her to change the channel when she was watching "Murder She Wrote."

"Those're some nice shoes, mister," Curtis said.

"I know, kid," the man replied.

"Where'd you get 'em?"

"The store."

"Which store?"

"The shoe store."

"Oh. Well, I'd love to have some shoes like them. Everybody'd wanna be my friend. They'd all say, 'OOOOWHEEE, here comes Curtis Joiner, look at those fancy feet, he must be goin' to the Outback Steakhouse!'" Curtis heaved a breath and stared at a stray pack of Peanut M&M's, picturing the new life that was within his reach.

"Yeah, they're great. Listen, are you going to get me that jerky?" All traces of

Bubba, Mrs. Yvonne, and that cartoon rooster had disappeared from his voice and his face was turning the same yellow as the deepest recess of his armpit, which only made the shoes shine brighter.

“Sure, I'll get it, but you've got to go wait outside. Man! Those shoes sure are nice.” Curtis raised his eyebrows twice, winked to get his point across and scurried off to get the dehydrated meat.

The man walked outside, Uncle E.L. snored.

Curtis skipped to the back room. Usually he hated going back there because black widow spiders and the occasional rattlesnake liked to hang out among the crates of Twinkies, but now he didn't care about some dumb old spiders.

A fading cardboard cutout of Dale Earnhardt stood next to the open boxes of jerky. At one point the jerky was a top seller, but now, the gangs from Warner Robins Middle School, who loitered at the station until their older siblings picked them up, preferred neon sour things; Curtis liked to watch their faces to see how close they could scrunch their mouths to their eyes. So Uncle E.L., for the time being, had replaced the beef jerky display with a wall of squishy bright sugar and a wide variety of Georgia-themed shot glasses.

Curtis wondered how many bags of jerky the shoes were worth. He tried to lift the smallest of the boxes, but he couldn't move it. He saw the shoes, disembodied, running away from him, sticking their tongues out and running faster than Curtis ever could.

But he and the man clearly had a deal so Curtis dug his arms down the sides of the box and wrapped them around fifteen or eighteen bags of Original Smokehouse Jerky.

Curtis snuck out the back door and walked around to the front of the store where the man was smoking a cigarette. Curtis outstretched his jerky-filled arms and stared at the shoes.

The man grabbed a pack of jerky and said, “Damn, kid, you didn't have to bring all the jerky you have.”

“Yes I did. There's more too,” Curtis said as he switched between frantic eyebrow raises, winks, and motioning his head towards the shoes.

The man seemed to lean forward a bit so Curtis dropped the jerky onto the asphalt and blurted, “Here lemme help you,” as he reached forward to untie the shoelaces.

The man took a few steps backwards, jerking the laces from Curtis' hands. He squinted at Curtis, shook his head and said, “You know this stuff is great for you, full of protein. You look like you could use some.” Curtis only stared. “Well, I'll be going now. Thanks for the jerky, kid.”

Curtis remained kneeling in the warm concrete as the man swerved to one side and headed towards the street—the undone laces of his white white sneakers dragging through puddles of oil and chaw juice.

“Wait! Ain't you gonna pay for that jerky?” Curtis shouted as big, real tears gathered in the corners of his mismatched eyes.

The man didn't turn around and Curtis saw the top half of a jerky bag fly from his hand and land on the windshield of a passing truck. Tears wandered to the tip of Curtis' nose and jumped down onto his lips. He reached up to wipe his face and he licked his lips. He saw the blood on his palm and tasted something like a few rusty pennies, salt,

and gasoline.

Big Man, Upstairs

The so-called honorable, blue-eyed and grey seersucker-suited Reverend Porter Moses Berthold, the third and only remaining flesh and blood incarnation of that appellation, with timely involuntarism, as if a mutated tic from within, shook his head in fleet flicks, always from right to left and always with wide eye as if scanning the concentration of his congregation, curved round and close like the shoreline of an unmapped island, in comfortably cushioned, armless chairs—population eight-hundred-and-ninety—notched in connection by interlocking metal fingers, beginning a spittle distance breadth from the elevated polished mahogany platform which added an unearthly baker's foot to top out the two-inched, white and combed-over like a bank of iced-over falsely fluffy snow-toned head at eight foot five—taller than the tallest man known to walk the Earth—towering from which, the man who preached could see even the faces seated late in the back row and the little buzz-cut brother making irreverent faces at his sister, believing he was hidden by the silk rose ringed Sunday crown of the smiling wrinkled widow one row ahead.

And to all of them he not so much preached as he did roll and break, like waves on the body of a beached whale, the ten-second once monosyllabic words of his self-composed sermon hailing like a firestorm on the mind of the big man, whose new

presence was unnoted by all, save the man who spoke, and seemed, in the mind of the big man, scooped six chairs in to the back row and henceforth known only as Big Man, to be directing his disapproving shakes, which were really more like tremors, at his late arrival and perhaps at the shoulders of dusty leather motorcycle jacket. The too-open, all-seeing, blind-dog eyes appeared manic to Big Man and, as a member of the audience, the sensation of being watched by the man onstage paired with the monologue of extended appeals to the “Ehahverlastin’ guhurasuv Gaawwwdd” and slurred warnings of “Thefharssuvveteraldammanashuun” made Big Man feel it necessary to shut his eyes to block out the resulting sensation of a drunken lightheadedness that had suddenly washed over his head; however, not as though it were inflated with a rush of helium and floated to bump without reason, but want for rise, against the aluminum ceiling of the church—disguised with draped hammocks of deep purple, unbroken lengths of fabric, reminding Big Man of two tickets he had purchased for a fancy acrobatic circus, an uninformed gift to his former wife, a woman he thought to be small, though she was merely afraid of painted-faced clowns, regardless of acrobatic talent. No he did not find his head among the clouds, but his brain, awash with a seasick repression, a jiggling Jell-O mold of grey matter, seemed shrouded in a vacuumed weightlessness, as if it had stepped into the dark-side of some large structure—either the Washington Monument or even a ten-level parking garage works—and, despite the friendly weather, the same of which Big Man had pattered atop his motorcycle through lightly-breezed Warner Robins that mid-November Sunday, felt the forced shadow of an unrealistic drop in temperature and unnecessary chills down the spinal cord. He was no longer sure if he understood English,

though he could see the words from far ahead spelled out and swarming across the tissue paper skin of his eyelids, seeming projected by the fluorescent haloes above him. Big Man felt like he had to fart, but he kept his eyes shut, believing himself to be an image of devout absorption in prayer, while the rest of the heads nine-hundred-and-sixty-seven, some standing steady, nodded, like buoys in current with the message that Big Man felt sinking into his stomach as they rose to a fever pitch.

“We pahray for these sinners, whose corrupted flesh will surely lead to stunted lives, here on the land provided by the Lawd Allmahty. The adulterer and drunkard. Homosexual sinners, all alike. We pray for these souls who choose to forego a life of evvahlastin’ salvashun.”

An undercurrent of “Amen’s” and “Praise be’s” murmured through the congregation; Big Man’s stomach joined in with a rumble like a cow’s moo and the Reverend herded on.

“Now we don’t do this often, but this glorious mawnin’ mah wife flipped on the television so we might come closer to knowing if the Lawd, not the weathahman, had stormclouds up ahead and we learned that this autumn day was being celebrated by our nation’s leadahs as “World Peace Day.” Now I don’t know about y’all, but around here we just call it Sunday. So to ahhhhlll of you good Christian folk, on this day of worship and fellowship, as you pass through the doors of this holy house and into the Gawd-gifted light of this special day, pray unceasingly, with righteous anger in your hearts, for the souls of all sinners whose lives have been paid for with the blood of the lamb, for this worldly peace is temporary and will crumble at the gates of heaven if we continue to

shake hands and smile at the sinner. Amen.”

“Amen,” echoed the people in a unison that boxed Big Man’s ears just before the sudden rising and shuffling of bodies and once-quiet voices, feeling more like a shopping mall at Christmastime than a place for sacred occasion.

And although Big Man experienced the service as a smoke-filled room, on exiting into a day that did, somehow, feel imbued with a new sense of hope; his queasy bowels no longer grumbled with constipated confusion, but let out a soft moan, like a passing ambulance, a rescuing release, and he confidently strode in too-blue jeans to where his helmet sat undisturbed, resembling an overturned saladbowl on the seat of his motorcycle. And before pulling through the already emptied spot in front of him, Big Man thought he may just return to hear what Reverend Porter Berthold III had to say next week about the fate of humanity. For Big Man too cared about wild brush-fired family homes in California, although he had never visited the state, and the effect the current economic climate was having on small business owners, such as himself, but did not know what caring about these things amounted to at the end of the day or the end of a life.

Revvng his engine, the fumes of his own exhaust entered his nostrils like tendrils of ferns unfurling, tickling his passages in a pleasant haze, so he inhaled sharply to heighten his enjoyment, but this only caused him to inhale, unbeknownst to him, a single dandelion floret that caught in the further cilia of his nasal passages and lurched forward a powerful sneeze, which, to the passive observer, seemed to be the sole force that drove the two wheels in succession over the flip-flopped foot of a teenage girl who wore baggy gym shorts and an oversized hooded-sweatshirt. The girl winced, but then only glared at

Big Man, who was beginning to apologize in what would have been a profuse manner, had not the guardian of the girl, another teen, though male and sporting a virgin mustache and chin hair like a dead grassy knoll in winter, stepped up and kicked thrice at the rear tire of Big Man's most prized possession.

"Hey, fat asshole. Learn how to drive one of those things before your midlife crisis," the boy said before hooking his arm around the shoulders of the girl who smiled up at him and said she would be fine if he'd take her to FroYo Palace. Her face shifted to a sneer that held within it the insincerity of the youth populous who treated all tax-paying adults of consideration as if they were a mist to be passed through, having the ability to chill, but barely and more often to cool down and only add crystalline dimension to the dewy rosebuds of their supple cheeks.

Big Man sought a response that would let the teens know of his forty-eight years of existence and stockpiled wisdom, not to mention cashflow, that justified a higher rank on the food chain of humans eating out the hearts of other humans, although he did not know what FroYo was, but he guessed some sort of new hairstyle. He settled on a firm scoff and it was good—a loud push of air through the lips—angered, but righteously so, and not overheated, but cool and age-appropriate, though it only had a short moment to work out an annoyed confusion from both teens before a gurgle in his stomach sent forth, behind the scornful puff of carbon dioxide, the half-digested remains of two-tablespoons worth of the quickly scarfed sausage, egg and syrup-infused pancake sandwiches Big Man had eaten while the rousing clarion chorus of the beginning of the two-and-a-half-hour service as well as a portion of a kind welcoming prayer from the Reverend passed

by.

Now on his tongue once again, with the added acrid tinge of stomach acid, the greasy amalgam spread into Big Man's loose jowls and filled the hole that a botched wisdom tooth removal had left in the back, left, bottom corner of Big Man's gums.

"What's wrong with you, man?" The male teen asked, cocking his head to one side and offering up his hands not in supplication, but clearly only concerned with questioning the mental capacity of Big Man and asserting his youthful right to a life lived without shame. He kicked again at the tire causing a small tan dribble of his former breakfast to leak from behind Big Man's pursed lips. The teens erupted in laughter. "Gross, dude. This guy's so old he probably eats baby food. Peace, bro, Jeezuhs."

The female teen hopped onto the back of her defender, as if it were her plan all along to have her foot run over so she could be carried off her feet to a frozen treat, and they galloped down the long rows of cars, leaving Big Man at a crossroads with dribbles of upchuck drying in the grey hairs of his bushy goatee and the rest remaining in his mouth. Voluntarily eating one's own digestive remains seemed something reality TV show contestants would do to win a five-minute, hot shower. It was for crazy people. Those who still managed to look attractive while gurgling goat testicles; those chosen people Big Man seldom saw the likes of in Warner Robins, the ones with tanned jutting collar bones and flat rumble-strip stomachs not speed bumps like Big Man's belly. Either way, spit or swallow, Big Man knew he could never again return to the immense warehouse encasement of New Rising Hope First Baptist Church. He swallowed, deciding that he had nothing to lose except his breakfast and in the back of his mind he

thought it might act as a snack to tide him over until his inevitably late lunch break. As he gulped down a gag, Big Man halfway recalled some repeated phrase the Reverend had shouted about God either vomiting or spitting out people who were lukewarm, which only made Big Man wonder if God would swallow his own vomit or gurgle goat testes for the salvation of a soul. Now he was feeling blasphemous, but he wasn't sure if he'd go to hell for it. Does picturing Jesus in a speedo make you perverse or is it worse to curse the Lawd's name to damnation.

With the sweet and tangy odor still clinging to his esophagus Big Man vroomed five below on the highway towards the storefront of his latest business venture, a shop that specialized in fine leather goods for motorcycle enthusiasts, but offered other eclectic mom and pop type offerings to appeal to the ever increasing influx of new families seeking safety and comfortable boredom far from cities that harbored unknowable futures like the fratboy football fanatics and dropout musicians of Athens or Savannah with its mysterious squares and chigger-infested Spanish moss draped trees and open-container anything goes liquor laws. There was appeal in the mystery and manner of these places, Big Man admitted, but he wasn't sure how one might simply drop themselves into a place with so much, like a mustard seed among weeds and wildflowers, and received enough nourishment to become something substantial, a human version of a homecooked meal; so he simply chose the place the offered him the best deal and seventeen years prior , as a pediatric surgeon with no children of his own and a wife he believed was hiding her seams, Warner Robins flowed with middle-class cash and young couples who had nothing better to do after outgrowing a prolonged phase of screaming and chasing one

another outside the movie theater than to huddle in stagnant units and divide and multiply like cancerous cells. In a two-story home on the once-outskirts of the city quickly growing too big for its britches, Big Man settled into leather sofas with his small wife and, before he realized his own exposure, he too had contracted the disease of undefinition that plagued those who somehow believed that they could leave any time they wanted. It was the people around him who now defined him and Big Man had decided he'd had enough, but each breath brought a chilled condensation of bile to his nose and he knew somebody would soon find out what he had done, and he was right.

