

Ten Stories/Egret & Tromso

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Ten Stories

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“Silence is not easily indicated on the page, beyond a few, tiresome suspension dots. But here, when Music is talking, the silences were long and eloquent. Silence is more important, more revealing, for Music than any conversation. He himself tells the story about a long walk he took at night with Alberto Giacometti. They had met at a bar in Montparnasse and, since their studios were both at that time near Alésia, they decided to walk home together; ‘and’, Music concludes with some pride, ‘we never exchanged a word’. The text below is full of such silences, and the reader is invited to imagine them at will.”

Michael Peppiatt



“A Confession”

By now you will have read about it in the papers: my crime. Or what they call my crime. They call it a crime, though I've been convicted of nothing. Or though I've been convicted, they have no ground to stand on. They call it a crime because they don't know what else to call it. I know better than they do what the truth of the matter is. I know better than they, I assure you. They know nothing more of the matter than lambs know of the slaughter. I will be free. I can already feel the breeze on my face. They talk of killing me—*executing* me, as if I were an order to be carried out, or a grand king who has failed his people, when I am neither of these things, when I am worth less than the parchment such an edict would be scrawled upon, worth less than the thread used to stitch that king's ruffle to his collar, worth less, even, than the needle through the eye of which that thread would have passed on its way to its resting place—they want to kill me. And I know that if they do, when they do, this—these words—will be received as my confession, though I mean it—I mean them—as nothing of the sort, and to read it as such is to miss the point entirely. To read it at all is to miss the point entirely. You will have already read about my *crime*, and you will have already formed your opinion, and so to read this can do nothing—it cannot sway you, and it will teach you nothing new, will not shore up your defenses. Yet neither will it break them down. It will do nothing. I am writing not to confess, though they tell me I should—tell me I *must*. Nor am I writing to contest my fate. Those of us who know of such things know that fate is not the sort of thing one contests. It is the sort of thing one ignores. Perhaps I am writing as a means of willful ignorance, as a means to distract myself until the gears have finished turning. Or at least that is how you should read this, for to read it any other way would be folly.

They tell me I have till tomorrow after supper. Though they will not feed me. I know they will not feed me. They say things like supper because they have their lives outside of this place, and they use those lives the way picadors use their lances, they jab at us with every word they utter. I hear the voices of other men. Or perhaps I only imagine their voices now. I have been in solitary confinement since not long after they brought me here. You will have read of my *capture*, though you will have read a fiction, for the storytellers out there must weave yarns that have the villain brought to justice, when in fact the villain here is a straw man and the justice a pantomime, a farce. I am here of my own free will. Though I do not claim to be free. I knew before I set foot on the stage that I would bow out and step into a crowd that reviled me. The point was revulsion. It meant I had played my part well. You of the crowd will no doubt feel that very revulsion, and will no doubt feel it even now as you read these words. If you do not feel it, I welcome you as a friend, but spit in your face for being a fool, for only a fool feels anything but revulsion for a man who has done such as what I have done. Yet do not hate me. Revile me but do not hate me. Spew your invectives but hold something back, or recognize that words are not the same as the things they describe, much as I am not the same as the things I have done. I am not even the same as the thing I write here, nor are these words the same as their author. Thus this *cannot* be a confession, for confession is impossible. For the deed lives on beyond language. I live on beyond language. They tell me I must write, yet they do not give me a pen and paper with which to do it here, in my cell, where I can think. They take me into their rooms and sit me across from them at their tables, and place scraps of paper before me and yell at me and hit me and expect me to *think*. They are like me. They know there is something else in those rooms. They

know it sits on our shoulders and weighs us down so that we are the same. But outside of those rooms I am nothing like them. Outside of those rooms, back here, in my place, I can hear. I hear those voices that I sometimes think come from other cells, that I sometimes think are memories of such voices, that I sometimes think are voices of the dead, or voices of angels—perhaps they are all of those things at once, perhaps there was never any difference. I don't think it matters. And I have *this* pen and *this* paper and I write for myself. You will no doubt read this in a way that shades it as something it is not. As a confession. Perhaps I should *confess*. Perhaps I should put on one last play, dance and sing and drop my trousers for the court to point and laugh at. Though by now you will have read it 1,000 times in the papers, heard about it from someone, and known in your heart that you could just as easily be where I am, and I could be the one out there, reading. Reading is not the same as writing. I confess but it is like a fever dream. No sooner are the words on the page than the page is blank. No sooner is the page set aside, a blank one in its place, than my eyes cease to see the pile I know must be there. It is not there. I am writing on toilet paper. I am writing on air. This paper doesn't exist. This pen is my finger. You won't read this because you can't. You cannot. So perhaps this confession will be the truest confession of them all, for it, like all confessions, will be of something beyond language, but it, unlike all its predecessors, will exist as something too—the confession itself—as something, too, beyond language. The confession is an act like a murder. The confessor kills his memories, strangles them. He leaves their bodies discarded in his wake and walks no longer burdened by his crimes, and is not burdened by his most recent slaying, for to slay an abstraction is to simply forget. I am already forgetting. I have forgotten. Let us say that you have read things about airplanes and

young men, and let us say that you have read my name. Let us say that you have read about my people, those who understood, as I understand, that nothing makes sense without a sensemaker. Without someone who *forces* sense upon the people who yearn for it. And those people are many. They are everywhere. Senselessness is a terrifying thing. We have all felt it in the night, before sleep, after. We have all woken and stumbled into our daily lives with the feeling that none of this is happening, or that it already has. And we long for someone to tell us we're dreaming, or that we aren't. This is religion. This is government. This is art. This is commerce. This is sex. We all find something to cling to. We have to. We must. It is the act. You will have read about two occurrences, certainly, the man from Denver and the man from Port-au-Prince, both of whom came to me the way rocks come washing to the shore, worn down so that they have become mere pebbles, yet these pebbles never know they are pebbles. But if they are lucky they know the world *sees* them as pebbles, and that the world no longer expects more from them than pebble-like behavior. They have gained something because they have lost the world's respect. The world will not see them. The world will not care. These men came to me through *fate*. I met them and we performed our acts, our usual acts where we tried to make sense of things, but we could not. First the man from Denver then the man from Port-au-Prince. We realized we were alike in being tossed aside, and I told them and they told me. We went to different places but wrote. We put our faith in *language*, that slippery traitor, yet for us it behaved. We bent it to our will, or it allowed us to bend it—perhaps it did so because it understood we didn't ask it for much. Perhaps because it understood we would not burden it for long. We did not burden it for long. We moved past it into the ineffable space of truth, of grace. If I tell you that to blow up a

bus, or to go into a school and kill children and their teachers, if I tell you that such things mean nothing if they can be explained, be talked away, you will call me a liar, or you will call me a madman, or you will not listen, you will simply turn away. If I tell you that even it being a *school* or a *bus* is explanation, that the act has become language before it is discussed, you will ignore me, but that does not mean that I am wrong. You will have heard about men from Denver and Port-au-Prince because the storytellers want you to hear everything there is to hear about those men, because those men were fools, though they were fools who I loved for a time, but in the end they were fools who fell in love with language because language wore a mask, like all mistresses. And they ended up speaking though that was the last thing they wanted. You will have heard that they *found* me because of the letters I wrote to those men, to others, and the letters those men and others wrote back to me, but they will not tell you what those letters said, because what those letters said would not make sense to you, indeed has likely not made sense to those few who have already read them, those few whose eyes were never meant to see those letters. And that senselessness would either terrify you or awaken you to how much you can achieve. So they say *letters*, and they say *confidential*, and they end it at that. But that is where I begin. You will have heard about those men because their actions were easily explained. And it is the job of storytellers to give you things that help you make *sense*. You make sense of violence by saying it has motivation, by saying it *hates*, by saying it is like sex or commerce or religion, but evil—not the antithesis, but the version that is held up as *wrong*, though it fits in with all else as smoothly as a brick fits in a wall. It keeps you in; it keeps everything senseless out. You love it. Those men were fools in the end. They were fools. You will have read about my crime, though it is not a crime

because it is not like any crime, and definition comes from precedence. Because words mean things that *were*, and things that are like things that were, but we have no words for things that simply *are*, or things that *will* be—we have words that reassure us that there are such things, but we never have the words for them until after they have come and gone. My *crime* is not a crime. History will show this, but not for any reason I can fathom, and that is hardly consolation. I seek not consolation. They will come for me tomorrow. If I tell you that what I did I did for the sake of simply doing, and that what I did I did, too, for no reason at all, that I began living a life along time ago whose inevitable arc led me to the doing of what I did, so that the doing was no longer even conscious for me, so that finally I achieved simultaneity with all of existence, you would not understand. You do not understand as you read this, I am sure. But I would not say such a thing because to say it would be to yoke it to definition. I retract all statements. I keep standing up and walking a figure eight around the room and then sitting down again, and I keep squinting my eyes in such a way that I see a glimmer of light that isn't there, and I call it the moon, and then I blink and extinguish it. I do the same with the sun some days. I sit back down and write. I am no more a confessor than a murderer or a madman. You will pore over these pages and look for the moment when I say *I did it I'm sorry I was wrong I am bad* and you will not find it. I did it and I keep doing it, for there is no difference between the act of opening the emergency hatch on a cruising jetliner so that bodies are sucked out and the act of crossing out a word on a page, no difference between the act of removing your clothes, basking in the gazes of those around you who see beauty where there is only pain and before their eyes smashing the little bottle of vodka in your hand and using it to stab the first child you see, or cutting yourself and bleeding,

this is all wordless, this happens without words, this all happens in as much silence as can be said to exist anymore—there is no difference, it is all the same, each act the same as the next, and each the same as exhorting others to follow closely, no difference, the same as extinguishing the moon with the blink of an eye. There is no difference. None. They are all actions, and they all mean nothing. And they speak a different language in the moment of their happening, and I dreamt for a while that I would someday learn to speak it too, only to realize later that, for a moment—a moment—I became it. They will come for me tomorrow with their pugilistic words and I will let them batter me. I will let it happen and I will not speak. I will not. They will come for me and I will know and I will follow them, bound. And I will seek only grace, and I will find it. *I did it I'm sorry I was wrong I am bad...*