Simply by his guilty breath, Maude, the well-functioning, elderly smoke-haired lady of his employ, would be the first to know and she would tell her best friend, Pearlis Montjoy as they chain-smoked Marlboro Gold's at her kitchen table, under which eavesdropped Curtis Montjoy-Aseem, who would act out his dramatic interpretation of the scene beneath the domed monkey bars in front of an intimate audience of Austen and Annabelle Brizzell, who, directly after Curtis' final bow, would walk home without speaking, accept crustless PB&J's from their mothers, and part perpendicular ways at the top of the stairs, where, to the left, Annabelle, age nine, would listen to Justin Bieber singing out "baby oh" to a million girls who all stood in front of their mirrors and pinched the skin above still-androgynous hips, and to the right, Austen, freshly twelve years, would reread "Helm's Deep," his favorite chapter in *The Two Towers* and write in his journal about Curtis' performance and grieve because he knew he would end up being the one friend Curtis' needed to stay alive, although it would mean the social end of Austen's life although he justified that one friend was better than being alone like Big

Man, whom he used to see as a lone surviving Viking descendant, but now would *never look at the same way again after finding out that he enjoys regurgitating and reswallowing his meals*. This particular passage would soon be read by his father and househusband, Bobby, who upon losing his job at the base had taken to wandering aimlessly around the house, picking up and looking under and into: lamps, vases, ottomans, and his son's journal, the contents of which he would post-coitally reveal to the former wife of Big Man, with whom Bobby had been sleeping since last Christmas at the "Annual Ballard Non-Denominational, Non-Discriminatory, Holiday Party," where the small wife, in a big way, had bent down to pick up an errant pig-in-a-blanket to allow the back of her sweater dress to slide up, revealing a pair of red and green panties that had "Ho Ho Ho" stitched in sequins across her buttocks; both Bobby and Big Man witnessed this: one of them—guess who?—was intrigued and the other sputter hot spiced apple cider down the front of his best and most loathed Land's End sweater turtleneck. And thus his small ex-wife would continue uncracked, but still empty, while Big Man's exterior clung to his hard-boiled interior, bits of shell help intact only by a small membrane which Big Man, though not in the same terms, hoped was some sort of soul.

If he had agreed to go with his wife to the Christian Catholic family-counselor, Big Man figured he would have at least five children by now and that they would all dislike him in one way or the other. Big Man tried to not think about his ex-wife as he curved into the parking lot she had chosen for the location of her dream: a store that produced coffee mugs, colorful tumblers, and other porcelain wares imprinted with images of the ones and things and pets that defined the categorized hearts of those who

sipped of them. He saw Maude's smokestack already puffing away at the front door and wished he had some mints or room for a travel mouthwash on his motorbike. Big Man's plastic watch digital lines at 11:20 said his store was already open. Maude, halfway through her fifth cigarette of the day and wearing her favorite "work shirt:" calypso pink and adhered with vinyl blue letters acronymed into S.L.U.T.S. across her big old-lady bosom and in smaller letters over her slightly humped back the translation: Southern Ladies Under Tremendous Stress. Only one of the many reasons Big Man tried to confine Maude to stockroom duties only and was unusually generous with smoke breaks so long as she take them out the back door. But since Claire, a sixteen-year-old early graduate from Catholic high-school and a self-proclaimed atheist "since birth" had not yet arrived for her shift, most likely because she was taking a nap or smoking marijuana with her younger boyfriend, a nervous skinny fourteen-year-old Michael Zauer, Big man would have to allow Maude to work the front, besides she loved and was an expert at calculating change for transactions inside her "mind's eye"—a phrase she had picked up from too much conversation with Claire.

"Yarr, late, boss man. Always late," Maude yelled as she stomped on the already extinguished butt with the heel of her navy Keds slip-on shoes.

"A good morning to you too, Miss Maude," Big Man replied and noticed her sniffing the air like a dog after tablescraps.

"Well, go on then, open'er up. You go to worship today? 'Cause I di'int see yah at the Early Bird service. I tole you is right thur down niney-six highway, ain't nothing else round it."

“I was there Miss Maude, I was at the back. I almost had to stand for the whole two hours. Thank God a screaming child forced a mother to give up her seat.” Big Man gently nudged Maude to the side so he could unlock the front door.

“Well then lemme know what did Reverend Porter preach on?”

“Well, you know, it’s hard to say exactly. He said a lot of things. Sin and the usual heaven, hell, it’s never too late to be saved.”

“Uh-huh, that’s what I thought, big boss man ca’nt pay the Lawd no heed for five minutes.”

“I was there, okay? He said World Peace Day was a sin.”

“Yah know, maybe he did say sumptin’ like that. Yah know, yer cheatin’ wife’ll be goin’ straight to the Devil’s doorstep.”

“Now I don’t remember anything about that,” Big Man lied because of the un stomachable guilt that he might have been the one who sent her there to burn eternally, “but the whole thing gave me digestive problems and the chairs were far too small.”

“The truth’ll do that to ya if you ain’t ready an’ willin’. His words are too big for a fella like you, hell, I don’t understand’im mostuva time. I like to go for the clappin’ and singin’. Praise is praise in any which ways. Where ya off to next Sunday?”

“Wednesday actually, and would you mind stepping into the store, we have work to do.”

“Oh yer goin’ to a prayer meetin’ if it’s a Wednesday.”

“No, Miss Maude. I’m attending Wednesday mass at Sacred Heart.”

“Hmph, them Catholics are weirdos if ya ask me. A buncha drunks and Mexican’s

too. But that Reverend Porter shore is a good lookin' feller."

Big Man nodded and imagined Maude as a Grey African parrot, outliving its caretaker, and left caged and repeating the words of a dead man with screeching rapidity, hoping that one phrase would signal a need for food.

"We'll see. Could you go straighten those riding chaps and make sure we have enough of those, whatsitcalled dogs plushes?"

"You talkin' 'bout Uga the bulldawg or them long hot dogs for the underdoor drafts?"

"The first one, it's called Uh-guh?"

"Duhhhhhhhhhh-guh," a happy voice called from the open door along with the jingle of a single gold bell which announced Claire's arrival. "Don't you know anything about college football, boss man?"

"Not really Claire. And you're forty minutes late. Do you think you could tell me why?"

"No, not really, but I think I might be late because there were too many billboards telling me that lust was going to drag me to hell and I was so full of lust for your company that I drove slow until it went away."

Big Man wanted to roll his eyes, but at the same time he wished some young thing like Claire, who was scrawny enough to still order off any twelve and under kids menu, would find some desire for his presence of mind and then she'd lead all of her free-bodied friends to follow him on a pilgrimage, all on motorcycles, to some spot in the woods where they would drink dandelion wine, although he wasn't sure what that was or

if it had hallucinogenic properties, and learn the ways of the Big Man.

A pyramid of miniature bulldogs wearing red football jerseys emerged walking on two coffee stirrer legs covered in teal spandex leggings and muffling a voice from somewhere in the center of the fluff, “Where you want these thangs, boss man?”

Before Big Man could answer, Maude crumbled the tower to the grey carpeted floor. “My lawd, Cuhlair, ain’t you lookin’ purty today. I love that little bun.”

“Oh my God, thank you Miss Maude, you already know I’m stealing that shirt from you.”

“Claire,” Big Man interjected, “can you shelf those in the college fan section?”

“Yeah, in a bit. Did you know that those dogs. The real ones they plop down on the field at games are replaced almost every seven years. It’s because of inbreeding, they can’t breath right and their legs can’t support them. But they want the real thing, a purebred American Bulldog, so they are, like, forcing cousins to reproduce these deformed offspring and all of them are Uga and everyone believes it’s the same dog, like, in spirit. But reincarnation can’t be forced.”

“Hey now baby girl, I thought you was one of them agtheist folk. I know recarnation means you keep livin’ after you die.”

“Miss Maudie, I am an atheist. There is no god. But if somebody asks if you are a god you tell them ‘Yes. Absolutely.’”

“Think you can explain that to me ova a smoke?” Maude reached into the loose collar of her t-shirt and from somewhere within the recesses and folds beneath, unearthed a moistened soft pack of Malboro’s.

“That’s one, Maude, only four more!” Big Man called after her and Claire had already jingled the front door shut to continue their theological exchange on the chipped yellow curb out front.

As Big Man shelved the icons of football fandom on the empty shelf, he wondered if Claire might be right. Maybe he too was a god and he only need someone ask for him to affirm its truth. During his own youth, his family attended church services, though he could not recall the denomination, on Christmas Day and Easter Sunday. From December to sometime in early spring, a baby was born, went through a massive growth spurt, murdered, and then it all repeated. After forty-eight years of believing, if you could call it real belief, in a deity who only emerged when there were mass exchanges and sudden appearances of gifts, Big Man had begun to think he was missing out on something. He had never desired children, but after the divorce and relocation of his few possessions—several rotating towers of music compact disc’s and DVD’s—to a townhouse on the opposite side of the city, and his late diagnosis with a rare case of what his physician called “early-onset hypogonadism,” but known to the Good Morning America general public as “male menopause,” he still had no desire for children but often wondered if he was incapable of knowing a whole love.

Big Man’s sharp decrease in testosterone, usually occurring in seventy-plus aged men, was accompanied by hot flashes, mood swings, and bouts of insomnia: the combination of which often resulted in the consumption of several pint’s of Ben & Jerry’s ice cream and eight hour insomniac screenings of Law and Order: SVU marathons and when those had ended Big Man would bask in the ghastly glow of re-runs

of Billy Graham reach a hazy half-sleep until an African American gospel choir would burst out in “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” Men in cheap plaid suits and women in boardwalk taffy-colored dresses peered at Big Man through the static that separated him from another room that looked like it might have an unlit fireplace somewhere off camera. The people, mostly men who looked as they might have been disciplined for letting a banana go brown, but sometimes women with pink weeping raccoon eyes, looked directly into Big Man’s eyes and said many things along the lines of:

Believe me, what I am telling you. I’m feeling your hurt. Right now you’re so sick and you aren’t even sure why. The doctor’s and witch doctors have no cures for you. You’re so much in poverty. You are dying. But listen to me. I care. Jesus cares about you and he wants to lead you to the light.

Why don’t you take his hand and let him lead you to the light. Why don’t you pick up the phone right now and call that toll-free number at the bottom of your screen. Right now. Praise the Lord and log-into that web address. Let me send you my free miracle olive oil shampoo. Let me rush this blessed cleansing chism to you right now. Hallelujah, this blessed soap will arrive at your doorstep and after soaking your hair and entire body in it, you will believe in the change.

I’ve seen the weak run marathons. Cancer blighted dying and lame cured, freed from the shackles of earthly disease by the blessed grace of gone. False criminal charges along with the crutches of disability dropped and freedom prevails in the name of the Lord. Perhaps it was just the beautiful fragrance, but I even had one lady tell me she was blessed with a new job, the very first morning she rose and chose to cleanse her head and

mind with this blessed oil. Please, praise God, call now. Free yourselves from misery, grief, and pain Amen.

A small unnaturally fast voice would add quickly in a barely audible voice, before the programming switched to a three hour presentation of the Magic Bullet all-in-one blender and chopper, an additional reminder that:

Free with shipping and handling processing fee of \$4.99. New Light Ministries may not be held responsible for incomplete results of product. Avoid contact with eyes and ears. Possible side effects if not immediately flushed include: blindness, cataracts, excess ear wax, and overgrowth of ear and nostril hair.

Of course, Big Man had never called, but that didn't mean his mind didn't waver between thinking it was quite obviously all a great scam to deceive the poor, desperate and delusional and the pushing possibility that the olive oil shampoo, the Beulah Land water from desert drinking fountains, and manna flour from heaven really did contain healing elements of the miraculous sort, particles light and sound of God infused within particles of earth matter, after all, some people trust that an apple a day keeps medical assistance at bay, so why is it so hard to accept a head of oleaginous hair might reflect the sheen of the searchlight of heaven? The truth might me that the miraculous walks hand in hand with the ridiculous.

After all, Linda from South Carolina told the man in the stiff suit:

The doctah's gave me up twice. Epileptic seizures none of they medications could control. It was like a demon of Satan had taken a'holda my soul and wouldn't let it go for nothin'. Every night in my sleep I'm havin' seizures. We hadda buy a bigga bed and my husband got me sleepin' crossways 'cause I was a'flalin' and fallin' out, breaking arms, legs, and everything. And last night I went home and I took that soap, like a crazy fool at

two o'clock in the mornin', wint on in that bathroom and lathered up my whole body with da olive oil shampoo. All ova my brusies an' everthan. And then I got in bed next to my husband and slept like a baby.

For three years after the devastating diagnosis of a quickly waning manhood, concealed prior by ignorance for the final four dragging years of his divorce, Big Man's epileptic brain seized with the *grand mal* known to the realistic portion of the public as a "mid-life crisis" at the mention of eternal life and flailed, searching for a hidden lightswitch, in hopes of illuminating his insides. After abandoning his wife and former occupation, Big Man began to wonder if he had ever know his *he*, or if he had always wandered through a desert without temptation or even thirst, but always surrounded by sand, the footsteps behind him blown over by the wind. He speculated that his *he* was the desert, a being made of totalizing anonymity, grains of sand that shifted, though only when touched by some peripheral presence. He made lists of the things he loved and they were short and unsure. The musical discography of The Beatles and Paul McCartney as well as his newly discovered craving for cageless freedom on the open road brought him pleasure, though always impermanent. As soon as the song was over or the destination reached, pleasure sublimated to perpetual absence. The dedication of his sweaty insomnia, more a result of self-realization of his sickness than actual side effect, had fashioned within Big Man a vapid slurping sinkhole into which Big Man poured the things that he trusted for their temporary truth in the hopes that it would eventually fill to the brim, all the cracks sunken in with sand, and allow Big Man to say with surety that this was *he* and *he* was it.

These thoughts, like a loose membrane, surrounded without touching, the substance of Big Man's solitude, and most nights, instead of searching for finality, they urged him only to stare right back into the unblinking eyes of those who unwaveringly preached allegiance to an unknowability that takes hold of the throat of the soul and throttles it to near suffocation, like a trickster foot on a garden hose, letting off pressure only when life is necessary. As uncomfortable as that might sound, when he lost the feeling that the eyes on the screen were spying into his IKEA-furnished living room, Big Man had begun the quest of self-suffocation which he hoped would lead to truth in faith and vice versa.

But to those who asked, whose numbers were few, Big Man would lie that he was looking to further his education, that he had a naturally curious mind—he did not—and that he wanted to see whether people really spoke in tongues and writhed around on the floor, as if zapped by some holy tazer, and if there were those who felt their beliefs supported cannibalism. What he did not expect when his church shopping reached consistency, was for his sleeplessness to subside. It was a mystery, though he would not admit a miracle, which he could not comprehend. With each week, mostly on Sunday, Big Man would attend places that contained faith, each with a different name. Warner Robins First Baptist, then Second, the Harvest Church of New Hope, Friendship Congregational Church, New Hope Ministries: with six-hundred-and-ninety-three official options marked by red dots on a computer map, search results limited within a twenty-five miles radius from Big Man's residence, there was some suspicion of hope that was vested in the limitless possibility that one of these establishments might offer a mode of

belief that promised time for questions at the end. That the skies would open up and a voice from above would boom, “Speak, man, I’m listening.”

The Wednesday after the pyromaniac threats that Reverend Porter interpreted for the deaf ears of Big Man, Sacred Heart Catholic Church would be his thirty-second attempt, although it meant leaving his store under the run of Maude and Claire for an hour and a half of the suddenly chilled, though still thoroughly sunshined autumn day.

That bright, cloudless morning, twelve of Maude’s cigarette breaks later, the store had seen eight customers: four of them bought “My Kid is a Georgia Bulldawg” bumper stickers and said “Oh what a bargain” as an apathetic Claire totaled other purchases of unadorned leather wallets and jackets that were supposed to appear “pre-road-worn” but only looked like crumpled trash bags.

After cautioning Maude to “try to not burn the place down” and Claire to “not give anything away for free,” Big Man had one foot out the door as a voice behind him rang out with the obligatory enthusiasm of church bells at eight in the morning.

“Hey, boss man!” Claire had clearly spent too much time discussing whatever it was a seventeen-year-old atheist and a seventy-six year old tar-lunged Southern Baptist who went to church only because “she likes the music and enjoys clapping.”

“Today’s my last day.”

“On Earth?” Big Man replied with sarcasm he normally suppressed.

“No way, man. I plan on living forever. But I’m moving to Athens with Michael. So could you just send my last paycheck to my grandparents house.”

“Who’s Michael? Does your mother know about this?”

“Who is Michael? He’s only the best keyboardist, guitarist, and vocal leader of Macon’s only good band. They’re called Party Dog. How have you never heard of them?”

“I guess I don’t get out much. What kind of music do they play?” Big Man appreciated Claire for her willingness to participate in conversation with anyone, regardless of age or the size of their belly, so long as they were willing to mostly listen to her.

“C’mon, you know that’s like asking someone what their favorite flavor of Ben’s and Jerry’s is. You can’t pick just one. But I’d have to say that his biggest influence is My Morning Jacket.”

“He’s inspired by an article of clothing of yours?”

“Jesus, you can be so dense. My Morning Jacket? Jim James? How have you never even heard “One Big Holiday? Here.” Claire pulled from her back pocket a phone that allowed her to search for and play a music video within a matter of seconds. She held it close to Big Man’s face and he watched a man with a shoulder-length triangle of frizzed hair that met at the hem with a cape that he would sweep across to conceal his face from time to time, like Dracula. He leapt across the stage in bounds and sang shifting from tenor to a smooth falsetto with ease. He yelled out to a crowd screaming the same words back at him: “We are the innovators! They are the imitators!” before breaking into a wordless chorus of undulating falsetto “Ooos” and “Ahhs.” Big Man was enraptured by the performance despite the shoddy sound quality of the phone’s speakers so he decided, despite his failure to provide two weeks notice, he would pay her music taste a

compliment. “They’re quite great. I could do without the four minute jam session at the beginning, but he has clearly been influenced by some of the greats. Perhaps Prince, Robert Plant. Good stuff Claire.”

“Duh, Jim James is a god.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in God.”

“I don’t. I never have. But I believe in the word god and using it to describe somebody whose talent surpasses other unimpressive humans.”

“Ah alright, and do you worship this Jim James or Michael the Party Dog because of their god status?”

“Maybe, but that depends on what you mean by worship. Jim James is a sacred icon produced by earthly circumstances and his own belief in himself and he is rightly revered for that. Don’t you have a meeting with some god to get to?”

“Yes, yes. You’re right. I’ve got to get going.”

“Bye-bye, boss man! I’ve heard them Catholic services is awful boring, so I’ve got a game for you to play: Count the Immigrants. I want a report from you bright an early tomorra mornin’,” Maude’s voice scraped across the parking lot to where Big Man was already mounting his motorcycle.

As he pulled into the small parking lot, veined with cracks of grass sprouting through, Big Man thought that, out of most of the churches he’d visited thus far, this one was the one that looked most like what he thought of when he attempted to conjure the image of a church in his mind: a plain brick building without too many front steps that led to simple but solid wooden doors adorned with crossed stained darker. The building

was smaller than most churches he'd seen, but he thought this an advantage to the necessity he assumed churches had for a need to confine, or perhaps it was confide, within its walls, a condensed mystery, that when full of bodies was visible as a fog descending on the congregation.

Entering the wooden doors, opened for him by a kind smiling blonde woman sandwiched by two children who were begging her to go climb the magnolia tree that separated the main church from an older smaller structure that looked even more like a church, although its steepled top was missing a lowercase t topper and the whitewashed walls were chipping, Big Man saw that the inside could contain no more than a congregation of two-hundred and fifty, an even The branches of the magnolia tree, drooping heavy with late-rotting white stainless flowers and gravy boat leaves, rested the far reaches of tender twigs atop the shingled roofs of the old and the new Sacred Heart. "Not until after mass," Big Man heard the mother softly admonish as the woman in front of him paused and dipped two forefingers into a small basin of water and then tap herself with it four times. Big Man did not dip his fingers because he did not did not know what it meant, but, feeling adventurous but with the need for a guide, followed the white poof of hair to a row in the upper-middle section of the sanctuary. Other than the elderly woman who smelled not overwhelmingly of Elizabeth Taylor's White Diamonds, a fragrance Big Man had purchased for his mother with saved allowance one Christmas, and a Hispanic man whose blue jeans had dirt on the knees though his short-sleeved button down was crisp and clean, Big Man was its only other occupant and was glad to have room to sit comfortably with legs open. The pew was covered in a rough, worn red

fabric with no cushion between it and the wood below.

Turning to look at the portion of church behind him, Big Man was surprised by the amount of people willing to give up their lunch hours to attend church in the middle of the workweek. There was a tanned South-Asian looking woman in a plain grey hotel maid's uniform, kneeling before the service had even begun. A man and wife surrounded their eight children and filled nearly half of an entire pew; from the looks of it they had another child close to arrival. Young and old would dip their fingers into the basin at the front, and some would kneel and make the same crossing motion across their chest before entering their chosen seat. Big Man did no research about the religions of the churches he visited; he thought it best to cannonball into the realms of differing beliefs instead of dipping in the tip of his big toe to test its tolerability, though now he had questions that he regretted his lack of answers to.

At five minutes to noon, the church was nearly three-quarters full. The old woman sat at an unimposing distance from Big Man, but close enough for her smell to waft over to him. He could sense her willing him to turn towards her and say hello because she knew he was an outsider. He felt like he had accidentally stumbled upon a secret cult meeting. But Big Man was not there to make friends and despite the slight comfort he felt in the present environment, he sensed his search was far from over and feared the end would result in the return of sleeplessness. So instead of giving in to the woman's telepathy, he looked at the wall to his left where, between the abstract stained glass windows, a large wooden relief was hung. The carving depicted Jesus dragging a cross on one shoulder and reaching forward with a freed arm to touch the cheek of a kneeling

woman in front of him, a wooden tear frozen mid-roll just below her eye socket.

A voice called out through the assistance of microphone connected to an unimposing soundsystem, “For today’s entrance procession, we will sing verses one and three of number five-four-one in your hymnals.

The whole gathering stood and Big Man followed a split second later. The old woman had moved closer to his side to extend to him a worn green hymnal which he felt obligated to receive. As the rest of the congregation sung the refrain, “Holy God, we forever praise thy name,” Big Man mouthed the words just in case the old woman was watching.

In the center aisle, the priest, clad in a white robe with a solid purple sash across his shoulders held a cinder-blockish Bible overhead as he led a parade of two identically dressed, but younger men carrying a gold lidded dish and a silver jug, these two, mere boys, had black cords tied around their waists.

Reaching the front, the priest stepped up a low stair and turned to face his congregation. He looked like an old man, a commonality with many of the churches he’d previously visited, though he was not beaming suspiciously shiny or squinting at the crowd as if searching out the sinners and saints; he did not wear a pop-star microphone or a large cross pendant with one built in. He looked tired, but content, like a normal person who happened to have the ability to fully function on five hours of sleep. He spoke and his voice carried to the back of the room without amplification, “In the name of the father, and of the son, and of the holyspirit.”

Everyone made the same crossing gesture from before and Big Man attempted to

mimic and reply, "Amen."

"The lord be with you," the priest spoke again.

"And also with you," the people replied.

"As we come to celebrate the mystery of Christ's love, let us acknowledge our failures and ask the lord for pardon and strength."

The whole of the church, save Big Man, said from memory, "I confess to almighty god and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned through my own fault, in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and in what I have failed to do and I ask blessed Mary, ever virgin, all the angels and saints, and you, my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the lord, our god."

Never before at previously attended services, and it may be important to note here that Big Man never made a repeat visit to any one of these loci of religious conviction, but be that as it may he had never, or couldn't remember, hearing such extensive invocations to such a large cast of characters, it was always just God or Jesus or Lord preceded by various complimentary and sometimes intimidating adjectives.

Unknowingly, Big Man had locked his knees causing a reel in his brain, as if a fisherman were actually hauling his disengaged mind to a place of suffocating incongruities.

Blessed Mary, Ever Virgin. The Archangels Michael and Gabriel. John the Baptist. Not to mention the various objects which God and his son had the ability to transform into at any given moment: a Branch or a Cornerstone, a Rock and a Refiner, The Word and The End. And how could one be both Sheep and Shepherd? Metaphor was no mystery to Big Man, he often imagined himself as the titular speaker in Simon & Garfunkel's tune that

turned the dethatched man into *a rock* but also *an island*, because *a rock feels no pain and an island never cries*, but how can one say they are I Am and also be this, that and the other? Why not an Exalted Eggplant or an Almighty Supreme Sandal? An Omnipotent Potent Emission? Why not? And as for all the others besought for their supernatural knack, not to mention free time, for the consideration of earth-bound inquiry, could they be all and end all too? And which was better: asking a bunch of ghosts for liberation from temptation or asking your Facebook friends, also specters in their own e-thereal way, to keep you and your recent misfortunes in mind as they kneel by their bedside, or walk down the sidewalk, or wherever it is that people pray. Is it appropriate to pray whilst pooping? Sensing an impression of irreverence, Big Man cut his stream of consciousness, though not entirely of his own accord as his locked knees had caused an insufficiency of oxygen, the breath of life, in his brain, which buckled his knees and caused him to plop his great bulk back onto the pew, as would a pigheaded toddler tired of standing up for words he wasn't yet capable of understanding, only to quickly rise back up as if nobody had noticed. But the old woman, seated around three Big Man's length's away, had smiled to herself after an initial jolt from the impact of his fall.

The priest outstretched his arms not as if he were a wizard about to cast a spell, but as if he were searching for double high-fives. He said his benediction, "May almighty god have mercy on us forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life."

This was followed by a somber assertive "Amen," which Big Man also found escaping from his lips.

Five minutes passed and everyone was still standing. Big Man began to fear the entire service would be made forcibly attentive by remaining upright and his lower back pulled upon by the forward gravity of his rotundity, which he believed to be a side effect of age that all, aside from the ascetic monk and the anorexic model, could only avoid for so long. Another hymn, another call and response prayer, another collective “Amen,” and another seven minutes passed before Big Man’s anxiety was appeased by the groan of wood beneath the communal butt of the congregation. Though not for long, as he soon gathered: mass involved more of an exercise of the physical body than the mind. Sit, stand, kneel, sit, kneel, stand.

The old lady kept up with a placid smile and steady knees, while Big Man gripped the wood of the pew in front of him to lower his knees to the hard ground, once pinching the long hair of the indifferent teenage girl directly in front of him, who sat unyielding and always looking forward with what Big Man ventured to avow was the same comatose veneer she shot through Big Man upon his offense; an air of cagey disbelief in anything other than her own full existence, and perhaps the persistent buzzing of her spasmodic cellphone, that passed over Big Man like a momentary passage under an overpass during a torrential downpour, which, on a motorcycle is not a fleeting reminder of relief, but a roaring muteness that only allows the sodden journeyman to soak-in his own wetness.

However tedious and inconsequential the ritualistic readjustment of the body felt, it did, to a certain extent, allowed Big Man to focus on keeping up the exercise, the chubby kid running laps around the basketball court, rather than wandering into the lethargic emptiness that always seemed to overtake him at nearly every encounter he had

while traversing the digressive tributaries of religious dogma.

For instance, after a redundant parading aloft the head of the large, gold cross embossed Bible from the spot where it was initially placed, on a pulpit to the left side of the central altar, in a semi-circle to expose perhaps its impressive bulk and to a lesser extent the might of the aged, but hearty priests' biceps to the gathered, only to return it to the spot where it initially rested, Big Man was able to later recall some semblance of a few lines of verse read not during the gospel reading directly following the procession, but one quoted by the priest in his short homily, a moment where Big Man's ossifying opinion of Catholicism was halted in its half-life by the realization that this was the only particular moment where he felt the priest was speaking freely from some inner cradle of infantile consciousness that wished to communicate with those attendee's still scratching their heads at "thee's" and "ye's" and who begat the one who spake verily and the thou who shalt be wroth with inner pestilence.

The priest delivered a neatly packaged summary of what had been read from a text that to many in the audience was as ancient and unfamiliar as a first-reading of *Moby-Dick*, minus the Ishmael. Narrating the events of Jesus' acts in simpler terms alongside modern relational situations and sprinkling in the occasional direct quote, this figure representing the nascence of religion, seemed not antiquated, but educated, as a college professor leading a lecture on a particularly dense piece of literature. Except, Big Man, charmed as he might be by the easy comfy understanding chair he found himself sinking into, reminded himself that this was not intended to be one individual interpretation of a passage with multiple possibilities of reduction. It was the Truth, the

Word, which required unquestioning faith in its invariability.

The priest urged the importance of discovery of faith within oneself rather than in the collective. He spake thus, “Your belief must sustain you day after day. Christ’s mysteries cannot simply remain an acknowledgement of truth within the confines of our engagement in liturgy in this place of worship, for you carry within you, out the doors of this building and into your cars and out onto the soccer fields, the blessed Eucharistic sacrificial meal. If our bodies can receive physical nourishment from manufactured foodstuffs, is it so difficult to fathom that through our communion with the gift of flesh and spirit of our savior Jesus Christ that we might absorb the nourishment of his divinity and the grace of the Holy Spirit, which provides the spiritual fulfillment, or fuel, that draws us closer to the divine life of the Holy Trinity. But this cannot happen without the assistance of our own healthy spiritual appetite and digestion. The Gnostic Gospel of Thomas, which I like to think of as a fictional representation of a Jesus Christ-like character, offers some food for thought: ‘If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.’ Leaving you with that to chew over, let us all join hands and pray with confidence to the Father in the words our Savior gave us.”

Everyone present, even the unreachable long-haired girl in the next row, stood, Big Man followed and had already folded his hands behind his back before he noticed that the old cottonball-haired lady had moved to his side and offered him her outstretched hand, with skin shrink-wrapped to the bone and a loose diamond hulahooped around the ring finger. Not wishing to make a scene and because he had some regard for the elderly

because of their waxing loneliness, Big Man placed his clammy palm atop the surprisingly warm and velvety skin of hers and both wrapped their thumbs around the knuckles of the other. Big Man could feel the arthritic vibration of her extremity so around craggy fatless flesh he closed his remaining slackened digits with a gentility he'd long forgotten he possessed after nearly a decade of clenching the control of his motorcycle handles. Although he'd never thought himself a sensitive man—one capable of feeling slight shifting peculiarities such as a few inches of a woman's freshly shorn hair or the variable taste of tap water from state to state—he knew he felt the calm of her quake.