[Note: This text, written in a mixture of blood and feces on a roll of prison toilet paper, was found concealed in the floor of the cell occupied by Edgardo Scherzi from June 2010 to September 2017. It is presumed to have been composed sometime between these dates, and was transcribed by prison administrators shortly after it was found. Owing to the fact that New York abolished the death penalty in 1963, Scherzi, convicted in 2006 of five counts of murder in the first degree as well as 12 counts of conspiracy to commit murder, is currently serving out 17 life sentences with no chance of parole. For a detailed account of Scherzi's trial, read The Madman's Burden by Simone Benedict, published by Knopf, 2008. – D.F.T., 3/9/2024, Auckland, New Zealand]

authorities be damned. And there was even talk of such a course of action after he and the woman had left — he had been coerced, he hadn't meant it, the words were not his own, but written for him, a script, a speech bubble imposed on him by someone else — these were not his teachings. The woman from New Zealand was most adamant, and Shiro, in broken English learned almost entirely during his time on the farm, agreed, but Dirt knew, had known ^{when} the woman began to speak. He had wept because he'd known so fully from the start. And I trusted Dirt, so we left in the morning, Dirt

BRO
BO



“Winter, ’86–’87”

For a brief stretch of time, back in ’86 and ’87, I had a job excavating Civil War-era land mines outside of Knoxville, where a housing development was to go up in the spring. This was winter, when the ground was frozen solid and thrushes billowed like gnats around the treetops.

I’d read a book, the year before, about the last real gold rush, and about how the miners in the Klondike region cleared snow and lit fires to thaw the ground, dug deeper, and lit more fires. A few feet per day, at most. I went to the lumberyard, every morning, for scraps.

I was renting a room above a garage in town. My parents had moved to New York.

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To get an idea of these mines, picture a riveted copper sphere a few feet in diameter, five or six feet underground. Militiamen from Knoxville and the surrounding hamlets would bury these in fields directly beneath earthen shafts, balance logs in the shafts atop the mines and cover the tops of the logs with brush. When brigades marched through on their ways north or south, they spanned the horizon; they moved like the shadows of clouds. And the likelihood of one man, one foot soldier or bugler, a colonel’s horse, the creaking wheel of a wagon dragging cannon, dragging the wounded, dragging meager supplies—the likelihood of even *one* log being pushed just a foot down its shaft and punching a hole through the soft metal shell, was high. The explosions ripped holes in the earth.

Two weeks before I was hired on, a backhoe allegedly broke a gas line. Nobody realized it until the driver went to light a match, his cigarette already dangling from his cracked lips. Three men were instantly killed in the blast. The acting supervisor suffered shrapnel lacerations.

I say that the backhoe *allegedly* broke a gas line because word got out, within twenty-four hours, that a Ph.D. candidate, a woman in Nashville, was writing her dissertation on the Civil War minefields, a local feature of which very few people were even aware. Within days, angry mothers were out protesting on street corners, and by the end of the week the company doing preliminary excavation issued a public statement saying that yes, the explosion *could* have been triggered by one of these hundred-year-old mines, but had more than likely been the result of the gas line, the gas line that had *clearly been cut*. It was enough, though—their admitting that possibility—and by the end of the following week, I had a job, low-paying, on weekends, because the company couldn't delay work at all and couldn't afford to sink too much money into public relations. Couldn't afford to pay the unionized workers for more hours; couldn't legally permit me to use the machinery.

I worked alone with a shovel, from sunrise to sunset, like a gravedigger without any coffins. At night I rode the bus back into town, took a shower, walked to the bar. I drank cheap beer out of fingerprinted mugs.

I've been thinking about that job a lot recently.

•

A woman, a girl really—from the community college newspaper—was waiting for me on the morning of my second day.

“*What’s* your name?” I said.

“Woodrow,” she said. “Woodrow Stephenson.”

“Woodrow like the president?”

“Like the president,” she said, and she shrugged. “My parents,” she added.

I set my pile of wood down in some weeds, unchained the gate, got the wood, and began to walk past her.

“Here,” she said, “let me get that for you.” She closed the gate behind me and absently threaded the chain through it.

She smelled nice, I thought. Like clouds.

The ground felt soft. Spongy even. Later that day I’d find an outhouse tipped over. But the sun hadn’t yet risen above the wooded horizon, and the smell hadn’t had time to ferment.

We walked up the hill to the perimeter of the dig, where they’d already started laying in trenches for sewage lines. This was my number one priority, I’d been told by the man who’d hired me, Graham. Graham who had the face of a boxer.

“These PTA mom’s are like harlots,” he said.

“Harpies, maybe?”

“Harlots,” he said. “Harlots.”

Now the moon was nothing but a glow on the horizon, and had disappeared entirely by the time we reached the crest. The girl, Woodrow, had a tape recorder in one

hand and a spiral notebook tucked under one arm. Her hair was brown. Her sneakers were old. I found her attractive in an indescribable way.

“Tell me,” she said. “What are your qualifications?”

“For this job?”

“Yeah, for this job.”

“You’re from the community college newspaper, right?”

She nodded. Almost imperceptible in the dark before sunrise.

“Are you writing from a pro-union standpoint?” I said.

She shrugged again, and this time said, “No standpoint.”

“I worked as a landscaper the summer before my senior year of high school,” I said.

“Dug a lot of holes?”

I said I had.

She fumbled with the tape recorder, trying to keep it pointed at me while she uncapped a pen between her teeth.

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Later that day, after Woodrow had gone, a pickup truck, one of those stake bodies with a whip antenna, pulled in and lurched to a halt. A man in a white hardhat and a goose down vest climbed out and raised his hand in a politician’s wave. I stopped my digging long enough to wave back before he disappeared into one of the trailers.

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I didn't even attempt to explain the Klondike technique with the fires to Woodrow. If I had, perhaps the write-up would have been better, more interesting. As it was, she lambasted the shoddy way in which the management was handling the situation, and held me up as a totem of their incompetence: "digging holes with less haste than the soldiers who buried these mines, and with tools more primitive than those used by his predecessors."

The article was well written, though. Verbose, but well written.

I had to give her that, at least.

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What the Ph.D. candidate had actually written up to that point—what hadn't made it onto anyone's desks in Knoxville—was that the mines, if any of them were even still in the ground, would certainly have decayed to the degree that they no longer posed a threat. I made the trip by bus the day before I started work, to actually find out what I could about the things. I had to know what I'd gotten myself into.

The woman, Janice Lemler, who was writing the dissertation, met me for breakfast and brought photocopies of what she'd written so far.

"You're really digging them up?"

"I start tomorrow," I said.

"Well there might not be anything left. The copper they used was a cheap alloy, a mix, it was easy to produce and perfect for their purposes: it was soft enough for even the slightest pressure from above to break the surface." She illustrated this point by taking the straw from her iced tea and poking a hole in the top of her fried egg. Yolk oozed out.

She replaced the straw and drank with her eyes closed. We split the bill and shook hands in the parking lot. She handed me the pages she'd brought.

“Keep these,” she said. “Call if you have any questions. Let me know how it goes—if you find any.”

I told her I would and we shook hands once more. I read the 200-odd pages on the ride home.

•

In the Klondike region, at the height of the rush, a glass of champagne cost an ounce of gold. They could have paved the streets with it back then, shod every horse anew each day with 24 karats. It was just below the surface to be had.

I didn't unearth my first mine till well into my third week.

Sweating, hands cold, with the fire roaring at my back, the shovel rebounded, scraped metal, and I stopped.

I thought about the miners, that night, as I drank my first beer. The company was paying me cash. After rent, after groceries, after everything else, I had little more than a child's allowance to drink with. The jukebox was tellingly silent.

Janice had been right: there wasn't much of it left. My first impression, upon seeing the mine, was of a rust eaten pipe or a poorly constructed time capsule. Indeed, I wondered initially if I hadn't simply hit an old irrigation line used by farmers who'd since moved west. But there'd been a diagram, old, hand-sketched, in mimeograph and photocopied, in there with Janice's typewritten notes. The shape, while warped and

decayed for the most part, was, in the end, unmistakable. I called Janice from the payphone in the back of the bar but she didn't answer so I left her a message.

“Found one,” I said. “Drive out tomorrow if you want.” It was Saturday. “They’ll haul it away first thing on Monday.”

•

She was there, like Woodrow’s doppelganger, when I arrived in the dark the next morning.

“I got your message,” she said.

“Can you get the gate?”

“Where’s the key?”

“In my pocket.”

The birds were beginning to sing.

“Up there,” I said, gesturing with my chin. That day’s scrap wood from the lumber yard had snagged on my jacket. We got to the top of the hill and I set to building a fire. When I’d finished I crossed the site and found her.

“There’s something kind of gorgeous about it, don’t you think?” she said. She was kneeling on the frozen ground beside the mine.

I watched my breath turn to steam as she ran her hands over the metal. Her gloves were inside out by the toes of her boots. I could see radio towers in the distance, blinking orange against the sky, casting enough light to obscure the stars.

“They’re really going to throw it away?” she said.

I didn’t actually know.

Once again, we, as a community, Woodrow had written, have demonstrated a complete disregard for our history.

After a while, Janice stood, and I walked her back down the hill.

“Call me if you find another,” she said.

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Many years later, on a group-rate tour to Marseilles, I met a man who’d done similar work in Bosnia.

“Except that the mines were *living*,” he said.

He had a crease of scar tissue down one side of his face that made it look like he was perpetually cocking his head.

When I joined the army, after leaving Knoxville and heading south, I asked if my experience with the mines was even worth mentioning.

The recruitment officer, no older than I was, smirked at me like I was a child.

“Winter, ’86 – ’87: Bo”

After Knoxville there was this five year period during which I got really into the teachings of this ten-year-old French kid called Bro Bo, or just Bo, as we often referred to him. I hesitate now, as I did then, to call him a guru, but I suppose that that’s basically what he was. I know now that he was from Vichy. I know now that his real name was Alain, though nobody ever called him that. I knew at the time that he was the oldest of seven. That he was four feet tall and couldn’t have weighed more than 40 pounds. That he wore these pitch black aviator sunglasses so that you never saw his eyes.