As a prayer familiar to Big Man's ears arose, "Our Father, who art in heaven," there occurred, beneath his baggy slacks, which he had unearthed from a box labeled "Your Shit" and a time when he was a much bigger man, and underneath the snug, fresh whitey-tighties, an involuntary twitch or three in the area above his futile testicles, which, despite his affliction, chanced from time to time, though usually when he was alone at home and a commercial featuring a buxom blonde pretending to eat a cheeseburger was broadcast and once when he went over ninety miles per hour on his motorcycle and a sudden blast of wind swerved his bike and his mind from the silence of speed to the dumbness of death, but never in church and never when he was clasping the hand of a woman who could have been his mother. He called it a fluke and continued fumbling over the words he had heard in at least a dozen services. But, as it tends to be, the twitch was a signal for Big Man to exile himself from polite company, in a bathroom stall or a confessional booth, but he remained holding the old woman's hand as all four inches of his

manhood erected a vaguely perceptible pup tent in his pants.

Big Man dared not look down, as if fearful the thing would unzip itself and detach, grow arms and legs and go frolicking about the room shaking hands. Instead he wracked his brain for the cause, denying precedence to the natural golden refracted halo that encircled the hair of the dissociative teen girl above the spot where once it would have been a simple task to dig in with fingernails to expose the grey matter below. Holding hands with an old lady seemed equally impossible. The smell of the incense maybe? Or perhaps the chiseled abdominals of the gilded Christ crucified? He had only been trying to recall the words of the prayer, to appear as if he belonged there; no sexy thoughts had been crossing his mind, as they did not very often due to his deformed imagination.

He just needed to sit, because the fold his zipper formed would conceal the reality below, only by making it look as if he were abnormally well-endowed, which he believed was no woman's first thought about a man. He felt like this prayer was longer than usual, and it was, though only slightly for the priest added a preordained postscript after the final amen and Big Man's attempt to sit which was thwarted by the immediate firm grasp of the old woman, possessing the nostalgic familiarity of a mother in an uncrowded shopping mall possessed by a state of unprecedented fear of losing her child.

"The peace of the Lord be with you."

"And also with you," the people replied and lifted their linked hands into rows mammalian mountain ranges.

A sigh escaped Big Man's mouth as he felt this to be a good stopping point, but

the woman still held his hand and the priest opened his palms to the people and continued, "Let us offer one another a sign of peace."

At that the old woman turned to face Big Man and sandwiched her hands around his like two freshly baked thin slices of bread enclosing slimy cold cuts of bologna. She said to him, looking him in the eye, "Peace be with you."

Others around him were embracing, shaking hands, and pecking on cheeks; Big Man nodded a forced smile at her.

She whispered, "You should say, 'And also with you' or anything like that. Welcome."

At that she winked and released his hand, which flopped to his side like a big dead tuna fish.

"Thank you," Big Man finally replied.

While the rest of the Catholics lined up to receive Communion, Big Man made a swift, though not unnoticed, exit out into the bright day, his erection still fully intact, but upon looking down to see what he had wrought, found there was no visible protuberance so he turned around and used the small vestry bathroom and unzipped only to confirm that he wasn't imagining things happening down there. Fearing the consequences of masturbating in a church, of a God that might smite him, and trusting the taut cotton of his new underpants and the diaper-esque proportions of the buttock region of his pants, Big Man walked back inside and regained his seat next to the old woman who was kneeling silently, though some were sitting. As she reclined she leaned over to him and whispered kindly, "I'm glad you came back."

“I only had to use the restroom. I’m not Catholic,” Big Man whispered back.

“Well, maybe you will be.” She smiled and pressed his hand as the whole church fell silent, save the screeching organ.

A quick prayer later, the fifty-five minute ceremony was over and everyone began to exit just as they had entered, only backwards because the priest and his robed companions left first. Big Man attempted a one fingered dip in the bowl of water and made a lousy gesture that looked more like he was voguing with Madonna. Surprised by his stamina, but knowing with absolute certainty that nobody except him knew the truth he had concealed, he shook the hand of one of the two holy men flanking the exit and strode briskly to his motorcycle.

As he was speeding back to his store, five miles over the speed limit, a voice from a darkened corner of his mind called out, “Are you a god?”

And Big Man replied, “Yes. Absolutely, I am.”

Vox Populi: Becoming the Leatherman

If you love me then you will not make a sound. Hickies can only remind me of vacuum packing my skin for freshness in the pockets of your cheeks, you cannibal squirrel. But it’s the suckling of your lips on my gullet, I cannot place a sound to, tonelessness with no place in any song that haunts me longer than the ovular red-leather skin spot, which I seldom see because I seldom look in a mirror as they are usually occupied by any of my four sisters who will only try to rope me into their makeup games. The vibration of that piece of skin that you can’t feel or hear until it’s over and then immediately begins its gonging.

You wrote yourself a letter on your Confirmation. You were eating Gushers and a Diet Coke for your lungs, you'd told me on the eve of the construction of your grandparent's house, during a space in time after you'd already decided you were the ultimate stoner but before the time when you didn't stop talking for nine days straight. I picture you best with the letter because I know you better than to talk out of your ass. Don't make promises when you can't justify you're your own ghost, you'd written to yourself at the age of your first reason, and then said again to me after the hickey, which gave you somewhat of a permission to ask about which Mother I worshipped.

The thin, cold air reminds me of when I forgot my name and the next day neck caked in toothpaste and redfaced shame. Kathleen told me it worked on pimples and hickies were just as annoying, lopsided logic making clarity in my mind. To choose to search for another—someone who would push Georgia on its side—would mean the love I can't deny to Her would be replaced with skinny brown bones and a promise that one day I'll grow up enough to drink my pain and prepare myself for fame.

Well, Jesus wrote me a letter on my Confirmation it said, "It sucks being the only son."

Gather Up the Fragments

Melissa stopped doing her homework and watched as Laurie filled the extra-large salad bowl with bleached flour. The flour, despite the label that claimed it was white, had the same color as the only snow Melissa, in her seven years, had ever seen—a dirty, light yellow mush at the end of the driveway that happened to survive the sunrise. Except you couldn't make a baby snowman with flour, Melissa had tried.

Laurie peppered the flour with plain white salt and red-orange seasoned salt. She

cracked three velociraptor-sized eggs on the sharp ledge of the counter and poured them into a smaller, but still large, bowl.

“Dammit,” Laurie said as a few shards of eggshell slid into the bowl with the last white of the last egg. Laurie's fingers flopped around in the goop, but the fragments dodged her every move.

“Goddammit, I can't even make dinner with some goddamn thing screwing me up.”

Melissa put down her mechanical pencil and walked over to her mother. She touched her fingers to a damp sponge on the edge of the sink and grabbed the bowl from Laurie's hands.

“Melissa, I don't need you in here getting in my way.”

Sharklike, Melissa's fingers dove into the partially scrambled eggs and, in one motion, plucked up each bit of shell. She wiped her hand on her jeans and returned to her homework—a math problem involving a fruit vendor and his cheap customers.

“Where'd you learn that, Sasa?” Laurie asked, shifting her tone to that of a doting mother.

Melissa shrugged her shoulders and made a face like a surprised monkey. Laurie did the same and dumped buttermilk and three dozen chicken cutlets into the eggs.

Every morning for four years after the divorce, Jerry heard Melissa before he saw her. And not hearing in the way that you normally would hear someone in the morning: the creak of bedsprings as they wake from that night's paralysis, the “ah” that accompanies the long-awaited release of fluid paired with the too-short *woosh* of the

faucet as they pretend to wash their hands, the floating of night clothes to the floor and the stretch of the seams of starched day clothes, the creep down the stairs so as not to wake up anyone or anything that may still be asleep.

After forty-eight years of hearing these things, Jerry had become partially deaf to them. These are noises mostly audible to the baby who is hearing these sounds for the first time or the temporary lover who feigns sleep until the sprinkle of the shower, assuring that they can exit quietly. Some noises you hear without really hearing them. But Jerry and Melissa had lived together, as father and daughter, for twelve years so they never bothered letting the faucet run while pooping. Though, Jerry still heard certain noises and the one that grated his ears to shreds of sharp cheddar cheese was the *click, click, click, click* of the light-up wheels of Melissa's rolling Lion King backpack as she pulled it down the tiled hallway that lead from Melissa and Jerry's adjacent bedrooms to the adjacent kitchen and living room.

There were twenty-eight clicks total and Jerry heard every one of them. He often wondered why Melissa couldn't just leave her backpack next to the table in the linoleumed kitchen; but she would do her homework there and then *click, click, click* to her bedroom. But the evening clicks didn't bother Jerry as much because they happened when the world was at its noisiest, with cars still honking and TV sets aglow and buzzing, so the clicking seemed like a small blip among the rest of the chaos. But in the still-dark mornings, where the only noises that felt natural were the chirping of insomniac birds and the occasional cooling breeze rippling over the surface of a cup of coffee, the clicking felt like an invading army.

Although the bag was technically Melissa's, Jerry thought Laurie should've taken it in the divorce. But she didn't. She didn't take a lot of things and the things she didn't take, including a collection of porcelain dolls; a dozen or so incomplete state quarter maps; a jar of Melissa's baby teeth; a crusty deep fryer; unused dog grooming supplies for the late Border Collie, Buddy; Christmas ornaments individually wrapped in multicolored tissue paper; forty-something karaoke cassette tapes, mostly country music; and stacks of various art crafts Melissa had produced from pre-k to second grade were all stored in clear plastic totes that stacked three-quarters of the way up the wall on each side of the one hallway in Jerry's one-story home. The totes narrowed the hallway to a small passageway and seemed to amplify the clicks like going in and out of a narrow cave.

Every day, Melissa parked the backpack next to her chair at the kitchen table, slid into the seat without pulling it back and proceed to spread a significant amount of butter into each individual depression in the surface of her toaster waffle, which she ate with her hands and without maple syrup.

Melissa was eleven years old and she liked her dad. He sometimes told jokes without really meaning to and certain evenings he'd plug up one of his electric guitars to a small amp and play Allman Brothers songs while Melissa, in her younger years, danced and begged for him to play "Roll Over Beethoven." He would draw out the notes of "Little Martha" to the very end and pretend like he was putting the guitar away when out of thin air that twang would appear and Melissa would immediately start dancing in a way that looked a lot like the way that crazy church people thrashed about on late night

TV. She was a little girl possessed by something she couldn't quite understand. In her older and wiser double digits, Melissa would lay on her back and watch the dust covered fan blades spin in time, throwing the meticulously lazy notes to all corners of the room.

Some night joggers passing by might glance at the illuminated window and think this was a nice picture then go back to focusing on their breathing. Others might ask where the mother is and they'd fashion in their heads some woeful tale of a beautiful, loving woman, struck down prematurely by the cruel world, leaving her mourning husband and blissfully unaware child to live on, growing chubby off of a steady diet of mayo grilled cheese sandwiches and toaster waffles. But only half of this imagined story would be true.

Jerry and Melissa never really paid attention to Laurie's absence, despite being surrounded by bits of her she'd left behind in unlabeled containers. Melissa wasn't unaware of her mother's existence. She remembers the hot midsummer day when a man driving a soccer mom van coated in a layer of grime had pulled up in their driveway.

Melissa thought he was one of the Mormons with their pamphlets and fat neckties, so she'd closed the blinds, shut off the TV, turned off all the lights and crouched down behind the door. She saw the man's shadow pass by the window and heard the doorbell struggling to make a sound, but for as long as Melissa had been alive, it had never worked and she didn't really know what a doorbell was until her first walking Halloween, when Jerry dressed her up as Axel Rose and told her to go press the glowing button and start wriggling like a snake.

The man called the screen door a bitch, a word she heard her father use to

describe anything from burnt cheese toast to snapped guitar strings. To open the screen door, you had to press in a small black handle and pull the handle at the same time. The handle was the perfect size for an infant's hand, but since babies can't open doors, adults had to struggle with the seemingly simple task. You could often hear someone on the other side yelling "Push and pull!!" But Melissa stayed quiet and listened to the man curse. He stopped fiddling with the handle and started knocking on the screen door. The screen protested with a rattle that sounded like that of an angry rattlesnake, only slowed down and metallic. Some knocks towards the end sounded like that but with an added wooden sound.

"Sasa!" Laurie yelled as she emerged from the hallway. "Why the hell are you just sitting there? Get the door!"

"Fine," Melissa replied in the tart voice of a teenager though she only had seven years to her name. She was not afraid of her mother nor did she hate her. But early in life, she developed the sense that, if she did not resist, she was destined to become her mother—a sense that most women don't become aware of until they accidentally sit in on a feminist group meeting during their first semester of college. As early as five, Melissa felt this ghost of a feeling following her around. Melissa and Laurie made the same noise when eating Laurie's homemade chicken strips and honey mustard dressing and they both shared an affinity for Loony Toons shirts, especially Tweety Bird ones with attitude-laden quips written in bold lettering. So Melissa, without really knowing why, always made it clear that she was not in agreement with her mother.

She opened the door, but in a way that suggested it was a huge hassle to do so.

She pretended like the deadbolt was stuck and it took two hands and some Herculean grunting to switch the handle from a horizontal to vertical position. She acted like the handle was covered in grease, too slippery to grasp with bare skin, so she put her hand beneath her slightly too-small Disney World t-shirt and made a makeshift mitten which somehow had more grasping power than bare skin, but it also require acrobatic talent, which Melissa lacked.

The screen door popped as if the man had broken its bones and the wooden door opened to the inside. Melissa lost her balance, yet could have remained on her feet; but she decided it would be more embarrassing for her mother if she threw herself backwards onto the carpeted floor of the living room. The man stepped inside and Melissa saw him looking down at her like someone might look when they're staring at the sun. His skin looked like he spent a lot of time doing just that. Melissa's rounded belly was hanging out and her hand was still in her shirt.

“Hey there, Melissa.” the man said in a voice that sounded like he had cereal milk coating his throat.

Melissa wasn't sure at that point how the man knew her name, but she figured out by then that he wasn't a Mormon.

“She's not going to talk to you. Are you, Sasa? Melissa, this is Gary.”

“Hi,” Melissa said, still laying on the floor, one arm akimbo above her head. She rolled her eyes and stared at the bits of dust that, over time, had gathered on the tips of the mini white stalactites of the spackled ceiling.

Jerry usually pretended to read the newspaper in the mornings to avoid talking to his daughter, but he usually just looked at the pictures. He didn't hate her. Sometimes he would even smile when he thought about her jerky dancing as she tried to find a rhythm to the endless guitar solo that is "Jessica." But they didn't talk much and both of them liked it that way. Melissa liked how, when they were driving around town, Jerry would point at a building with his thumb and say, "I delivered there." They still have conversations, just not with their mouth, the types of conversations only close family can have: Melissa would do the dishes because she could tell by the way Jerry was sitting that his back hurt and Jerry would keep rented DVD's past their due date because he knew Melissa would want to re-watch them. But actual words rarely passed between the two of them.

 Melissa was twelve and in sixth grade at Northside Middle School when Jerry, fifty-two, ex-Marine, ex-husband, ex-trucker and unemployed due to workplace injury, happened to look up from a front page photo of a man in a lime green polo, who was holding two tiny dogs wearing fringed, tie-dye vests, topped with the headline: **MACON'S WOOFSTOCK IS A BARKING GOOD TIME.** He watched Melissa slide her slightly overweight by national standards, but normal by Warner Robins standards body into the chair without pulling it out. Jerry broke his stare by glancing back at the picture of the man with the dogs. Jerry felt uncomfortable looking at his child for more than five seconds at a time like he was scared his eyes would stab her. He looked back at Melissa because he noticed how a certain area, around mid-chest level, rested just on the ledge of the table.

He looked back at the man with the dogs and asked himself a question that made him feel like he'd swallowed a cup full of worms and beetles.

Are those breasts?

He wasn't exactly sure when little girls hit the equivalent of a squeaky-voiced, pimply-faced, pubescent thirteen-year-old boy. Maybe it was the same age, but Jerry through he read somewhere that girls develop faster than boys, maybe as early as nine; it had something to do with processed chemicals in mother's milk. Or maybe what he was seeing was some remnant of what people like to call "baby fat," or "another excuse for allowing your child to eat Bic Macs at the age of three," as Melissa's pediatrician, a thin-lipped, skeletal twenty something, liked to call it. And then Jerry had another question.

Where do you buy bras for twelve-year-old girls who might not really have breasts yet?

Just before his injury, Jerry locally drove trucks full of propane and other natural gasses for a company called Holox. Before that, he drove propane tankers across the country. Before that, he moved crates of milk for Dixie Dairy and before that he was a Marine.

When Melissa was still an infant, Jerry drove propane to Indiana and Illinois three times a week. He would pretend like that tanker was an infant because in a way they are very similar. Too sharp of a turn or too quick of a lane change could cause the fuel to slosh around and the momentum from that sloshing could send the whole tanker rolling into a ditch. But Jerry felt more comfortable hauling a thousand gallons of highly

flammable liquid than he did guarding Melissa's unclosed fontanelle with his calloused hand.

Jerry's local deliveries never went outside Macon and were mostly for various businesses who used small amounts of natural gas—helium for grocery store flower departments, various inhalants for dentist offices. The gasses were stored in large metal tubes that weighed at least one-hundred-and-twenty pounds apiece. Normally, loading the truck was a two person job, but for Jerry it had always just been him and an empty warehouse; and one day when Jerry was halfway through loading, he picked up a tube of methyl chloride. The warning on the side read Warning: inhalation of this gas may cause central nervous system damage and birth defects. If you feel drowsy, dizzy, or confused or begin to experience difficulty breathing, walking or speaking, paralysis, seizures, or coma, please see a doctor immediately. Skin contact may result in frostbite. Use extreme care when handling.

Jerry'd picked up tubes like like this hundreds of times before, but this time he felt something burst in his lower back, like a tiny sac full of boiling water had ruptured and the liquid was now searing his insides. He dropped the tube as gently as you can drop a one-hundred-and-twenty pound metal tube full of dangerous chemical gas. It didn't explode, just rolled until it was stopped by the truck tire. But Jerry's back stayed bent like a tree permanently swayed by hurricane winds. He tried to take another stop, but as soon as he barely lifted his knee, there was another pop and more boiling liquid, except this time it spread throughout his body and jettied into the folds of his brain.

Fifteen minutes passed of Jerry standing there, useless and statuesque, until he

decided he would call for help. He didn't like the feeling of surrendering. He was getting used to like pain as long as he remained perfectly still. He started to feel numb and euphoric, like before you freeze to death, but not exactly. He thought he'd gone blind for a second, but it disappeared as he pictured his large, curled, fetal body being discovered by his boss or a janitorial worker. Jerry realized he's been holding his breath so he forced the air out, it felt like he was breathing cheese grits for air. He inhaled until he felt like he could hear the straining of his lungs against his ribcage. The air was forced out again, but this time Jerry added words. One solitary, "Help" echoed through the warehouse like a cartoon sonic boom. Jerry could've sworn he heard the metal tubes in the truck rattling against each other.

Gary started coming around a lot while Jerry was working one last busy year at Holox. Jerry's deliveries were in the late afternoon, past when most natural gas using businesses were closed. So Melissa took the bus home, unlocked and relocked the front door, parked her backpack by the table, and made herself an afternoon snack of cheese toast, which she made in the oven. When Melissa heard the gravelly crunch of Laurie's truck pulling into the driveway, she would run to her room and pretend to be taking a nap, though she really was spending her alone time putting on her mothers size eighteen jeans and waddling around the house; the tall part wrapping around the bottom of her feet and dragging on the floor. Laurie always wondered how the knees of her jeans had been worn so thin.

Laurie would quietly open Melissa's bedroom door and in a whisper that was

more painful than an inaudible, yet headache producing, high-pitched whine, she would whisper, “Sasa! Get up! You won't be able to sleep tonight.”

Well, duh, that's why I'm just pretending to sleep. Melissa thought.

Then Laurie would go into the living room and sing Wynonna Judd's “To Be Loved By You” four times in a row until she switched to a key-changed rendition of “Friends in Low Places” and finally rounded out her repertoire with a robust version of Reba McEntire's “Fancy.” A song whose protagonist, a movie star, confronts her troubled past when she was forced to turn tricks by her desperate and sickly mother. Melissa extended her faux-nap through all of this.

Then Gary would arrive after getting off of his job as an x-ray technician with a specialty in “old bones” at the Houston Medical Center. After knocking a dent in the screen door, he would enter the house and yell, “Melissa, come do these dishes for your mother!” He would top this off with a hearty chuckle similar to that of a killer clown. Melissa would shuffle down the hallway and into the kitchen.

“Sasa, aren't you going to say hello to Mr. Gary?” Laurie called through the rectangular opening in the wall between the kitchen and living room. Her words felt like a wasp stinging Melissa's inner ear, so she turned the faucet on full blast so she wouldn't be able to hear her mother. The water ricocheted against a large salad bowl that Laurie used for battering chicken fingers, and splashed into Melissa's face. By the time the dishes were done, Melissa's hair, face, and the collar of her Mickey Mouse t-shirt were soaked with lukewarm water and bargain-brand, lemon-scented dish soap. Melissa walked into the living room in that state, and sat on the loveseat which was caddy-corner

to the couch that Laurie and Gary were sinking into.

Melissa sat there until Gary left, she felt like she was some impervious force that was quickly filling the room and the whole house, forcing out an excess matter, like Gary; like that science field-trip Melissa's fourth grade class took to Middle Georgia Technical College where they watched gas in an enclosed test tube expand until you could see the straight sides of the test tube bend outwards right before it exploded into a thousand shards behind a glass-proof hood. And eventually Melissa's pervasiveness would cause Gary to start squirming and made him say, "Well I guess it's about time for me to get going; got an early day tomorrow at the Medical Center." Which sounded to Melissa, oddly reminiscent of the daytime soap operas Melissa would sometimes watch when there was nothing else on. Melissa's invisible juggernaut kept expanding and pushing until the joints of the house creaked and one day she pushed Gary and Laurie out forever.

Jerry didn't like when Melissa was home alone though she was twelve-years-old and very capable of making sure she didn't set herself on fire or chop her own head off for the two hours of Jerry's absence. On average, Jerry spent twenty-two hours of the day inside his house, some days he did not step outside once. For nine hours of the day, he was alone while Melissa went to school and then hopeless middle school cheerleader tryouts. Eleven hours were spent either asleep in bed or napping on the couch, so when you add all that up, there were about four scattered hours of each day where Melissa and Jerry were conscious and in close proximity to one another. Some days would pass and as Jerry was just nodding off, he would ask himself, *Have I seen my daughter today?* He felt

like her face belonged on the side of a milk carton. *Have you seen this girl?* But they didn't even do that kind of thing anymore. Nobody wants to see missing children when they're trying to enjoy their morning dessert of sugary marshmallows and equally sugary “whole grain” cereal. Jerry would try to rewind through the whole day, pausing at some points to scrutinize the footage and see if he'd crossed paths with his daughter. *Oh yeah! I saw her brushing her teeth and humming a tune I've never heard.* Jerry thought. *But maybe that was last night or last week, maybe that never happened at all.* He would lay awake talking to himself like this for hours until he came close enough to convincing himself that he was doing a good job.

On a Saturday, Jerry took his prescription painkillers for the one-thousand-five-hundred-and-sixty-fifth time since the injury, buzzed his hair too short for his own liking, and knocked on Melissa's bedroom door and said, “Wake up, Melissa, we gotta go to the store.”

Melissa had thumb-tacked a flannel bedsheet over her window around midnight the previous night and she'd been laying in her dark bedroom for an hour or so, watching the light creep into her room despite all her efforts to keep it out. She liked that the sun somehow found a way in and eventually heated her room so that she had to kick off the covers and lay there like a dying starfish on a rock. The sweat gathering in the small of her back made her flip over onto her stomach, but then she couldn't breathe with her face in the pillow so just got out of bed, leaving her blankets on the floor. She changed out of her red cotton shorts and put on green cotton shorts, folding down the white elastic waistband a few times until the shorts were two inches shorter. That's how all the other

Northside Middle Eagles cheerleaders wore their shorts.

Melissa was not a cheerleader. She couldn't do a toe touch or even a decent herkie; her high kick was almost impressive, but it didn't make everyone blind to the fact that Melissa had about twenty pounds on the 2x4 sixth graders who made the squad. Melissa would try out five times before an honest girl would tell her she was just too fat for the uniforms, but other than that she was a really goo cheerleader. This would make Melissa happy for a long time after.

The oversized *Lion King* t-shirt she wore was exchanged for a snug Northside High School football shirt whose sleeves Melissa tied up with blue and gold ribbon. She sprayed a cloud of baby powder-scented body mist around her body, walked through it and went to meet Jerry in the living room.

Jerry had fallen asleep on the couch. He'd been thinking about things that mothers do for their daughters and that exhausted him; stress related narcolepsy was a side-effect of Jerry's particular combination of eight prescription medications. Jerry slept on his back, not favoring either side and when he took naps on the couch, he would raise his arms, as if he were in the middle of a heated church service, sway then, shake his hands and mumble soft but fervent words in a language Melissa did not know, but she liked to imagine it was Spanish. This was not a side-effect of Jerry's medication. Melissa played an old, pixelated Oregon Trail computer game until Jerry woke up. She made it all the way to Oregon and only one of her kids, Little Jasmine, died of dysentery.

Gary wanted to be a doctor. He grew up in California, where he was raised by stern

Lutheran parents, who told him if he “worked hard enough and wasn't distracted by earthly pleasures then he would attain whatever profession he wished.” But Gary couldn't get into medical school or nursing school so now he just works as an x-ray jockey surrounded by real doctors who can name every bone in the human foot.

Geriatric bones were Gary's specialty. He was a self-educated expert on gout, osteoarthritis, postmenopausal osteoporosis and his most memorable times working in radiology were when elderly men and women would come in with broken hips from a fall that wouldn't have even cause a bruise twenty years earlier. He was constantly surprised to see how the bones had turned into what looked like cracked shards of chalk. Marv and Dawn, Gary's parents, were well into their seventies and had the flexible bones of sixteen-year-olds. Gary had the bones of a sixty year old woman, as Dr. Talton put it. He wasn't sure how your bones could get older than you or switch sexes.

Gary fathered five children he no longer spoke with and had an ex-wife who didn't care if he was alone on Christmas Day. He had a large, red, truck that barely fit in the small driveway of his Byron, Georgia townhouse. He bought a motorcycle and kept it for three months; he grew a goatee and started making boxed brownies in a fancy glass pan he purchased from the Williams-Sonoma website; he took weekly baths; he rode his 8-speed Huffy to Dairy Queen, where he ordered a chicken finger basket and a medium Oreo Blizzard with extra Oreos. That's where he met Laurie—a six-foot, forty-eight-year-old, beast of a woman who, bored with domestic life and her job selling insurance claims, went looking for male company. She had ordered the exact same thing as Jerry, down to the extra Oreos, and when one order was called, they both grabbed the same tray

and laughed about it for an uncomfortably long amount of time; Gary asked her for her number and rode away on his bicycle with his chicken basket steaming in his backpack.

Jerry told Melissa to wait in the car, mostly because his back was hurting and he wanted to get away with parking in the emergency vehicle lane, but also because he didn't want to go bra-shopping at Walmart with his twelve-year-old daughter. Melissa turned on one of the Spanish radio stations, she liked the horns, and waited while Jerry went inside.

Jerry loitered in men's and boys clothing, where he felt more comfortable surrounded by boxers and t-shirts dripping with cheesy sarcasm. There was a woman sorting hangars at a desk that served, along with a cluster of flimsy-looking fitting rooms, as the threshold between men's and women's clothing. Jerry walked past the woman and into a row of pantyhose and socks. *Even their socks look different.* Jerry thought. He went to the next aisle which was full of bras that could have doubled as cereal bowls. He touched a black bra with an elaborate system of straps. It was soft, softer than most of the places he'd slept when he was younger. He tried to think of the last time he's seen a bra on a woman who wasn't on TV.

He already knew it was Laurie, a few years after Melissa was born, when they moved her into her own bedroom. Laurie had arrived home from work with a twenty-four pack of Bud Light and she and Jerry had eight and ten apiece; they went to bed together and, in the dark, tried to figure out what exactly had happened to each others bodies; Jerry could feel the line Laurie's bra strap had cut into her flesh which had the texture of

watered-down Play-Doh. When Jerry got up to use the bathroom, he left the door open and turned the light on. He leaned backwards mid-stream to look at his wife, who was lightly snoring with her torso above the covers. She had a white bra with thick straps. Just under her arms there were yellow half-circles that stood out against the otherwise immaculate white. To Jerry, all of this felt very appropriate at the time.

Jerry was now holding the black bra with both hands, rubbing his hardened-by-callouses thumb back and forth across the silky fabric. The bra was too big for Melissa and Jerry knew that. He put it up and wandered around until he found himself in a section that looked like an area where twelve-year-old girls would hang out. There were the multicolored, short, cotton shorts that, in Jerry's day, were only worn by high school girls at the skating rink. And there were shirts loaded with glitter. Jerry brushed his hand against a sparkly butterfly and his hand came away shimmering. Jerry was trying to wipe the glitter off when everything started swirling. Dizziness was a side effect of one of his medications, but he was on another pill that was supposed to eliminate that symptom. Jerry thought about Melissa sitting in the car by herself. *What if it gets too hot and she suffocates? What if my laziness gets the car towed with Melissa in it?* “What if” scenarios kept you on your toes in the Marines, but now, in the middle of Walmart, they were making Jerry's back ache, forcing him to bend over slightly to relieve the pressure on his spine. He stood there for a minute or so, staring at a pair of destroyed shorts with rhinestones lining the borders of the pockets. Barely lifting his knees, Jerry shuffled over to the woman at the desk. “Shawna,” according to her name-tag separated the hangars by color and size into seven cardboard boxes. She glanced up at him, might have smiled a

bit, and went on sorting. Shawna's hair looked like a shiny, protective bicycle helmet. Jerry wondered if it was hollow on the inside. His hair was pepper without the dignifying salt and it was thinning. He wondered if a woman like Shawna would want to date or marry a man like him—jobless and permanently wounded, abandoned with his wife's leftovers and his daughter, who was clearly not going to grow up to be a normal adult. Jerry knew Shawna would turn him down before he even had a chance to ask. She looked like the type of girl who had everything figured out. She had a kid at fifteen, a boy, and she raised him herself and now he's captain of Northside High School's football team; he's got a football scholarship at University of Georgia, but he'll really shine in his Intro to Biology class which spurs an interest in nursing. Her son would never know who Melissa was, he wasn't friends with people like her, but he was always nice to them. Jerry tried to draw a mental picture of Melissa's friends, but the canvas remained blank. He tapped on the desk with his knuckles and said, “Uh, 'scuse me, ma'am ? Could you please help me find something?”