His teachings, every single one of them—all vague aphorisms—came to us handwritten on cereal boxes in the form of scrawled speech bubbles attributed to the already present cartoon mascots. Bo never spoke aloud. In fact, many of his followers never even laid eyes on him until right at the end. There were several hundred of us living on farms scattered across the south of France and the north of Spain—and people talked, too, about a single, isolated group in Andorra where they received the teachings far less frequently than the rest of us, though in far greater volume, where everyone had taken the same name, though no one could say for sure what the name was.

We all took them though: new names, after the model of Bo, after the model of his first follower, an American (like myself) called Dirt, who was on the same farm as me, the only farm not south of Paris, but slightly north of the city, in fact, in Autun—or, rather, just outside of Autun. If Bro Bo was the dark, rippling star at the center of our cosmos (the analogy is weak and I apologize for it), Dirt was the explosive sun. He talked constantly, is what I’m trying to say.

There were ten of us in Autun. Bo kept us in language groups, so there were countless French farms, several Spanish ones, two German, etc. On our farm, Dirt and I were the only Americans. There were five people from England, a mother and son from New Zealand, and one man from Croatia, because Bo either thought English was the national language of Croatia, or just didn't know what to do with the Croatian, whose name was Yuri, and who took the name Shirt.

He kept to himself.

I took the name Kevin. You were supposed to just relax and take whatever came out. Kevin was the name of my childhood dog.

So I did that for five years, living in France on an expired tourist visa, driving into town with Dirt in a panel van registered under the name Val Amít, who Dirt claimed was Bo's uncle, but who Dirt sometimes also claimed was Bo's cousin, or father. It was irrelevant. Five years of spending every Tuesday waking up before dawn, loading the van with produce, riding shotgun into town, selling at the market, and buying Coca-Cola and hot dogs to last ten people for 21 meals, give or take.

When he was 15, Bo made a tour of all the farms and told us, in no uncertain terms—this was the first time, again, that any of us had heard him speak—that we were idiots. Dirt wept. It was over. Bro Bo—Alain—we were told (not by him, but by the woman with him—his mother? a nanny? a woman from one of the other farms who Bo had let into his dissolution before any of the rest of us?—a hollow-eyed, frail, deep-voiced woman who drove the car in which they arrived and departed, who held his jacket for him and proffered it to him when he was too hot or too cold. He was the oldest of seven but we saw none of the others—if she was his mother, she doted only on him, a

mother of seven who doted only on her first)—she told us he was being sent away to military school in Versailles. His dark glasses were dark glasses and showed no emotion, but we all imagined we saw, in the shape of his mouth, at the corners of his lips, perhaps in his forehead or in the movements of his hands, we imagined we saw sadness, regret. We saw it—we felt it coming off of him and it became ours. Dirt wept audibly, snuffling and hiccuping, even as the hollow-eyed woman spoke and explained to us that we had nine days to vacate the property in full, and that failure to do so would result in our being fined by the local authorities, as well as forcibly evicted. Bro Bo just stood there, either staring out at us or well beyond our heads—again: the dark glasses. And when she was finished speaking, that was when it happened. She shrunk away and he came forward and we were rapt. Dirt fell silent. Bro Bo removed his glasses. His eyes were small—they seemed too small, how could they not? after years of never having seen them. And now he really was looking directly at us, and he spoke those three words, a simple pronouncement, no aphorism, no beauty, nothing to be taught: “You’re all idiots.” And it was over. Perhaps—almost certainly—if he had not spoken, we would all still be on those farms, the authorities be damned. And there was even talk of such a course of action after he and the woman had left—he had been coerced, he hadn’t meant it, the words were not his own, but written for him, a script, a speech bubble imposed on him by someone else—these were not *his* teachings. The woman from New Zealand was the most adamant, and Shirt—in broken English learned almost entirely during his time on the farm—agreed. But Dirt knew, had known when the woman began to speak. He had wept because he’d known so fully from the start. And I trusted Dirt. We all trusted Dirt. So we left in the morning. Dirt and I thumbed a ride into town and from there into Paris,

where we spent two nights in the 13th arrondissement. Dirt had no French and I had only a little. The farm had been a microcosm and the trips into town had ben predicated on money, on selling and buying, for which language is really just window-dressing. After three days in the city we rode a train to the coast. We hitched to the port and bought tickets to England. We bought coffees and croissants and sat on a bench at the terminal. It was foggy and cold and there was only us, waiting for the boat to appear, and then there were voices. A young couple, Americans with rucksacks, and then a British family with suitcases and grocery bags, and soon the pier was full and we were awash in a language we understood. We were already home. We slept on the boat.

Another thing I did—this was for two years, after I'd been back in the States for a while—was eat only watermelon seeds and purple cabbage, after the teachings of a man named Georg Trondheim, but my heart wasn't in it. There was none of the community that there'd been on the farm. I was living in Milwaukee at the time, in a converted warehouse, and working as a janitor for a textile company. I knew of only one other person following the Trondheim doctrine, a middle-aged woman with three kids and a dead husband. We met a few times, always at her home in the suburbs, and ate our seeds and our cabbage and tried not to pass out (I woke regularly—it scares me now to remember—on the floor of one office or another, the lights on, a mop across my chest, textile samples on the walls, and with no real idea of how long I'd been out). Her name was Margaret and I never met her kids, and after two years I went back to a regular diet and moved to L.A. and never saw her again. I found a job working on a fourth unit for Warner Brothers, filming ambient visuals for DVD menu backgrounds. That was the

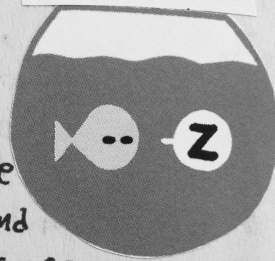
best job I've ever had. They let us all go after two years, when they just started using footage from the actual films. It was only a matter of time.

But before that, when I'd only been in L.A. for about six months, Dirt tracked me down. He'd been in La Jolla all that time, ever since we'd come back from England. He'd been working as a line cook at a breakfast place and living with first one woman then another, never for more than a few months. I guess he saw my name in the credits for a film, though I never asked. There was something inevitable about Dirt showing up. He left a note at my place: "I'm in town, but didn't want to surprise you. –Dirt." His phone number was written on the back. When I called, a woman picked up. I started to ask for Dirt before I thought better of myself and remembered his name. I asked for Michael. "Dirt! It's for you!" I heard the woman yell, and the clunk of the phone being set down, and then silence, and then rustling. "Hello?" It was Dirt. "Who was that?" I said. "My mom," said Dirt. "I'm visiting up from La Jolla for the weekend." He gave me the address, in Culver City, and I told him I'd see him for lunch the next day. That night, I dreamed I went to Culver City, to a little house in the middle of a soundstage, and the woman who answered the door was Margaret from Milwaukee, but she was also—as in dreams—the hollow-eyed woman from Autun, and she let me in without a word and led me down a hall to a room at the back of the house. It was dark, and it took my eyes a while to adjust, and when they did I realized Bro Bo was standing with his face inches from mine, not breathing, not moving, and wearing his dark glasses, even in a room in which there wasn't even the hint of a light. I asked him a question and he spoke but there was no sound, and then I woke up. It was nighttime but I was wide awake so I went out for a walk. In the morning it was all one long, continuous dream—the actual dream and

the walk and returning home and climbing back into bed. It was almost noon by the time I got out up. I showered and walked down to the bus stop. I rode the bus. I found the house. Dirt's mother was at work, he said. He looked good. He looked alive. "Listen," he said, after a silence had passed, and that silence after we'd been talking for a while, catching up, shooting the shit, reminiscing. "About Bro Bo." "I dreamt about him last night," I said, but it was like Dirt didn't hear me, he didn't acknowledge what I'd said, he didn't even seem to actively ignore it, he just kept going. "That kid was just some kid," he said. "What do you mean?" I said. "I wrote it all," he said. "All the teachings. Every single word." I stared at him. He continued. "You're the one person I've wanted to tell all these years because you're the one person who really seemed to get it." "Get what?" I said. He shrugged. "I don't know. You just seemed plugged in." He shrugged again. "It was just thing thing I did, and then I didn't want to do it anymore, and most of the time that seems like the right thing to have done, and sometimes it seems like what the fuck was I thinking?" He shrugged and stood up. He left the room and was gone for a while. The house was silent. I didn't know whether I believed him or not. Dirt had always had a tendency to say a lot of stuff. I stared at the fridge. I was still staring at it when Dirt came back into the room. He had a huge cardboard box in his arms. He set it down on the table. "I want you to have these," he said. I unfolded the top flaps. "The teachings," I said, before I'd even finished opening the box. I knew it. It made sense. Hundreds of flattened cereal boxes. I closed it again. I don't know what else we said to each other nor do I know how much longer I was there before I left. I rode home with the box of boxes beside me all the way, and when I got back to my apartment I put it in a cupboard and never looked at it again.

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DO FISH SLEEP?



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“On Helen Casper”

I first met the painter Helen Casper at a private symposium in upstate New York. I had left art school—as my father had predicted I would—after a semester and a half, and was working as a culture columnist for one of the many daily newspapers that litter the benches at train stations and clog gutters during rainstorms. The only reason I’d been invited to the symposium in the first place was because a friend of mine—Carlos Ruiz-Apel—had made me his plus one. Carlos was an artist. I was a bottom-feeder. I figured I’d meet some people, eat free food for a weekend, and at the end of it all write something about it for my column.

The symposium—a three-day event concerning the intersection between architecture and conceptual art—was being hosted by the philanthropist James Seligman at his summer home on a lake in the Adirondacks. His wife, Miranda—the woman from the telethons—had recently made the acquaintance of none other than the filmmaker Nathaniel Khan, son of the architect Louis Khan, and had been a silent partner in bankrolling *My Architect*, Nathaniel’s well-received documentary about his father’s work. Buildings, evidently, were her newfound passion.