The Ballad of Collie Hatchett

The initial aspect beginning the narrative to come is located from the vantage point of a dusty fringed lampshade and seen through a chained, chugging, as if by locomotive lungs, haze of mentholated smoke dissipated through the toothless jaw of nothing more than a consanguineous relation of our primary heroine:

Collie Hatchett finds pleasure, of the asexual variety, in the reclining of her head so that much of the ghostly-hued natural silken threads—which, afoot, tipped just below the crack of her prodigious backside—could be waterfallled and trapped between the cracking faux-leather of the reclining chair and the backward leaning of the expanse of her back, topographically featured and distinguished by two sac-like globules beginning from the apparent point of termination of ham hockish shoulders and resulting in a pair of

protuberances nearly equal in size to the mammalian 46DDs Collie flaunted in the foreground of her countenance. The combined forces of her skimp strands catches and pulls taut between the false posterior cleavage and Collie's conviction in her own mass. Nose straining heavenward, in this position, Collie bears the peculiar expression of the greenhorn stargazer or of one the potential verge of self-scalping or at least of one prepared to do either task with full acceptance of all consequences: eyebrows pulled into duplicate frowns though no extant lines of displeasure show on the planed brow.

There is only the faint turn of a smile, or maybe that too is only a result of the pulling, only the connectivity of all parts of skin to all other parts of skin: Back fat flesh pulls follicle, pulls forehead. And it's just something Collie does when she becomes bored with day-to-to goings-on, sometimes unaware of her own role in the action, when the din of "Murder She Wrote," or the omnipotent song of "The Sound of Music" with its grainy picture barely visible through the sunlit smoke becomes too overwhelming for even a creature so large as our Miss Hatchett, who seems so capable of containing a myriad infinitude amongst her fleshy folds.

"Grandma, must we watch this abhorrent musical for the trillionth time?" Collie asks with no intent to hide her inherited Southern lilt, but to sink its soft charms among the craggy language of academic minds, of which Collie has cultivated through the volition of her own hand's movement toward a particular shelved book.

"You never was so good wit figgers. Bless your heart, I ain't seen this movie but a dozen times. Get yo facts straight and then I might'n change the channel," the reply puffs in cumulous secondhand smoke signals meant for the morbidly bored protrusion of a

woman with nearly three decades and a better-than-nothing job at the Hi-Way Haven minimart and laundromat to her and by unalterable ties of blood and her grandmother's shared name and legacy, though Grandma argues constantly concerning the decency of the sort of "foreign folk" who owned the gas station and afforded Collie's regular wage which translated into electric illumination and cheap chicken skin for Friday's fat fry. The delineation of such things into other things and still manifold more things was a constant consideration in the life of this still-young demigoddess and of all the things she did as well as of those from whence she knew not the origin, like the reasoning behind free pens attached to chains or the number of souls to be found on the Internet, were compartmentalized into endlessly divisible brain-cell file-cabinets.

Individually containing a translucence of silver, not dissimilar to the gossamer threads propelled by spiders, but due to a recent mishap involving a tumble into a heavily chlorinated swimming pool, the collective of Collie's lank strands now more closely resemble the golden-green wisps of cornsilk. Sighing with remarked force and still gazing at the would-be stars of the pop-corned ceiling tipped with stalactite dust, Collie adjusted her neck to provide a properly balanced confluence of tightropes for the inevitable migration of the flea from dry desert of the infertile bone-sucked skin of the doubtless feral cats Grandma insists upon sustaining to, by comparison, the veritable boundless skin succor of milk and honey upon which the flea may feast for several lifetimes over.

After nearly a quarter hour of puffing and perpendicular straining from both ladies present and accounted for, Collie's hairline was haloed in red and she was forced

to contemplate a more fulfilling fashion about which she could appease both her boredom and yet unrecognized metaphysical desires. She did not understand why Grandma must feed the anorexic cats both canned tuna and fried chicken skin and such interminable lines of inquiry so often pervaded her burgeoning mindspace, like the way the menthol smoke seeped into even seemingly solid objects like the real-marble countertop of Grandma's tri-fold mirror vanity, into anything with a little give that came in contact with the double-wide trailer Collie has shared for something over two decades with its sole proprietor, paternal Grandma and herder of hungry and searching strays, notwithstanding the marsupial opossum, dumpster-diving masked raccoons, and orphaned Collie herself.

So now we have the whole abundance laid out in cornucopia before your eyes: the undying death buzz of the antediluvian television—referring to the great flood of 1996 which buckled brand new linoleum similar to the wind-formed ridges upon soft dunes—the machine always muted but still buzzing during breaks for commercial advertisements, the flood lights that prevented nighttime escape from the boredom that Miss Hatchett believes is a state one is born into; then the bottomless anorexic cats and the skittering rattails of opossums whose eerie sharp grin bears witness to rabidity fed like members of the house by the woman who chose to puff unceasingly through her remaining days; But then too, it's difficult to exclude one Byron Gooch, perhaps the only living creature with such an appellation, with his distended belly born of beer and the seatbeltless red pickup truck which, in its own pattering charity, assisted the less mobile inhabitants of the suburb called Warner Robins, and subsequent pattering-out parked perpendicular so as to place foot not first on land but on the salvaged wood of the stairs he constructed bare-

handed and connected to the back-porch where he is always welcome for a glass of tooth-rotting iced tea and Southern hospitality so long as he agrees to drive unlicensed panicked question-driven Collie to Piggly Wiggly for bags of dried beans and whatever meat held the least value in the eyes of the butcher. Lest we forget our husky heroine, when the above creatures, great and sundry, intelligent and stupid, presented Collie with their surely divine intervened absences, during times when Gooch takes Grandma to various bodies of open water where he tried to impress upon the already ossified brain of the ancient matron a new belief in the life-prolonging miracle of water aerobics, only then can Collie Hatchett and her men exist alone.

This continuing slow action of our current tale now relocates higher aloft and atop an unmade bed masked by a Grandma-crocheted quilt that hid the unkempt nest where Collie sometimes retreated for meals, but mostly snores and sleeps. Our point of vision is through the singular window stained with the melted colors of what once were butterflies, deformed by the sun into shapes that resemble both injured sea turtles and the wilting day-death of the primrose. Look over shoulder to the patched grass and haphazard rain of pecans that harbored Collie fast in her current port.

Collie's mass, not to be underestimated by the timid reader, was enough to cause the mattress upon which she sat to V up in a slight slope on either side, but the other mass of her, of which the weight is unmeasurable, contained in the clacks of her keyboard, appears to Collie in a vision of feminine power; through the words she wrings of her own rough iron, an endlessly sleek and mirrored-silver vessel of destruction, sometimes—for fun—emblazoned with a patriotic pin-up, but more often, and always in her dreams, she

is the singular seamless torpedo, though her point of destruction remains unscathed by her own self-rendered inactivity prompted by ritualistic burial in the crumbs of Little Debbie cakes and the more than occasional self-ommissive sigh.

Through the window the straightness and sheen of the back of Collie's head refracts the rays of the sun back out of doors where they are born and belong. Though if you can peer through the evaporation of light that causes her hair to appear constructed of the same plasma of the sun, you would see that since her last visit to *raisetheromance.com*—three days prior to this very—her artistically recherché renderings of self has cultivated eighteen, no now nineteen, comely and cavalier communiquees from gentlemen callers, they too clacking the deciphering keys of their own self-identity to be sent across countries and seas, though not atop a steed, to address Collie, the doxy of their denomination—a voluptuous sight, indeed, for the sore eye of certain internet beholders. Though our lookout spot provides a clear view through the glass of the Easter egg marshmallic arms and if we could but reach through the glass and sweep aside the cascade sun from her head, we could then see the built-in, or rather add-on, neck-pillow roll of flesh that cushions the powerful backward thrust of her frantic sighs and the occasional nostril-tingling Coca-Cola compelled belch.

Collie turns, as best her circumference will allow, though she does possess unlikely pliancy of limb and an unusually dexterous hand, out of a constant caution about her surroundings before the hovering cursor, tentative extension of her half-hot-dog fingers, through the pervasive click that can mean an opening or a closing, a doubling or deletion, the now figuratively open mailbox now boasts twenty tokens of ardor not for

our Collie Hatchett, but for msGAdawg29 and her pushup bra pout captured from the oblique angles of angels and giants, forcing the gaze down into the dark reliquary crevice elongating the hereditarily puffed-Polish cheeks though the supplement of shadows found in presupposed poses that evoke the effect of the emergence of the skeletal underpinnings contained by every true face, which, it is claimed, if not overly made up could verily appeal to those men seeking something of the angelic or elven quality or any sort of magical quiver that indicates something more than a woman, something the wordsmith farmbread42 was not apparently seeking when he initiated correspondence by complimenting the composed “DSL’s,” or “dick sucking lips for all those unfortunate souls who have yet to encounter the multitudinous wonder caverns displayed in the world wide webbed captures of the Internet—do you do so for fear of sexuality or of spiders? He then supposed such lips would complement the singular curvature of his own immaculate member.

Following several more effluent passages concerning his own prowess, farmbread42 reached the inevitable ironclad request too reprehensible to the sentiment of any modern feminist to warrant its translation to softer terms as we have previously allotted, more so in the name of brevity than the desire to preserve the originality of the electronic message. The conclusion read aloud by Collie atop her bed was this: *Ur tits look great but were is the rest of u? Got any full body pics? Nudes r allways welcome to. Plz send if ur not too shy. Btw, I'm Shawn, nice to meet u, cutiepi.*

From our peeping Panoptic local we may provide a clear view of the small square room where Collie spent most of the hours of her life thus far. Two walls were stacked up

with cardboard boxes dishonestly labeled as containers of Christmas lights, but instead served for a communal gravesite for the rejected dolls and stuffed animals long neglected by Collie, but kept barely alive by Grandma's hopeful hoarding and her antiquated belief in the unreliable truth that value and utility grow with added layers of dust. And from this spot, were the window ajar, we might rest our heads on Collie's pillowed shoulder to see the flashing click that denoted her intention to reply. Because Collie Hatchett, or really msGAdawg29, always continues, though never thinks to initiate correspondence.

Her twice proofread reply thus appears rendered in its accurate entirety:

Hello Shawn!

I appreciate the unveiling and entrusting of your true name to myself, whom, should you choose to extend this exchange of thought, you may express my personage and hail me by the call of Hatchett—the tertiary 't' deserves a good hacking off, but that is probably of little importance to your esteem.

As to my lips and any substantial occupational roles they may prove useful in providing some pleasurable outcome, I hope you will ignore my crude play with words and look instead to the pervasive democratic spirit—contained in the few words of your concluding line from whence you incited the continuing discourse surrounding that unidentifiable thing which saturates all living creatures and allows, as you so rightly indicate, twain souls to meet without contact of eye, hand or the more crass, nonetheless never lacking in function, bodily elements. Though I cannot promise a fuller manifestation or depiction of my physical form, I do firmly believe in the commonplace idealist notion that a complete passage of one's vital essence through the disembodied

embosomed soul of another is possible, even moreso in the days of our modern technologies. So what better a locus for this traversal of secret selves to pass than delicately upon the immeasurable threads of this webbish interloken of ethereal wires and waves that cleave our corporeal vantage points into pixelated faces, barely illuminated by the scant radiation of our laptop screens?

So as for the rest of me, you will see presently unveiled and exposed bare and faceless before your own obscure wares. I'll show you mind if you simultaneously show me yours.

Best,

Hatchet

King Frog

Wearing predictable shoes for a man gone, not grey but white—slip-on leather loafers once dark-brown, now greyish red and the flopping useless decorative tassels that

once represented the uselessness of shoelaces and sung the freedoms of barefootedness achieved with the properly angled kick of the foot that once sent smaller versions of the same shoes into tall grass and splashing into creeks; but now, in the land where custom made orthotics replaced the original leather insoles that held the imprints of flattened feet like fossilized caveman footprints, the shoes only meant more waiting, more walking, more standing for one Elmer Love Joiner, known by everyone who asked as E.L., who used the shoes to walk to the bus stop on the corner of Cherry Street in downtown Macon where his great-niece had dropped him off, mumbling something about hating the decrepitude of modern downtown, then the shoes had to support his shaky knees and sustain his silent hex on the ineffective orthotics on the bus ride to West Macon where the flimsy waiting room, full of postnasal drip and unempty seats, waited for him.

The walls were not real. They weren't illusions, only flimsy particle board covered in dark grey scratch, but still nothing any old man would trust to uphold his lean, especially if behind that lean was the force of a gut hardened by beer, family reunions, and apple fritters, which E.L. preferred, homemade by Rosemary his wife, to Krispy Kreme, even when the hot donut light was lit.

Unnecessary as it was, for E.L. could see every occupied seat from the threshold, but pushed by some ingrained need to patrol, E.L. squared the perimeter, his beat, and assessed the possibilities for where the pain in his tailbone and every bone below that might be alleviated. He could ask the receptionist for pain pills, but she would only give him acetaminophen, which E.L. believed had no medical properties whatsoever. He could also push some magazines aside on the reading table sandwiched by two chairs in the

center of the room, one occupied by a girl with pink hair, torn black stocking legs and military style boots that reminded E.L. of days long gone, boots he'd lost in the jungle along with his youth and bits of his pride torn off by shrapnel. And the other chair withstood the fortitude of a scabby woman whose hips, or the excess of body that hid inside the same hips as a science lab skeleton, absorbed the arm rests and looked more comfortable than the picked upon upholstery that gave no give to arms. *A pillow of human fat sounds good right about now*, E.L. speculated and imagined laying flatback on the table with his head sinking into the warm blubber. *Blubber makes it more appealing than fat. Fat is something to cook with, not to cushion.* But a table is not a bed and it is even more so not a chair, E.L. knows this, and if you just go around sitting on everything, pretty soon you'll be making people out to be chairs and maybe you'll forget what *is* intended for sitting upon or what it is like to be sat upon. Aside from his wife when she drank too much sherry bourbon and felt romantic, no other adult had sat on E.L. and he was glad for that. Rounding the final corner and heading towards the open doorway, E.L. still looked at every seat.

A big-haired lady with a tissue covering her face, spoke in strides to some unknown on the other end of her cell phone call about germs in doctor's rooms and how she didn't think it was wrong for her son to take their old rheumy dog to a field, "any field, a cornfield, I don't know," to rescue him from his own misery. "Can dogs be miserable? I just don't like the idea of him dying like a prisoner on death row, lethal dog injection. In a field seems much nicer even if he is using a G-U-N."