I met Carlos at his motel room the night before. We drank too much beer and watched staticky porn. “If you watch enough of this stuff,” he said, “you start to really appreciate it as a craft.” “Porn?” I said. He shook his head. “Not all of it. Just the staticky stuff.” But Carlos wasn’t as much a mystic as that makes him sound. He did austere installation pieces. Work about absences. Empty rooms. Maybe that’s why he liked watching porn to unwind. He wasn’t turned on by it. It was an intellectual exercise. All those holes being filled must have seemed like the antithesis of his overall

project. “What have you been up to?” I remember him asking. “Nothing,” I said. “Nothing of value, I mean.” “You’re done with the black paintings?” I nodded. “Well, I’ve been reading your column.” “In Rhode Island? How?” “Michelle cuts it out every day and brings the clippings up every weekend—you’re not bad.” “Yeah, but I’m not good either.” “You’re doing fine.”

The week before, I’d taken the ferry to Staten Island to cover a competitive eating semi-final in Great Kills Park, and ended up mainly writing about the spouses of the competitors. The next morning I’d called in sick, and in the intervening days my editor had been running columns of mine from the year before. Then he started leaving me messages that said if I didn’t have something new for him by Tuesday I could start looking for work elsewhere. So I’d churn something out, even if I couldn’t bring myself to stand behind it.

•

Carlos and I had roomed together during my one proper semester, in a studio he rented off-campus. To help pay for the space, he’d built some bunk beds in one corner, and a revolving cast of students and morons paid whatever he told them to. I had a deal worked out that kept money from ever changing hands, since I had a part-time job at a building supplies warehouse. Anytime Carlos needed material for a project, we’d rent a truck and make stock disappear. I moved out when I lost my job, but it was just a formality. Carlos said I could stay as long as I wanted, but I was finished. A few weeks later I dropped out of school and left town.

•

Helen Casper née Secombe started working in the minimalist tradition while still in high school in northwestern Manitoba. By the time she graduated she had perfected a photorealist approach, and applied to the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts (RCA) with a portfolio that would subsequently make up more than half of her first major exhibition, at the Lewis Strohm Gallery, in Montreal.

When I met her she had already been away from the art community for several years, living in New Mexico with her husband, the photographer Marcus Johns. This self-imposed exile would go on for still another five years, and barely anyone—save for the odd curator or art dealer or close friend—would see either of them again for another two after that. No shows, no interviews, no lectures, no teaching. The symposium was a favor, they said. Helen was thirty-eight. Marcus was thirty-three and young for his age. They drove up from the desert in his Corvette, smoking Drum tobacco and drinking cans of 7-Up. Theirs was not a full retreat from the world, as it were, but a shying away, a peering out at it from behind their mother's knees. We met them on the road to the Seligmans' home, a one-lane drive that seemed to go on forever. I was following Carlos. At a blind curve we heard the sound of an engine and slowed, and they came at us from the opposite direction. They'd stayed the night before at the invitation of the Seligmans, and were going into town before everyone else showed up. They waved. Carlos waved. I waved. That was it. They got back late that night.

•

I read all this after the fact, once I'd returned to Brooklyn. My interest was piqued. Everything I came to know about Helen Casper I learned after we'd met. That weekend I

was blind to what was standing right in front of me, but not for lack of looking. I'd looked. I'd been looking for a while. But a painter is not her paintings, even if we trick ourselves into seeing them in their maker. There is the art and there is the artist, and I'd only ever seen the art.

I saw my first Casper in a museum in Boston. I'd seen photos, of course, but not the real thing until then. This was during that one full semester of art school. She wasn't written about back then. Even before disappearing she didn't grant interviews very often. Carlos and I and Carlos's girlfriend, Renee, drove up to Massachusetts for a long weekend. The Casper, *Self-Portrait with Isis (III) (29 years old; breasts sag; two scars; plantar wart; two hours of sleep; no breakfast)*, was from her Isis cycle. Painted during her time back in Manitoba on a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Isis paintings were the first to indicate her imminent mid-career shift to largely autobiographical work. At the time, of course, the subsequent paintings weren't yet painted. The Isis paintings were the latest things anyone had seen.

Between that weekend in Boston and the symposium where we met, I saw several other works of hers, mostly early paintings from the RCA days. There was a through-line of course, but the early works paled in comparison, and when we met I remember the most frequent subject to come up in conversation was a murky rumor that she'd recently sold a massive canvas to the Tate Modern in London. "Last time I checked I wasn't in the art supplies business," she said. Nobody pressed it any further than that.

•

Most of what I once remembered about that weekend is gone now, and those fragments that remain are as insignificant as old newspaper clippings. I remember the second night, when a discussion between the installation artists James Turrell and Dan Steinhilber devolved into a fistfight, and that we all just stood around them, cheering like teenagers. I remember the Seligmans giving a stale welcoming address, but that as hosts they were kinder than I'd expected they'd be. I remember the food we were served and the food that we ate. Late night runs into town with Carlos and an old friend of his, also named Carlos, for pizzas and beers. There were thirty-six people there that weekend. I remember only a handful of their names. Yet Helen and Marcus are as alive to me now as they were that weekend. Maybe more so. If we barely spoke then, it was because they were both art world celebrities and I was a fly on the wall, with a tape recorder and a composition notebook. Yet the weekend existed for the sake of one conversation, shared later the same evening as the fistfight. I'd gone outside, far enough down the drive, away from the house, so that I could see the stars. I was smoking a joint that I'd bummed off of Carlos. The pot was weak, but the ritual was nice all the same—flicking the lighter now and then. Suddenly I heard a voice from behind me, and I turned to see a silhouette—what did I expect?—approaching from the direction of the house. Presently the shade transformed itself into the figure of Helen. “I smelled grass,” she said, as she neared me, “Do you mind?” I shook my head, exhaled, and passed her the joint and the lighter. She sparked it and took a drag, coughed, handed it back. “Your Ruiz-Apel’s friend, right?” she said. “Yeah,” I said. She smiled. “I kept wondering why I didn’t know your work, and finally asked someone and they said you were a journalist?” She looked up at the sky. Looking back now she must have been feeling me out, trying to

figure out whether the cover on her exile had been blown. How many vultures were circling up there. “Sort of,” I said. I took another hit, passed it to her. “But that’s not really why I’m here.” “Oh,” she said. I explained about art school and having nothing to do. “I guess I miss it, the community, but I just didn’t have the drive.” “What program were you at?” she said. I exhaled. “RISD.” We were silent for a while. Then she said, “So you must know Dave Frazer.” “Yeah,” I said. “I took one of his classes. Why?” I said. “Why?” She shrugged and said, “We’ve shown together. He’s a friend.” The joint was almost done. We took turns pinching the roach between our fingertips once more and then I ground it out in the grass beneath my foot. “You should send me some of your work,” she said, as we walked back to the house. “Or—you know—photos, I mean.” I said I would, and she promised to give me their address before the weekend was over. But that never happened.

•

After the symposium I went back to the paper and tried to write about Helen but nothing came. I put the attempt in a drawer and wrote something else, something forgettable, something about upstate New York. I described the region as a kind of blank canvas, a surface onto which one can project whatever part of oneself one chooses. It kept me from losing my job, but it was one of the worst things I’ve ever signed my name to.

For almost a year I kept my head down and stayed quiet. I had a relationship with an older woman that ended without explanation after four months. I thought about painting again but there was nothing to paint. I visited a prostitute out of boredom and curiosity more than anything. I fell out of touch with Carlos, or, rather, finished the

process of falling out of touch that had started the day I left school. Then, almost a year after the symposium, I received a letter, care of the newspaper, with no return address. I'd changed apartments and hadn't told anyone where I was living. I wondered if it counted as disappearing if no one noticed you'd gone. The letter was from Helen. In it, she asked if I'd be interested in coming down to New Mexico, not to write anything, but to see them—to see the studio. She apologized for having forgotten to give me their address. It was included in the letter. "Send photos of your work," she wrote. I quit my job the next day, and the day after that I was on a Greyhound to Santa Fe.

•

My decision wasn't entirely insane. In the year that had elapsed I'd read everything I could get my hands on concerning Helen, and, to a lesser degree, Marcus as well. Helen's work, I'd come to understand, was my work, which is to say that, as long as she was painting, I didn't have to. She could create the work that seemed somehow inevitable to me, and I could spend my every waking hour celebrating its existence as if I had been the one who had conjured it from nothing. In an interview with *Artforum*, from before the move to New Mexico, she'd said that painting, as she conceived of it and practiced it, was the only way to travel back in time. In another interview that, inexplicably, had appeared in a Parisian newspaper just a few months before I received her letter, she'd described her work as "subcutaneous." As well as tracking down every written word concerning Helen, I'd spent countless hours staring at reproductions of her work. The massive canvas that had been a rumor less than a year before did indeed exist, and was—and indeed still is—at the Tate Modern. The painting, *All That Weight (37)*,

measuring 30 feet by 45 feet, is almost entirely blank, unpainted canvas, at the center of which is a tiny self-portrait in the photorealist style that Helen had by that point largely moved away from. The accompanying artist's statement reads, "I wanted to make the viewer aware of the white space of the gallery as an oppressive context, and I realized that I could never do so if the white space was allowed to speak for itself. Thus the gallery wall has been replaced by the painting, which, while largely unexciting to look at, cannot help but impose itself on the viewer's psyche—that frame is up there, it's over there, it's all around you, and you can't ignore it, no matter how hard you try." In the years that have passed since I last saw Helen I've made the journey to London twice, and seen *All That Weight* (37) at least a dozen times. The intended effect never loses its power. The canvas dominates your field of vision. The only way you can master it is to lose sight of the actual painted image. And when you're close enough to see it you can't pay attention. In the photos I saw of it, in that year following the symposium, it still resonated, but the full scope of it was—is—untranslatable.