The old man, more grey than white, but dressed in the tweedy attire of higher

intelligence and affluence nodded his head in apparent agreement with her sentiment, but only after he scoffed at the spelling of the mode of dispatch. E.L. wondered if the little, rounded belly and blonde hair, knew how to spell and was about to concern himself with preoccupations about what happened to spelling as a school subject and when it all got lumped together under English, but a gap between the curly blonde head and the pushy face of the woman who might've been watching her, might've even been her mother if her attention wasn't so singularly focused on the tabloid magazine photos, laughing aloud about Jessica Simpson's cellulite and nip-slips, "NIPSLIP!" she would cry through a chuckle, E.L. didn't know what a nip-slip was, but he thought he could make a highschool educated guess. E.L. didn't turn his head, but his whole body, to face the glorious momentary relief the chair would provide before the doctor delivered whatever he had to say that E.L. didn't already know about his ossified bones, liver spots, and the genetically-bred full head of white hair, like a miniature snowbank atop his head. *I am a purebred old man, that's for sure. They'll take me out to the field any day now.*

Looking down to his respite he met a pair of bulbous eyes belonging to something E.L. had never before seen in a doctor's waiting room. A giant hunk of a bullfrog, encased in a mesh and wire pet carrier. The same kind of big daddys E.L. remembered catching in the muddy banks of the Chattahoochee, sometimes bringing them home for a quick fry-up job for Mama, but more often stuffed in the back pocket of his Wranglers, ready to be called upon if one of his five sisters needed scaring, Ruby always needed it most, but they were all scared of them, frogs, for really no good reason at all.

E.L. questioned his better judgment, partly gained though some young years spent

marching in service of the United States Armed Forces the other part from the rest of his life, until his retirement at sixty-five, also spent mostly standing, as a policeman for the city of Macon—a place that was once going to be the capitol city of Georgia, in the actual heart of the south, if the heart means a central location where you are most engulfed by the sheer land of the place and if you look hard enough and turn in circles, you can see all of everything for miles and mountains beyond mountains; not Macon, confounding with its criminality on streets next to streets of antebellum homes and the birthplace of the poet Sidney Lanier and the sidewalks and cool wooden porches trickled with the six-legged skitter of immense American cockroaches. Warner Robins, where E.L.'s home was carved out on Bonanza Drive, is actually more central than Macon so E.L. often wondered what the city would look like with skyscrapers instead of sonic booms, stripmalls, and too many McDonald's.

His once 20/20 but now faltering sight, that tried and tried like a bad photographer to find the clear focus, could also be to blame for blurring the figure of some ratty little dog into a big old horny toad.

Still unsure and fearful about what it meant now that people were toting ugly frogs to doctor's appointments, but motivated by his desire to take a load off, E.L. addressed the girl who had tied her t-shirt in a knot between her potential for breasts, like some miniature Daisy Duke. She was examining the natural folds in her pale stomach that concealed her belly button when seated, using both hands to pry open, like a puppets mouth. Her stomach mouth made monster noises.

“ ‘Scuse me, young lady, is this seat taken?’”

The girl turned her translucent blue eyes to the big bony hand that pointed, like death, at the chair where the frog sat, the unmistakable puffing yellow throat never breaking its rhythm breath, then, only briefly, as if her attention were on something in the room that E.L. could not see or smell, her eyes made contact the with the murky swampwater pools of his own, which using the two bushy white caterpillars above them, he was attempting to contort a look of imploring kindness, something that said without saying: *Dear child, take pity on an old man in old shoes. You have not years enough to understand what it means to be standing up. The bottoms of your feet, still pink arched, and uncalloused. Your toes sparkle without polish. Your shoes, older than you, hand-me-downs no doubt. If I removed my shoes right here in this waiting room, if you weren't first knocked out by the odor that collects in my socks as a sweat out these dog days, you would see that I have no nails on the of my toes and the blackened skin that emerged and engulfed the craggy remainder of my nail bed sometimes leaks a pus that looks and reeks of rotten milk, but it's really the stench of flesh rotting before your eyes. Those toes are a constant reminder of my poor hygiene from the knees down and a personal hatred of constraining socks that prevent free toe wiggling and only put another layer between you and the ground. And if you saw the grey rhinoceros hide that grew there secretly until I realized I was no longer getting splinters walking barefoot on my old back porch, saw my crestfallen arches which explains the particular way I waddle, maybe if you just saw then you could, for a moment, imagine what it would be like to be standing for you whole goddamn sixty-eight years of existence, minus the time when all I could do was cry and crawl and scoot on my diapered bottom. Maybe then the frog could sit on the floor, or in*

your lap, hell, I don't care, my lap, my back pocket, as long as I can rest these tired dogs for a moment. Please, think about how long I have been alive.

But the look he eventually settled on, lowered but pursed brows making a sharp V of the skin between and above eyes set in a constant squint—"Chinese redneck" some of the rowdy boys on the force would call him, only barely because of his affinity for Chinese takeout which stunk up the squad cars for at least twelve hours after its removal and consumption—the completed look, couched in the puffy, mostly smooth but always sagging and bouncing flesh of his Southern-tanned face, was received by the girl with a heavy sigh. She untied the knot of her shirt, stretched it around bent knees and then she wore it, like any other oversized t-shirt, this one advertising America and July Fireworks that were long past smoke traces in the sky. It reminded E.L. of another quandary he sometimes pondered: *Why would people take photographs of fireworks? Do they look at the pictures and say, those were some good fireworks even though these photo's cannot recreate the crack and boom and the burn you can feel, your first smoke, or maybe you inhaled bug spray.* The voice she uttered was part teenager and part loud and fast Southern accent, high-pitched as all get out.

"Ummmmm, yes," the girl said yes with three syllables and the added letters of *u* and *h*. "That is my friend, Mr. Frog and he is on his throne. He can't move because," her voice tripled in force, "TODAY HE IS KING OF ALL THE FROGS!"

"Toads too?" E.L. was not one to pressure a child.

"all the frogs," she whispered like demon behind your back might with the urgency upon your will to engage in something sinister.

“Ain’t all toads frogs, mama?”

“Duh,” the woman replied, jowls shaking with what appeared to be either constant unprovoked chuckling or sneezing, but the movement made it impossible to locate a chin that allowed words to flow undammed by her mind or tongue, “they all look like frog’s don’t they? So if they look like frogs then they’s all frogs. If you looked like a frog you’d be one too.”

“You look like a frog, mama. You’s a frog.” The child laughed at herself, but E.L. noticed how she appeared to absorb each of her mother’s words like it were the gospel truth. She smiled closelipped at her mother who had the same thin lidded slit eyes as E.L. but her voice made her seem like she grew up on the wrong side of the trailer park. But E.L. despised the word trailer trash or any label that tried to locate Southerners on a spectrum of Southernness so he lumped people like her into a group that he called The New South, of which he was a part of so long as he remained alive and conscious of today’s date. It was new every day, shapeshifting before his eyes—the two lane highways that uprooted Ruby’s one-and-a-half-score-year old crepe myrtle trees in Byron, restaurants everywhere that offered more than just pulled-pork barbeque, fried chicken and fish, and greens flavored with hamhock, *Why ask for more variety than that?* Yes, these were sorts of people now in Central Georgia who were of the sorts that were here when that cannonball crashed through the Hay House, but they were there for the tour and to make misguided inquiry about where the slaves were kept.

But these people *are* the South now, E.L. has to remind himself of sometimes, like after binging on boiled peanuts with Ruby at the kitchen table of her double-wide,

the pace of their thought keeping tempo with their slow lilting accents—words falling like petals plucked.

E.L. still longing for the chair, thought with policeman's logic that more questions would lead to more answers and more answers would lead to eventual and inevitable surrender. So he asked, "Now why would a purtty young girl bring a frog to the doctor's office? Are you going to kiss him to see if he turns into a prince?"

"King Frog," she insisted. "And he's a king, not a prince. I might kiss'im but only because I like'im soooooo much."

"Tell the man why you brought your frog, space case," the mother blabbered.

"He's here 'cause I'm gettin' shot today."

"You're gittin' a shot, boobear," she corrected turning the page of a celebrity tabloid to a full spread of sexy bikini expecting moms. Their tan round bellies bore a less hairy resemblance to E.L.'s own firm protuberance.

"Can King Frog get a shot too?"

"No way, Jorge, the shot is people medicine. Probably'd kill that big ole bullfrog, but I'm sure he'd have some hell of a time before he croaks." She erupted in laughter at what she had done there.

"E.L. realizing the futility of his pursuit, wished the ladies, "y'all gals," a nice day, which went unheard over the child's loud chanting, that did not diminish, but filled the room with hot air. *The room might float away, these lightweight walls aren't keeping us safe from germs or anything at all.*

The refrain continued, loud and wild and not at all cute, "KING FROG, KING

FROG, KING FROG! KING FROGAAHHHHH!”

“All The Place You’ve Got”: A Defense on Writing What, Who and Where You Know

When I rack my brain in search of the memories of my younger years—especially those located in the span of eight or so years when my mother was both my, and my four siblings, caretaker and the progenitor of our elementary education—it is not so much the experience of a wanderer on the highway whipped by blurs of whizzing, ignorant vehicles, make and model unrecognizable, though if a four-lane pileup caused them to crawl, I still couldn’t say with certainty where the machines came from, who made them, and why, but instead like trying to figure out the omissions of an erased newspaper obituary, the kind for someone who gets more than a couple inches next to super-discount car sales ads, with all the specifics of a lifetime, important events and achievements blacked out, leaving behind only a few names and feelings about those names: beloved, estranged, frankness, remembered. When I make attempts to recall some conversation around the dinner table, which I do remember served as my spacious school desk where I took spelling tests under the watchful eye of my mother, and more often when my mind fails me and I’m forced to mull over the current circumstances of my life, which, though not without occasional adventure, are routine and all too familiar to be rendered inspirational material for fiction, I’m reminded of Flannery O’Connor’s claim in “The

Nature and Aim of Fiction” that “The fact is that anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days” (*M&M* 84). At this, I become depressed because I feel an absence of information gained from childhood, though, ultimately I know that to not be entirely true.

Often when I sit down with the intention to begin writing a story, I feel as if my mind were under the secretarial care of one, Ignatius J. Reilly, the bumbling, contemptuous and almost irredeemable protagonist of *A Confederacy of Dunces*, who, in lieu of performing the taxing organization and storing documents of import at Levy Pants Inc., prefers the trash bin as his file cabinet of choice. In many ways, in moments of attempted recall, I feel I have hired myself into this position and become my own Ignatius, believing that the spin of Fortuna’s wheel will send me in an upward spin of self-belief and successful determination of fate or, as more often seems the case, a downward cycle of disbelief in my own ability accompanied by fourteen hour periods of hibernation on my memory foam topped mattress, my malfunctioning valve creating within me a gurgling fear that I have been nowhere and have no map to lead me onward. During these times, I am still writing, but only halfway, filling notebooks with the beginnings of characters who, let’s forget about readers for a second, cannot even believe in their own existence to follow it to a point of respite or revelation.

This halfhearted writing is not wholly unproductive and often, when my optimism awakens, I sometimes find that the scraps of characters and places I have penned are like sand for filling in the gaps of a mason jar full of marbles—now why one would want to do that, I have not an inkling except a guess that we all want to feel full. And not full in

the overstuffed, tryptophanic haze of Turkey Day way, but filled up and leveled, like a scoop of flour flattened to the perfect measurement by the backside of a butter-knife. But also full in the way a funeral feels when the organ or piano radiates around the seemingly empty space above the heads of the mourners whose sobbing, laughter, and shifting combines with the music, and the silence, in a sonorous and surrounding ether that is capable of allowing the dead to exist once again among the living. In *Bird by Bird*, Anne Lamott, in discussion the creation of believable characters quotes Carolyn Chute who uses a much more festive metaphor to describe the irritation of discovering the true form a character will take. She said in an interview, “I feel like a lot of times my writing is like having about twenty boxes of Christmas decorations. But no tree. You’re going, Where do I put this?” (Lamott 60)

When I think of my memory as an annoying sack of clacking marbles, I am, at once, distressed by the unfiltered clatter, but then come to realize that each of those marbles is an emotion with a kinetic energy that may collide with other emotions or come to rest comfortably in a pile of dust. A few loose marbles, an item I never possessed as a child, swirled with vivid red streaks of anger or staring eyes of anxiety, the remains of my childhood experience is enough material to begin a story and perhaps better than whole beaches of individual grains of sand, insignificant details as they stand alone, but when brought in by the truckload can fill in the gaps emotion leaves behind with elements like time, place, plot, and symbol. As Flannery O’Connor reminds me, “If you can’t make something out of a little experience, you probably won’t be able to make it out of a lot. The writer’s business is to contemplate experience, not to be merged in it” (*M&M* 84). In

my final year of undergraduate studies in the English department at Georgia State University, I had already become known as “The Girl with the Flannery O’Connor Tattoo,” so when my first creative writing mentor, who exposed me to the very existence of Master’s programs dedicated solely to the craft of writing and shifted me away from what I believed to be my somewhat begrudgingly accepted fate as a reader, interpreter, and teacher, though never a producer of great literature, suggested that it might be wise to take a couple years just living and gathering experience and subsequent material for a future MFA thesis project, I politely replied, reverberating with the words of my ultimate source of writing inspiration, that there were enough feelings bouncing around inside of my anxious mind, yet undiagnosed, to fill a thousand pages and all they needed was a place to exist and that, at the time, seemed an easy enough task of imaginative exercise.

Before I even begin to write, I begin to, at least attempt, to remember something, usually a feeling, from my past which I can then associate with a new fictional event, which usually takes the form of what sort of event might have evoked that feeling in my young mind. Eudora Welty, whose visual memory recall ability far surpasses my own, writes reassuringly, “The events in our lives happen in a sequence of time, but in their significance to ourselves they find their own order, a timetable not necessarily—perhaps not possibly—chronological.” While I may not be able to recall specifics of time or place, the flotsam of my shipwrecked remembrance washes ashore in the form of feelings I’ve experienced—for instance, my memory of a sensation I often experienced at a very young age where my limbs, especially hands, felt like they were constantly swelling like balloons testing their elasticity—which, as a writer looking to reach a pinpoint of

emotional experience through my characters, becomes endlessly useful material and allows for, in my writer's mind, a freedom of possibility for what might lead a character to experience those emotions. Welty continues her thoughts on the expansiveness of time with the concluding thought that "The time as we know it subjectively is often the chronology that stories and novels follow: it is the continuous thread of revelation" (*One Writer's* 75). Through writing these feelings into the experiences of created characters, I am not merely making use of and reproducing the feelings as they were experienced when I was six or seven, but allowing these feelings to take root in a new experience of somebody other than myself, pulling both the character I've created and myself—the writer sitting sidecar—forward on a path that leads, firstly, and more importantly, the reader, to a fuller understanding of the motive behind the action or inaction that the character will ultimately experience, but secondly, allows me, the forerunner of the feelings to experience a regeneration of my memories which, for both reader and writer, results in revelatory vision of the causes and, more significant in my own writing, the effects of human interaction.