•

I don't think I'd imagined how big New Mexico would be. I thought I'd get off the bus and walk a few hours, or catch a cab if I had to, or hitchhike. At any rate, I hadn't looked at a map. I didn't really know where I was going. Helen had given me a phone number in the letter, but I hadn't felt like making a long distance call from New York, so when I arrived in Santa Fe a little after midnight I found a payphone and went through the motions. "So you're where?" said Helen, once she'd gotten over the surprise of my unannounced pilgrimage. "Santa Fe." "Jesus." "Am I far?" "Three and a half hours if I

left now and pushed the speed limit, but I think Marcus took the Corvette into town. You might be on your own.” The station had emptied out completely by now—the vending machines humming in one corner—airbrakes somewhere out of sight. I said, “I’ll find a place to sleep for the night.” “Call back in the morning. We’ll sort something out. This guy’s supposed to be bringing Marc down a bunch of developer from Santa Fe in the next day or two, maybe I can get you a ride with him.”

The next morning I called, but there was no answer. I got breakfast and sat in a park for a while. Then I went back to the payphone and called again. Helen picked up.

“I talked to the guy,” she said. “Meet him out front of the Greyhound station at one o’clock. His name’s Rob. I told him you’d be looking for him.” I asked how I’d spot him. “He’ll be driving a big flatbed. Should be fairly obvious.” We said goodbye and hung up.

•

That was the last time I spoke to Helen Casper, though there were letters once or twice, years later. I went back to New York only long enough to collect my things, then I moved to another city and got another job.

That day, at the Greyhound station, I waited until the sun had gone down, and then I thought about calling before realizing, abruptly, that what had happened had happened and was done. Maybe Rob had forgotten or Helen had never called him in the first place, simply hadn’t had the heart to just tell me to fuck off. The specifics weren’t important to me. It was enough that I’d come to Santa Fe bearing photographs of my paintings. That no one had seen them—that Helen and Marcus hadn’t seen them—didn’t

matter. Not really, at least. I'd gone to the desert and cast away my failed past. Almost a decade later, when Helen began publishing essays in *Artforum* and *Stylus*, I stopped writing entirely. If she was doing it, I didn't have to.

"These will be my memoirs, after a fashion," she wrote. "The public records of a life briefly lived." In those pages—short screeds on subjects such as her childhood obsessions and early artistic failings—she recounts her life as nothing more than a series of facts: "Helen Victoria Casper. Born in Highmount, Manitoba—February 5, 1958." But, in her own words, "The art almost always lies outside of the frame."

In one of her last essays for *Artforum*, remembering our arrival at the Seligman house, Helen wrote of an archway—"the archway beneath which we all had to pass merely to gain entry to the grounds. The archway—too small for any of our cars to fit through; not low, but narrow, and with such tightly spaced pillars so as to cast shadows that fused into one black veil that fanned like smoke across the sandstone courtyard within. There, directionless and with our host temporarily missing, we all congregated quietly in clusters of threes, fours and fives, taking advantage of the inevitable connections that we brought with us from the suddenly faraway outside world."

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Helen disappeared six years ago, while in Australia for the Sydney Biennial. I read about it in the *New York Times Magazine*. "Painter and essayist Helen Casper..." It wasn't an obituary but it felt like one. I wrote to her once, after the first *Artforum* essay. I said I'd been thinking about her and Marcus and that weekend in the Adirondacks. I said I was living in Colorado if they were ever passing through. She wrote back and said that things

were going well. She mentioned something she was working on, but it wasn't clear whether she was painting or writing—maybe she'd stopped even distinguishing between the two. She was forty-six then, and in the process of working on a series of oils entitled *Unfinished*, to which she devoted the last three years of her life. The series, itself unfinished at the time of her disappearance, consists of thirty-three works, most in various states of completion. The last one, *Unfinished (33)*, is a self-portrait. In it, she's a New England landscape. It's autumn and the trees are all bare. In the distance, sketched in pencil, barely, is the intimation of a sailboat on a lake.

“Thirteen Virgins, or The Pineapple Farm”

I heard this story from a friend of mine who spent a few years working on a pineapple farm in North Dakota. The owner of the farm was a Frenchman who had made a name for himself buying up huge plots of land in Siberia and the bottom of the Arctic Circle and basically terraforming them into tropical oases. Arctic mangoes. Arctic coconuts. Banana plantations within eyeshot of glaciers. His name was Francois or Michel or something French. A last name that was completely unpronounceable. Anyway, this friend of mine ended up working closely with the Frenchman on what was supposed to be just the first of 32 North American sites (one of three slated for the Dakotas—most of the rest scattered evenly throughout Canada and Alaska). My friend was—is still—an organic chemist. He’s very good, I’m told. Taught at Yale for a while.

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The story is perhaps most unsettling in its most basic iteration, which is that the Frenchman required 13 virgins to spend one night bare to the elements, nude, in any location he’d scouted before he’d commence with the process of what I’ll keep referring to as terraforming—the word seems right. Most of the virgins died within hours, frozen to death or murdered by their companions. The cold drove them mad. Those who managed to live long enough to see dawn before they succumbed to hypothermia: they made it that long—were found in the morning, dead like the rest—beneath the piled bodies of the other 12—entombed in a mausoleum of flesh. Pseudoscience, my friend said. 13 was a special number. The Frenchman said virgins’ bodies, untarnished by fornication, were like tuning forks, and that their corpses were like roadmaps in the

process of changing the land. And his hands were clean, legally speaking—everyone signed waivers. He, or his people, merely told them where to go for the night, and he didn't need the bodies: the coroners' reports told him everything he needed to know. "The biggest truths lie in the littlest details" was, I'm told, one of his favorite maxims. In North Dakota he wore a cowboy hat; he wore spurs. He was small—5'7"—and spoke softly. He met with the virgins—always six of one, seven of the other—and explained his project and his methods and told them how valuable they were. Then he left and my friend—and no one lasted long in this role, in Russia, in the Arctic—my friend had sidestepped into it, had come on as a GMO consultant and been roped into extra duties—my friend would come into the room with reams of waivers and releases and he would get video and audio documentation of informed consent. They would discuss remuneration and that was it. They would be dead the next day. My friend did it once more for the Frenchman in Alberta before quitting, and the two of them only ever crossed paths once more, years later, at a conference in Berlin.

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I saw my friend last night for the first time in years. He seems quieter each time we reunite—smaller, as if he is receding towards a horizon that has finally stopped retreating, as if he, like his Frenchman, has found a way to master nature, and as if he is paying for it on a daily basis.

“DMC-12”

1

For weeks I’d been listening to Jay describe a DeLorean DMC-12 to me that he’d seen one night while walking home from some party in Neshaminy. Friday morning, a little after six, he called to tell me that he’d decided to buy it and would I please come with him because his license had been suspended and he needed me to drive it off the lot for him. “Just off the lot, that’s all,” he said.

And so a few hours later I met him down at the bus stop.

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The dealership was on a side street about ten blocks from the bus stop. As we walked along the empty street in silence Jay stayed a few feet ahead of me, canted forward like a man confronting a gale. Downtown Conshohocken—which was really just a main road that ran down a steep hill towards a long bridge across a river and then onto the interstate—was outfitted with flags for Independence Day, and the trees that sprung up intermittently from the sidewalk were ringed with yellow ribbon tied in big, loose bows. After a few blocks we stopped in at a gas station so he could buy cigarettes. I scanned a back issue of *Sports Illustrated* while Jay tried to explain to the teenage clerk—whose face was a mask of acne scars beneath a furrowed, incredulous brow—that the wedding ring on his finger was *proof enough* that he was twenty-eight; that you had to be eighteen to even *get* married.

“Nuh-uh,” said the kid, shaking his head. “Nuh-uh man. Friend a’mine’s girlfriend’s parents signed for her so she could marry him before he shipped off.”

“Look at me,” said Jay. “*Look at my face.*” He tilted his head back, and, to the ceiling, said, “I have a *full fucking beard.*”

“I would too if I hadn’t a shaved it off this morning,” said the kid. Finally, after a few more minutes of this, Jay gave up and stood outside while I pulled out my driver’s license and paid for the smokes with his twenty. Back out front I handed Jay his change and the cigarettes. “Goddamn kid,” he said as he tamped the pack against the heel of his palm.

“You still wear the ring,” I said.

He touched the gold band. “Visual reminder not to do it again,” he said. Then he smiled. “Plus my fingers got fat.”

•

Jay was on his third smoke by the time we got to the dealership—a squat building flanked by a vacant lot and a fenced-in warehouse. The car was parked out at the edge of the lot, its front bumper nosed out over the sidewalk and its doors opened up and out to either side. A price was scrawled illegibly in white soap across its windshield. “There it is,” said Jay, and we both stood there, staring at the car, so black that all the morning’s sunlight simply seemed to melt around it. He took a drag off his cigarette and exhaled smoke. Then we stepped off the curb and crossed the street. A man in a short-sleeved button down shirt materialized in the shade of the building. He threaded his way between parked cars until we met somewhere near the middle of the lot.

“Can I help you gentlemen?”

He smelled of palm oil and something else that I didn’t recognize.

“That DeLorean,” said Jay. “How much are you asking?”

“Straight to the point,” said the man. “Straight to the point. I like that.”

“How much?”

“I’ll go check. Just a minute.”

He went inside. The air conditioner in one of the dealership windows rumbled and ticked. He came back and quoted a price. Jay wrote a check for the whole amount. More standing. Signatures. I watched a crow eat garbage in the vacant lot. Somewhere a siren erupted and slowly faded into the distance.

“Just give my guy a couple hours to tune her up,” said the man. “Go grab a beer or something. Walk around, y’know?”

“Yeah,” said Jay. “A beer. Sounds good.” He looked down at the wrinkled yellow copy of his receipt. “We’ll be back around one?”

“Absolutely,” said the man. “Around one. Absolutely.”

They shook hands. As we crossed the lot, Jay folded the receipt unevenly and tucked it into the back pocket of his jeans. We ended up back in a pizza place that we’d passed on the way over. Jay slurped at his soda while I worked my way slowly through his thick leftover crusts. We’d been sitting there for probably close to an hour when Jay finally broke the silence. He took a mouthful of soda and then, swallowing, detached himself from his straw like a diver coming up for air, and said, quietly, “Let’s go.”

We walked back over to the dealership a little before one o’clock. The car was waiting. “Hop on the highway,” said Jay.

We'd been driving for almost an hour, bombing north along the 611, when Jay spotted a hitchhiker standing in the weeds off the shoulder. I hadn't seen him, but Jay was adamant that he was there. He turned and squinted back through the rear window and said we should at least see where he was headed. I pulled over. Jay rolled his window down, leaned out and looked back.

"He there?" I said.

"Yeah. He's coming."

I glanced in the rearview mirror but couldn't see anything. A few seconds later I heard footsteps, then a man's face appeared outside Jay's window. He was clean-shaven and looked about 40 years old. Jay asked where he was headed.

"Out to round about Scranton," said the guy. "But anywhere along here's just fine."

"Scranton?" said Jay. "I got a cousin out there."

"Oh yeah? What's his name?"

"*Her* name," said Jay. I went to turn the radio on but nothing happened. "Her name's Martha." Jay unbuckled and climbed out to let the guy in past his seat.

"Not Martha Roestler," said the guy.

"No," said Jay. "Different Martha."

I waited for them to get situated before I pulled off the shoulder. A second later a tractor trailer tore past us. Jay and the hitchhiker kept up a steady stream of small talk while I fiddled with the radio. After a few minutes I interrupted the two of them.

"I think the radio's busted."

“What?” said Jay. “Are you serious?” He stabbed at a few of the buttons. “This is bullshit.”

He hunched down and started to do everything I’d just done.

“What’s your name, man?” I said to the hitchhiker, trying to spot him in the rearview mirror—he seemed to be lying down.

“Doctor,” said the guy.

“No way. Really?” said Jay from down by my knees.

“Yeah,” said Doctor. He sounded amused. “That’s what my folks gave me to work with.”

“Can I call you Doc?” I said.

“Most people do.”

We were all quiet for a little while. The whole world seemed to hesitate.

“How far you guys actually going anyway?” said Doc.

“Good question,” I said.

Jay was still bent double. “I can’t believe this fucking radio’s broken,” he said.

“Maybe it’s just one of those things,” said Doc. “My sister can’t get her car out of neutral if it’s more than eighty degrees outside.”

“Are you kidding me?” said Jay. He straightened up. “That happens? What does she do in the summer?”

“Turns it on in the morning and leaves it idling in the driveway.”

“You’re kidding,” I said. “I mean—you’ve gotta be kidding. That’d be a huge waste of gas.”

“Yeah,” said Doc. “Yeah. It sure is.”

I glanced up again into the rearview mirror. Doc had sat up. He seemed to be combing his hair with his fingers.

“How long since your last ride?” I said.

“Oh, a few hours.” He paused. “What time is it?”

“I don’t know,” said Jay. “This radio’s fucked.”

A little while later we pulled off the highway for gas. I pumped while Doc and Jay went inside to look around. At first I could see them through the big front window, pacing up and down the aisles, gesturing as they spoke, but after a while—though the building wasn’t very big—I lost sight of them. I pulled the car away from the pump and stalked off into the dark away from the station to pee into a ditch behind the dumpsters. When I came back around they were both in the car. I climbed in and twisted around in my seat to look at Doc.

“Listen,” I said. “I think we might turn around and head back. Maybe you should hang out here and try and catch the next ride that comes through.”

He nodded and started to say something but Jay cut him off: “No—come on, man,” he said to me, “just a little bit further. Doc, you said Scranton, right?”

“Yessir.”

“Scranton,” Jay said to me. “Let’s just take him to Scranton.”

“That’s like an hour away,” I said.

“Forty-five minutes max. Besides, we can probably stay the night at my cousin’s place.”

Doc was silent, as if he'd done this a million times before and knew nothing he could say would make a difference—he'd get where he was going eventually, one way or the other.

3

We got to Scranton a little past three. Doc leaned forward to give us directions. Once he'd gotten us to the main road he sat back. "And then it's just right next to the bowling alley. You can't miss it."

"Lucky Lanes?" said Jay.

"Nah. Strike Zone. Lucky Lanes shut down."

Jay seemed to have to think about that for a couple long seconds.

"Up there?" I said.

"Yeah. Just pull into the lot."

We floated across the asphalt. I turned off the engine. Jay opened his door and let Doc out. We said our goodbyes and then watched as he loped away, shouldering his backpack and hiking up his pants every few seconds like the action was part of his natural stride.

"Doc needs a belt," said Jay. He sounded solemn.

I started the car again and we left.

•

Jay's cousin Martha lived on the outskirts of town, on a plot of land that, according to Jay, had once been part of a coal mine. He directed me along roads lined with neat rows of young evergreens. After a long time Jay told me to turn left and we thumped off the

asphalt onto gravel. Every few seconds the DeLorean's tires skipped a beat and the engine whined like a cornered animal. The long driveway led to a two story house with a gable roof and a chimney pouring smoke. Every light in the place seemed to be turned on. The front door was open, and the lawn was covered with parked cars.

My window was down and I could hear the murmur of voices from inside, underscored by something that sounded like music. As I took in the scene I noticed a tall man amidst the cars, pacing around aimlessly and drumming on the rooftops. He flagged us down and kind of half-gestured to an open spot near the front path. I parked the car and we both got out. The guy strode over to us. His arms were long and dangling and he had a face that seemed permanently sagged into a dopey, vacant grin. He was the kind of guy who, if he were a gangster, would have a nickname like 'Crusher'—or maybe 'Smiley' because he'd smile while he was crushing you.

"Hey," said Jay. "Is Martha around?"

There was a delay before the guy spoke.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah, she's in there somewhere." He looked at the house.

"Last I seen of her she was in the kitchen."

The hallway was unadorned—a long stretch of linoleum floor lit by one bare bulb on the ceiling. There were people in every room and cigarette smoke in the air. Martha was standing in the kitchen. I knew everything about her the minute we met. The way her bones stretched her skin, how her eyes seemed to dart in slow motion. It was all too familiar. She took my one hand, extended, between both of hers—the rough palms like sandpaper. She said my name twice—first as a question, then as a kind of affirmation—smiling at the corner of her mouth, then she hugged Jay and kissed his cheeks and told

him it'd been too long. A guy with a cast on his right arm was sitting at the table. A few other people were clustered by the window, smoking a joint. She introduced us around as if we were ghosts, or the other way around. I left the kitchen and wandered from room to room. The party was quiet, smoldering. The music had stopped. In the living room, arrayed across cat-scratched couches and chairs, a handful of people in a loose circle listened as first one person then another spoke one at a time. I stood in the archway and listened, too, without meeting the eyes of a single one of them. I lost track of the time.

When I felt a tap on my shoulder I turned, expecting Jay, and found myself face to face with Martha instead. Up close her breath smelled like baby powder. Her eyes were bloodshot. She had her hands beneath my shirt.

“Come upstairs,” she said through gritted teeth. “Come upstairs.”

“But—”

“Jay’s busy.” The way she said it made me think something horrible had happened. “Come on.” Her skin felt like ice. I tensed against her hands. She was breathing fast, boring her eyes into mine as if she knew we shared a secret—as if she knew we were really the same as each other. I felt her reach beneath my belt and take hold of me, I was in danger and I knew it but I couldn’t get away. I was pinned against the wall. We were alone. We went upstairs into a bedroom as unadorned as the living room, as the hallway, as the house—into a bed as lifeless as the air we breathed. She had my pants unbuttoned before I knew what was happening. I had a nipple or a raised bruise or a bone beneath flesh between my lips by the time I realized that I didn’t know what to do with it. Not anymore. She moved around on top of me like a slowly breaking vase—moving from one dream to the next, the way I remembered it used to be, easy, moving


through the world between fixes, knowing it would be just as well not to. When she stopped I barely noticed the difference.

She spoke but I didn't hear. She held me. She lay beside me and held me. She lay beside me and held me and then she spoke again. The same words. I shook my head and apologized. I felt like crying.

"It's okay," she said.

"No. I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"Baby. It's okay. Listen," she said. "It's fine. Don't worry." She seemed to stand above me as if I was in a cradle. What magic she spoke. But she seemed to fade out of the world, and when she came back she seemed smaller somehow. And in that moment I was frightened again, felt the danger, though I didn't know why. And I felt her tremble beside me like she'd gone suddenly electric. And it was as if the world had suddenly noticed her. And I shut my eyes and, just like that, she was gone.



by tourists. we were not tourists, though we lived like we were, which is to say that we lived without rhythm, and that we rarely ate meals at home. our kitchen looked like a real estate photograph. I often felt like a guest in my own home. my wife was at work all the time and our daughter was attending a Spanish school and, increasingly, spoke only in a language I barely understood (it occurs to me now that this must be an experience that all parents have, and that I was perhaps fortunate to have it happen so clearly, to have the change be so complete, though at the time it felt eerie). I was alone for much of the day every day. I was between clients and had been for months, which always made me antsy, as if there would be no more, as if I

“Viva España”

12 years have passed and still I can't shake the feeling that things might have gone differently—that I could have done something differently, though what I do not know, and certainly wouldn't have known at the time. Of course, what happens has already happened, in a sense—it is over by the time we perceive it. There was never any other way. There never will be. I know this. I knew it then, too.

The feeling is less one of regret at a past shortcoming than it is a feeling that I was present for a moment of infinite possibility—I believe there are only a few of these in a lifetime. I feel as if I boarded the wrong train, or as if, perhaps, I am still in the station. It is a feeling that comes most strongly at night, and is gone by morning, though the memory remains.

•

We lived in Barcelona, on the third story of a building about two blocks away from the Gaudi hotel, with a window that looked out at a brick wall and another that looked out at the street. The floors were wood and worn, like the deck of a retired military vessel anchored at port and eternally weighed down by tourists. We were not tourists, though we lived like we were, which is to say that we lived without rhythm, and that we rarely ate meals at home. Our kitchen looked like a real estate photograph. I often felt like a guest in my own home. My wife was at work all the time and our daughter was attending a Spanish school and, increasingly, spoke only in a language I barely understood (it occurs to me now that this must be an experience that all parents have, and that I was

perhaps fortunate to have had it happen so clearly, to have the change be so complete, though at the time it felt eerie). I was alone for much of the day every day. I was between clients and had been for months, which always made me antsy, as if there would be no more, as if I would be free, as if I would be forced to live the rest of my life with the memory of the last job. This was all I could think about. I went for long walks in the hope that a change of scenery would help. In this way, too, I was not unlike a tourist. But I was directionless. I envied the tourists and their itineraries.