Metaphor is food for the mind, though satisfying as it may be to the reader or writer searching for some comparable clarity, it is never enough in absence of what it is meant to stand for: the real thing to be experienced and remembered and filed away in folds of grey. Writing, in this way, is a process of remembering what has been lost or partially blotted out. It is a form of self-hypnotism that allows for the recovery and reconstruction of feelings, sights, sounds, and places, when upon recollection can be formed into what you thought was your life. I write to remember the past I've forgotten,

not to piece together puzzled shards of ceramic with superglue, but to forge and melt the scrap metal materials of memory and pour the hot liquid to cast a creation that both is and isn't what it was before—if I had the choice I'd cast all my alloyed memories into a fine set of copper-bottomed useful and long-lived cookware that would hang from my kitchen ceiling and boast of my ability to turn nothingness into reproductive somethingness.

The void of a personal memory timeline and the persistence of emotions experienced outside of space and time has created in me a desire to explore the cause of effect. This state of causelessness haunts me and makes me feel a victim of some post-traumatic stress disorder, though I know my childhood was easy and relatively harmless. But, before I delve further into my loss of memory and why it is the driving force behind everything I write, especially in the creation of my first collection of short stories, centralized in the city I was raised in, I being the nascent writer that I am and feel I always, in some sense, will be, find it necessary to use the words of a writer who seems constantly capable of translating my feelings in a way that they are still rendered as alien, not part of me, but some far-reaching twinkle in the sky who can understand me better than I can. Though lengthy, this quote from Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, is one I find myself constantly returning to, reading and rereading from a notecard I keep tucked in the pocket of my current notebook, on days when I'm feeling incomplete, insecure, and unable to finish anything I've begun:

Later, after the world had been torn in half and the Amazing Cavalieri and his blue tuxedo were to be found only in the gilt-edged

pages of deluxe photo albums on the coffee tables of the Upper West Side, Joe would sometimes find himself thinking about the pale-blue envelope from Prague. He would try to imagine its contents, wondering what news or sentiments or instructions it might have contained. It was at these times that he began to understand, after all those years of study and performance, of feats and wonders and surprises, the nature of magic. The magician seemed to promise that something torn to bits might be mended without a seam, that what had vanished might reappear, that a scattered handful of doves or dust might be reunited by a word, that a paper rose consumed by fire could be made to bloom from a pile of ash. But everyone knew that it was only an illusion. The true magic of this broken world lay in the ability of the things it contained to vanish, to become so thoroughly lost, that they might never have existed in the first place. (339)

This paragraph concludes a climactic moment, located aptly near the very center of the novel, for protagonist Joe Kavalier and though, for the character, it is a revelation of his acceptance of death as the ultimate magic, the escapist's greatest and truest performance, as a writer reaching this moment as a reader, it leads me to reflect on my own writing: the illusion I'm crafting to convince my readers of a world that both does and does not exist. And perhaps Chabon too pictured himself the magician in this moment of momentous, moving prose; the writer possesses his own bag of tricks, eloquently strung sentences, intense exchanges of dialogue, a fine eye for detail, all employed artfully to transform the black and white words of a fictional world into a Technicolor lucid dream that the mind

of the reader is immersed into and allowed to exist in until, reaching the end, finally jolted awake into the reality of actual existence where, if the world of the novel or short story has been successfully rendered, the day to day continues, but not without a lingering wonder and belief in the mystery of our own daily lives and the invisible threads that are in perpetual weaving.

It is my own belief in the mysteries of human interaction that allows me to accept the nonexistence of my own unmapped memories of experience; remembering my childhood, instead, as a conglomerate of pulsating emotion and understanding, the effects without the cause, pushes me to explore the world that lies just beneath the surface, to follow the thread of a distant emotion into a thicket where it never vanishes, though is sometimes obscured by fallen leaves, weaves around vines and briars, fashions a hammock for a hermit, knots itself into tangibility, and leads to an emergence into a place once thought unfamiliar, now illuminated by the thousands of translucent threads all adjoining to a monument that preserves the ephemeral memory—my own transient, flickering candle in the wind of a mind—in suspense amidst a silken web of the mysteriously taut strands of human existence.

My desire to explore the humanity of a place that I often felt and was taught by stereotype and history lesson alike to be inhumane and backwards in its too-polite manners and sordid past, but where, for the majority of my life thus far, I was—and part of me is still—nonetheless stuck became my reasoning behind locating this collection of stories in the very heart of Georgia, Warner Robins, a city that seems to be growing to big for its britches. Where once I lived on the outskirts surrounded by pecan and peach

orchards, pines, and expanses of empty land sometimes used for corn or verdant sod to be pulled up like bandages, at the intersection of highways 41 and 96, is in the present day being doubled in lanes to make way for families and their SUV's heading to the soccer fields and strip malls that popped up quicker than the crops ever could. Instead of inventing locations where my stories would unfold, I decided, from the very start, that the place where I and my four siblings, who all serve our own role in certain stories, grew up that was, unbeknownst at the time, growing alongside me, filling with new and diverse families looking for—though I'm still not sure on this one—a relatively uneventful and safe place with a bounty of churches and Mexican restaurants where they could build their own lives.

Many writers before me have opted to build their stories within the world of their childhood. O'Connor locates most of her stories in the Southern states, if not specifically Georgia, and nearly replicates, down to the hoard of intrusive peafowl she kept as pets, Andalusia, the farm in Milledgeville—notably only a thirty minute drive from Warner Robins—where she composed the bulk of her writing, in her story, “The Displaced Person,” in which she introduces the unfamiliar element of a Polish family forced into exile by WWII into the still highly racially conscious and judgmental region O'Connor was brought up in. In his short story collection, *The Coast of Chicago*, Stuart Dybek uses his birthplace of Chicago as a bleak but nostalgic backdrop—the El train's constant clatter overhead and the looming skyline “like luminescent peaks” (144)—amidst which take place the comical and tragic antics of a raucous group of boys come into sedentary adulthood in the chaos of the city. O'Connor, in several essays and speeches collected in

Mystery and Manners, emphasizes the importance of regional art in its contribution not only to the community it reflects, but in the light that reflection shines on the country that contains the community. In one address, “The Regional Writer,” she drolly remarks, “Unless the novelist has gone utterly out of his mind, his aim is still communication, and communication suggests talking inside a community” and that when a writer isolates himself from his community “he does so at great peril to that balance between principle and fact, between judgment and observation, which is so necessary to maintain if fiction is to be true” (*M&M* 53-54). This sort of “regional writing” is a practice which some may choose to see as unimaginative and limiting—O’Connor admits that “To call yourself a Georgia writer is certainly to declare a limitation, but one which, like all limitations, is a gateway to reality” (*M&M* 54)—but to locate the writer’s imagination within a familiar community is more often a fruitful exercise in the deconstruction and rebuilding of an environment once thought, by the writer, as entirely familiar and commonplace into a setting that is not only malleable in the minds of characters, but capable of a disorienting ability to shift the course of a character’s development and can, as I’ve experienced in the creation of this regional Southern collection, exile the writer from her own region as she measures her own experience against the truth of her environment. My own Middle Georgia experience, once believed to be material too boring to write about, has, in the course of compiling these stories, and writing many of them at a safe distance in South Florida, created in me a weird feeling that I do not belong to Warner Robins, or even Georgia for that matter, but, instead, that they belong to me. I am not the writer of the regional, but the region itself is contained within me and,

more importantly and less egotistically, within my characters.

Only through my constant repetition of its strange name has the existence of Warner Robins become known to my colleagues and any Joe who dares ask me what I'm doing sitting alone at a bar next to a watery whiskey and Diet Coke, scribbling out lines in cursive, a foreign language to most especially the intoxicated. But to everybody else who doesn't want to listen to the only thing I care to talk about at length—that is, my writing—Warner Robins and the people who inhabit the Air Force Base, trailer parks, and mazes of cookie-cutter columned houses and go to work, if not in some various Air Force duty, as Geico claims operators, owners of strip mall trophy stores, and Red Lobster waitresses are, like the same people who do the same things in other various unnamed cities across America, are nothing; they simply do not exist. So when I'm told in various forms to “write what I know” or as Anne Lamott more articulately writes, “You must learn about people from people, not from what you read. Your reading should confirm what you've observed in the world” (68). But what if there is nothing written to confirm what you observed pass between the little dishwater blonde, pudgy Half-Indian, Half-Caucasian boy and the man who asked him where his real foreign accent was before he hands you your pack of American Spirits? Well, then, you should first consider yourself lucky that nobody, at least nobody important, has yet thought up a story containing such an interaction, then you should immediately sit down and write your observations in more than just a brief scene, but elaborating on the possible past that led this kid probably fifteen, no, instead make him eight-years old but keep his light red-clay complexion, and leave him standing next to the old man, his employer with slipping false

teeth who buys lottery cards from his, own supply. If it was your viewpoint that the customer, buying eight bags of beef jerky, was rude and racially insensitive, then make of him a shape-shifter of Southern accents, intending, out of perhaps maniacal pleasure or sheer boredom, to confound the young boy to tears. If you write all of that, as I did, illegally sucking down invigorating nicotine in my idle car parked in front of the 5-lb Bag-O-Ice cooler, then you'd have given new life to two individuals who, unbeknownst to them, will become the protagonist and antagonist of a story to be titled "Throw Down Yer Heart."

But before I delve further into the oddities that emerge from my various cast of characters and how they come to define the community they inhabit or are merely passing through, I have to shake the ghost of Flannery O'Connor who I imagine reading over my shoulder, a dour disapproving downturn on her face and a fiercely-accented admonishment of my rejection of the faith into which I felt forcibly confirmed. Though she is by far the mostly influential source of inspiration for my writing, if I may indulge in a comparison, aside from our dry wit and strong connection to Georgia, she is my polar opposite and I believe we would have argued bitterly over topics pertaining to existential belief, self-actualization and individuation, sacred mysteries and supernatural sacraments. Despite this and also despite the fact that I've proclaimed myself to not be a fan of either epigraphs or tattoos of quotations, I've dedicated myself to both at two points in my life, using the same words from Flannery O'Connor's first novel *Wise Blood* each time. In my lifetime, it's likely that more people will read and compliment the peacock feathers and cursive lettering that permanently adorn my left shoulder, than will read or even know the

existence of my Master's Thesis, and hopeful first book of short stories, tentatively titled, E.D.I.M.G.I.A.F.A.D., and begun with some words preached madly in the name of the "Church Without Christ" by O'Connor's anti-prophet protagonist Hazel Motes who yells amidst a crowd of exiting theatergoers, "In yourself right now is all the place you've got" (Wise 166). The struggle behind Hazel Motes' strained nihilistic sermonizing on the absence of God and self-salvation through the acceptance of our own autonomous human freedom driven by his desire to escape the haunting image of a fearfully powerful Jesus instilled in his youth as a figure he sees "move from tree to tree in the back of his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not knowing it and then suddenly know it and drown" (*Wise* 22) can, in most basic terms, be boiled down to a choice that Hazel must make between socially acceptable norms, even social constructions of religion, which allow human freedom to guide our choices and complete immersion—drowning or baptizing, however you wish to view it—within the blinding truth of the sacred mysteries which, for O'Connor and her unwavering Roman Catholic faith, is a vision of the true ultimate freedom contained within us all, but is beyond definition from socially constructed knowledge.

In building the world of *Wise Blood* and of most of her short stories outside of the discourses of social theory and existentialism—a consequence, O'Connor admits of it being "written by an author congenitally innocent of theory, but one with certain preoccupations" (*M&M* 114)—her conflicted protagonists in quest of freedom are forced to overcome the boundaries of socially constructed notions of self-reliance and religion,

though, in the case of Hazel Motes, a multiplicity of increasingly violent acts of transgression, sins against society and self, the most critical of which, his self-blinding with quicklime, leaves him with the inner vision of the divine light within himself. I made the decision to begin my first collection of short stories with this epigraph not only out of sheer admiration for my favorite writer, but more so because I actually believe in the message that Hazel Motes declares—though he, clear in his bombastic enthusiasm that is ignored by most of the people he encounters, lacks conviction in his own autonomy and proclaims himself the preacher of the Church without Christ only as a means of subverting and transgressing the societal practice of religious belief—that we do, indeed, possess within ourselves the locus of a free-willed individual mentality that is in constant relocation in relation to the “right now,” the precise time and moment in which we are existing and this phenomena of self-actualization generates within us a freedom that cannot be constricted, except through personal decision to do so, because its place is within ourselves, a body in constant motion.

The atmosphere of my thesis is imbued with this personal conviction that we are the possessors of our own fate; it the atheistic antithesis of the prophetic quest for divine freedom that is only gained through an admission of the limitations of human choice wherein the character’s “integrity lies in his not being able to” rid himself of “the ragged figure who moves from tree to tree in the back of his mind” (*M&M* 115). Like O’Connor, I was raised Catholic in the Protestant South, which, in Warner Robins, despite its proliferation of Protestant branches and twigs and shoots, meant there was only one place you could attend mass seven days a week, one place to be baptized, receive your first

communion, and in the sacrament of Holy Confirmation one place and one congregation, most of whom knew your name, to witness your commitment to the beliefs of Catholicism at the ripe age of, at least for me, twelve. A commitment that, upon entering adolescence and school, albeit Catholic, outside of the home, away from my mother and the constant chattering of Sean Hannity on AM radio as she drove us to piano lessons. In the middle of seventh grade at Sacred Heart Catholic School is where my memory begins: with an onslaught of possibilities for my newly discovered freedom. This is one such personal feeling that was so strong and visceral, yet still mysterious in its multifarious source, that I knew it to be the truth of human freedom and choice.

In each of the stories in this collection I wanted my characters, centrally my protagonists, to collide with, confirm, or meet in fisticuffs with this conception of multiple realities or paths of existence. For Big Man in “Big Man, Upstairs” there is a constant collision with the “gods” that occupy the religious facilities and the various forms of worship they promote, ultimately, in rediscovering his returned manhood, leading to his proclamation that he too is a god. In this story, which still requires extensive revision to both plot and character development, the character revelation that is reached is intended to be a false understanding of free will and its point of emergence, unassociated with any real religious belief. To return one final time, I promise, to O’Connor, this story was a direct response a question she asked and answered in writing about “The Mystery of Freedom” in *Wise Blood*. She poses, “Does one’s integrity ever lie in what he is not able to do?” And answers, “I think that usually it does, for free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting in one man. Freedom cannot be conceived

simply. It is a mystery and one which a novel, even a comic novel, can only be asked to deepen” (*M&M* 115). Though not directly, it can always be implied that O’Connor is speaking with a Catholic sensibility, referring to the Holy Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—who in reception of various sacraments, inhabit us with gifts of divine sensibility that are not wholly our own, but part of our *telos* to understanding and merging with the divine mystery of everlasting life; but the human body too may contain conflicting wills that, while colliding and bouncing like the stressful multiball bonus of arcade pinball, do ultimately lead to a decision as they do when the jumbled desires of mother, lover, and youthful beauty are delivered in first-person frustration by Hally, who cannot accept her family’s current state of existence, broken-down and stranded miles from destination Disney World in Warner Robins, a place she never knew and never wanted to know existed.

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