•

I remember almost perfectly the night the call came. It had by then been almost six months since I had received such a call. The man had an American accent—it sounded like music. I was directed to a payphone in the gothic quarter. Thirty minutes. My wife was in her study, my daughter in her room. I grabbed my coat—it was cool out—and left.

I knew where the phone was—I knew where all the phones were. I had, on my walks, mapped the city's public telephones to my subconscious, as I had in any city I'd lived in since my first job. It was a habit. I knew exactly where the phone was. I was elated. I walked briskly with my hands in my pockets and my collar pulled up against the chill. It was the middle of the week and the clubs were quiet, an occasional lone figure toeing the curb and smoking a cigarette as if in a dream, or as if in a dream in a film, where everything is too simple, too logical, too easy to believe. Eventually I was in the neighborhoods where the windows were shuttered, and then the market, empty, the stands

covered and dark, the lingering smell of seafood and butchered meat, and then nothing—the mountain loomed over everything, I could see where the city came to an end at its base. Somewhere up there was a castle that had been empty for centuries, save for a time during the civil war, though that would have been as when children play atop an old grave. I was close now. It had been almost half an hour. Soon the phone would ring and I would answer as if compelled by fate, as if there was no other way (as in fact there could not have been, I know now), and I would hear a voice and I would follow instructions. Perhaps the phone was even ringing now, though not for me, as it would ring again once I'd gone, and again, and again, and would go for days without a sound and then again would ring until, one day, it would be over, as for everything we take for granted in the moment.

I was two blocks away and would soon hear the voice say my wife's name and I wouldn't understand and I would ask the voice—the American—to please repeat and I would hear it again, as in a dream, or a dream in a film, and the voice would go on: a time, a place to dump the body, a deposit box in Seville where payment would be waiting, all the steps that I knew so well. There was a sound and it was my voice and I was speaking. All things, in that moment, were as they had been and always would be forever.

“Coast”

I bought the lottery ticket because I was out of ideas. I’m not normally an impulsive person. Margot had told me about a friend of hers who hit five grand on a two dollar scratch ticket from the gas station on Morris. He’d used the money to pay his rent ahead six months and had holed up with toaster pastries and instant coffee.

“I guess he’s painting,” said Margot, “or something.”

“He’s a painter?”

“He’s...I don’t know—” She took a sip of her wine. “Yeah.” She smiled. “I don’t know.”

•

I’d gone out to the coast because of a deal I’d made with Margot. This was back when we were strung out up in Vancouver, B.C., where we’d had friends who’d invited us up.

We ate two dollar Vietnamese hoagies every meal for three months. The taste of daikon radish. Stale rolls.

“Let’s get clean,” said Margot one night, while we were lying on couches on the porch.

“Where?” I said. I didn’t ask how we’d do it. Back then everything was a vague possibility.

Across the street, a middle aged man cleaned his car. The vacuum’s hose caught in the driver’s side door.

“My uncle has a house on the coast,” she said. “An hour and a half straight out from Olympia.”

•

Of course the ticket, the ticket I ended up buying—a five dollar thing in gold foil, labeled “El Dorado”—it didn’t hit, of course. But I’d bought it. That’s what mattered.

Later that day, with the spent ticket on the counter, I called my sister, Lauren, back in Maine, for the first time in months.

“I bought a lottery ticket,” I said. It seemed like news.

“Why’d you do that?”

“I don’t know.”

In the background I could hear her kids playing with Mark, her husband. Their father, just to be clear. He kept calling out something that sounded like, “I am the death!” Lauren and I stayed on the phone for a while, and by the time we hung up, the kids had gone to bed and Mark, she told me, was out back.

“Is he smoking again?” I said

“Only at night.”

•

During the day I liked to walk along the beach. I’d found this spot where the waves cut a long trench underwater late in the afternoon every day, just as the tide went out. The undertow was like the absence of sound. Back at the house, Margot read to me from the King James Bible. Corinthians, Psalms, the Sermon on the Mount.

“I always used to like the parts in the Old Testament,” I told her, “where the genealogies just filled entire pages.”

“Me too. I always wished my family made as much sense.”

“I just liked hearing the words.”

We went into town and got our methadone in the pharmacy where teenagers stole cough syrup and old couples filled their prescriptions together and walked arm in arm across the parking lot, clutching paper bags with doctors’ notes stapled to the outsides. Margot told me about her grandparents who’d retired to Puerto Rico. I told her about mine who’d all died when I was young. We got our doses for the day and went out for sodas. Mothers with children and strollers outside of the kindergarten.

•

Two days after the El Dorado, I went back to the gas station and bought two more tickets. These ones were cheaper by an entire dollar eighty-five, and less flashy, just green paper made to look like crisp dollar bills with Uncle Sam where George Washington should’ve been.

Neither one of them hit, but I could feel something in the air. A crackling like the buildup of pressure before a thunderstorm, when the leaves flutter impatiently, before the wind comes all at once. Margot had left. She called me from her brother’s place in Spokane to tell me that she’d be back the next day. Early.

“Our mom’s been sick,” she said.

I didn’t say anything.

“I’ll be back in the morning,” she said again.

•

Weeks passed. My blood felt thinner. The leaves back east changed color. I woke every morning feeling hungover and sat on the toilet to pee, too dizzy to stand for too long. In November, Margot started lowering her doses: three little pills to my four.

Some mornings she was sick but she wanted to get clean.

“I can feel my own *skin* again,” she said.

Lauren called a week before Thanksgiving. I answered the phone on the first ring.

“Mark and I have discussed it,” she said, after we’d been talking for a minute.

“We’d like to fly you back here for a few weeks.”

Two days later, the ticket arrived in the mail. I borrowed a suitcase from Margot.

The airport had the air of a hospital waiting room.

Their children were bigger than when I’d last seen them.

•

I called Margot from Lauren’s study while they were all out one day. Mark had taken the kids to a movie. Something about penguins. Lauren was shopping.

“How you holding up?” said Margot.

“I’m fine.”

“My dad tried to kill himself.”

“Jesus.”

“I just got back maybe five minutes ago. I drove all night when they called me from the hospital.”

“Is he okay?”

“He’s fine,” she said.

“Your dad, I mean.”

“He’s fine.” She breathed. “They’re doing work on the 90 at night right now. I had to take a detour. I got lost.”

“Lauren’s kids have gotten older,” I said.

We talked a little longer. I told her I’d be back in a few days.

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

Lauren came back with baskets from the farmer’s market. Eggs. Produce. A peach pie in an aluminum dish. We sat on her back porch and drank a fresh pot of coffee and ate out of the tin with forks until all that was left was crumbs. The shadows lengthened across the yard. There was a neighborhood of families. As dusk came on she made a little sound of remembering and stood and went into the house. When she came back she was carrying a bag.

“Winter’s coming,” she said. “I just thought you might need these.”

A sweater, warm pants, socks.

Later that night, after Mark and the kids had come home, Lauren and I were in the kitchen.

“I need money,” I said. “I just, I need to borrow some money.” I said it like I was admitting defeat.

A long silence as she filled a glass of water from the tap. The sound of her setting it on the counter. A toilet flushing upstairs.

“How much?”

•

Nights alone when the kids were fast asleep and Lauren and Mark were working from home. I walked around the neighborhood at the edge of a town at the edge of a continent. The sky stayed light long after the sun set. The night before I flew back to Washington I bought a Powerball ticket at a general store that I'd passed almost every day that I'd been there. An old lady sold it to me. My fingers must've been shaking. Back at the house I showed it to Lauren. We were in her office. The radio whispering softly from a shelf.

“I don't think they announce it till Sunday,” she said.

“Then you should probably hold onto it for me.”

On the plane the next day, descending into Chicago for a layover, I got a pressure headache like my skull was splitting open. I pressed my forehead against the back of the seat in front of me and squeezed my eyes shut against unbidden tears. In the airport I felt like I was going through withdrawal. Everything seemed bigger than it was.

•

Maybe if I hit big I'd finally get clean. Do like Margot's friend, hole up, withdrawal. Maybe I'd move back east and visit Lauren on the weekends. I'd run out of ideas is what it was. I'd come to the end of the world with someone who was ready to bathe herself in the water, and all I had left was my habits. I promised myself, some nights, that if I scored, if I won, I'd do that, I'd start over, I'd baptize myself. I'd buy a boat and fish for lobsters and sell them in Bangor. Play uncle. Learn it all over. It was a plan.

•

All that winter I stayed indoors. Margot drove her truck to the post office, the grocery store, the clinic, and came back bearing everything we needed. I watched squirrels through the back window until she returned.

Late in January, Margot's cousin and his wife drove up from their home in California.

"They're selling the house," Margot told me once they'd left, "my uncle's family. We need to be out by June."

•

Late at night, if you stayed quiet enough, you could hear the waves lapping at the hulls of the barges out at sea. You could hear snow falling back in New England. Margot ran baths and read the newspapers from the library. She borrowed knitting books and started knitting a sweater. Loops of yarn on the couch every morning. She'd take it apart and start over each day, getting a little bit farther each time. Our lives revolved around quarter to one in the afternoon, when we could take our drugs and hang on a bit longer. Margot lowered her dose a little more every month. Two and a half pills. Two pills. One and three quarters. I saw less of her as she spent more time away from the house. I read the Bible wherever she'd dog-eared the pages.

I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

I have led a blameless life.

•

In March, Margot's mom died without warning. The phone rang at three a.m.

“Will you come with me?” she said when she’d finished pacing in the hall, when she’d hung up, when there was nothing left to do.

We left before the moon had gone down.

As I drove she sorted through what papers she had of her mother’s, in a cardboard box balanced on her knees, she kept saying, “There was this card.” She kept saying, “This card that she sent me.” She kept saying, “I gotta find this card. I have to find this card.”

The highway was empty. Margot fell asleep with her head against the window, my jacket draped over her shoulders. We arrived in Spokane a few hours later.

“What day is it?” I said as we drove through downtown. “Is it Sunday?”

“I don’t know,” said Margot.

Her parents lived in a split level home at the top of a steep, shaded driveway. Moss at the edges of the crumbling asphalt. A dead tree on its side on the lawn.

“Is anybody home?”

“I don’t think so. I don’t see any cars.”

We got out and walked around to the back. The house was locked. We sat in the truck. I thought about my grandfather’s funeral—my father’s father—in a Catholic church. My shoes didn’t fit and my feet kept cramping up.

“I need a suit,” I said.

“You don’t need a suit,” said Margot.

“Something nice, at least,” I said.

We drove back into town and found a shopping mall and an outlet store. I bought some pants and a dress shirt while Margot waited in the truck. Afterwards we went to a

burger place by the highway and splashed water on our faces in the handicapped bathroom. When we got back to her parents' house the front door was open. A station wagon was parked on the grass.

•

Of course, Margot's father didn't want me at the service, so Margot and I went to the funeral home to see the coffin. The car, her father's station wagon, smelled like old cigarettes. Margot stopped and waited at every single stop sign.

The funeral home was across the street from a forsaken strip mall. A credit union sandwiched between boarded up storefronts. The coffin was alone in a room off the hall. Folding chairs were stacked against the wall.

I stared at the body, the rouged cheeks, the folded hands, and remembered Margot when she used to nod off in mid-sentence—like a child trying to stay awake for New Year's. I wanted to reach out and touch her hair, feel her skin, Margot's, her mother's, I couldn't distinguish. It was as if by reaching out I could go back to the way things were, but Margot was with me, and so I just stared. After a while she took me back to the house, and I sat in her old bedroom while she and her father were gone.

•

That was the year it snowed in May and we ran out of money and couldn't put gas in Margot's truck. As if in obeisance to some ancient agreement, I became the breadwinner, and went out, and picked up food stamps, and got our drugs, and came home, and Margot

stoked the fireplace with boards from the house they'd stopped building down the street. We got by.

Margot kept knitting. She finished the sweater. She made a scarf. She made mittens. She clothed us.

She was down to a pill a day. Then half a pill a day. She moved through the stages. She threw up. She got better. I watched her come to life like she was a mother giving birth and, at the same time, the child being born. She gained weight. She lost weight. She jogged every morning.

One night, without thinking about it, on the way home from the grocery store, I went back to the gas station. I'd saved a few dollars worth of quarters and dimes from the sidewalks. I had a paper bag filled with orange plastic bottles and candy bars and potato chips and soda and a receipt. I had on a jacket that I'd bought in Maine before Lauren and Mark first got pregnant. I needed a haircut. I needed a shave. I needed a lot of things.

I bought a two dollar thing called the Pot O'Gold with a four leaf clover and a leprechaun and a rainbow. The whole deal.

I didn't even bother going outside before I scratched it, one, two, three, with the edge of a penny from a dish by the register. I didn't look. I just scratched. And when it was done, I put the penny down and looked back over my work.

The kid behind the counter must have known. People must jump up and down when they win. Or maybe it gets to be like everything else, where you hit big and just put it back in, buy more tickets, wait for the next one, wait. Maybe he knew because I didn't look up. Maybe he just knew.

“Better luck next time,” he said without inflection. Or maybe he didn’t. Maybe the snow muffled everything.

Outside, I blew warm air into my cupped hands.

By the time I got back to the house it was late and Margot had gone off to bed.

I sat in the living room and watched embers pulse in the fireplace. In the morning we’d wake up and start over.

“Raphael Martin”

It was while writing a review, for a friend’s small literary journal, of a collection of early stories by Collette that I first came across the poems of Raphael Martin. I had not heard of Martin up to that point, and the poems, which appeared in Italian alongside one of the Collette stories in a now defunct magazine based out of Venice, were accompanied by a note on the author so scant that it might as well not have existed in the first place. I was doing my homework, tracking down original versions of the Collette stories, early drafts in her papers, precedents established in the few novels that came before the stories, to see what the evolution of each piece had looked like. I was on no sort of rigid timeframe—my friend published when he had a good issue; it was one of the rare privileges of having an almost nonexistent readership. And I wrote to that readership, which is to say that I wrote to myself.

My wife and I had just had our first child, and we often found ourselves awake when the rest of the world was asleep. I would put the baby in the carrier and bundle myself against the cold and go for long walks all throughout the neighborhood. As I wandered the empty streets of that outer edge of the city, I would silently, or under my breath—moving my lips—compose one slow sentence after another on Collette that I would then carefully transcribe upon returning home, after laying the baby down in her cradle. And that was how I came to write the review.

When it was finished, I sent it to my friend, and knew that I wouldn’t hear back from him for months. That was how things were. My daughter, I understood, might be crawling before the review saw the light of day, she could be turning the pages of upside down books and opening cupboards and making sounds where she knew words

belonged—the review had been written, and in writing it I had moved beyond it, and ceased to give it space in my mind. Yet Martin’s poems stayed with me, they lingered just beneath the surface, and as I continued to wander at night with the baby strapped to my front, I found myself reciting lines that I hadn’t realized I’d committed to memory. Lines whose incantatory qualities either lent themselves to my recitations or were in fact products of them—lines that perhaps wouldn’t have stood up to a second, third, fourth, or fifth read. The poems no longer existed for me as poems. I wanted to read them yet knew that to do so would illuminate all of their flaws, cast a sudden light upon them so that those flaws would be all that I saw. The moments of perfection in those poems had become so much a part of me that I no longer saw them as distinct from myself. I would not see them on the page. During the days, I would sometimes catch myself idly thumbing through the magazine in which they lived, and more than once I had to force myself to stop before I ruined them for good. Or perhaps I had already ruined them, and was simply denying the truth. At any rate, that was where things stood for a time. I walked with the baby and the poems as I remembered them so that my wife could get some sleep through the night. During the day, between naps and long intervals of staring at the wall, I did my work. I was, at the time, teaching an undergraduate class on the metaphysical poets, and had a certain amount of grading and lesson planning that had to be done in any given week, but it never felt like more than a distraction. I used the work productively to take my mind off of other things. Or, rather, I tried.

A few weeks before the end of the term, I was re-reading the second foreword to Hewitt’s *Life of Swinburne* when I came across this passage near its end:

“While no one seriously questions Swinburne’s place in the canon anymore, we also see very little discussion being had about the actual *purpose* of the canon itself. In addition to functioning as a storehouse for our culture’s greatest works, we might also view the canon as a kind of prison in which we keep our literary forebears separate in their cells, each prisoner labeled for easy recognition in the event of an escape. It is this latter iteration of the canon, then, into which Swinburne has finally and decisively been placed. As a result of the aggressive categorization that takes place upon induction/incarceration into the canon, lineage and influence become harder to trace. In coming to understand Swinburne as belonging to a particular stylistic school with particular artistic goals, we have effectively ruled out the possibility of ever recognizing the ways in which those incongruous elements of his work are echoed in works produced by later generations. Yet there can be no denying Swinburne’s influence on poets such as Antonio Porchia, Paulo Vennuzzi, Sibyl Kelley Turner, Raphael Martin, Henri Vals, and countless others.”

The pages of the book, the foreword, the introduction, each and every chapter, the flyleaves, all were rife with marginalia that reflected one reading piled atop another atop another, and so on through the years since I’d purchased it new when I was still a student, yet this passage alone—*only* this passage—had evidently caught my eye so infrequently in the past that it stood isolated on the page, untouched. And there he was—Martin. I stared at the name for a moment, reread the passage, skipped back a few paragraphs and read again to where I’d stopped, skimmed ahead but saw no further mention of him. I touched his name—I *touch*ed it—with my fingertips. I said it aloud. Then it occurred to me to jump to the index, though I imagined he had lived too long after Swinburne to

appear anywhere in the book beyond the foreword, and I was instantly rewarded:

“Martin, Raphael 233-234, 312, 314.” And from those pages, where really I only found in total maybe a dozen sentences concerned with Martin, I learned that he had lived in England, that he was, in fact, English, the son of a Welsh mother and a father from northern Italy, and—born in 1888—that he had lived a life whose beginning overlapped perfectly with the end of Swinburne’s own, that he had *met* Swinburne, had worked for him, organized the aged poet’s vast personal library, and had received, in lieu of pay, tutelage of a sort, though this information was based solely on entries from Swinburne’s journals, in which he never went any further than to scribble things such as, “9 August 1907—Had Martin here today, earlier than usual; five hours in the library followed by two in the garden, where we took a late tea and discussed meter at length.” or “24 November—Martin came round; dusted.” That was it.

Yet that was enough.

For a period of time after that, the desire to re-read the poems faded somewhat, ebbed into the background. Though I realize that one might imagine that such a discovery as I had made would have had the opposite effect, would have driven me more than ever to want to revisit the work that had so captured my attention in the first place, I can only explain it, or try to explain it, by saying that Martin suddenly lived *outside* of me, that I no longer felt as if I were his caretaker, as if he were occupying me, trapped within my very being, and longing more than anything for escape. That he had lived—and, I could only reasonably presume, died—meant that the poems, as I had remade them in my head, could end, and had indeed already ended. In the night, as I walked with my daughter sleeping against my chest, I found myself talking to her, telling her stories about

the life her mother and I had lived before we'd had her, before we'd even fathomed her, telling her stories about myself before I'd met my wife, her mother, stories about myself when *I* was a child, and some nights my wife joined us and we wandered as a family from one streetlight's faint corona to the next, holding hands, or simply matching one another's pace, rarely talking, but not thinking either.

That was how it was for some weeks, through the end of the term and into the break that comes between winter and that early part of spring that is really winter in disguise. We took a trip to see friends in another city and stayed awake into the night in a way that we hadn't in months, letting sunlight disappear and turn to dusk which turned to darkness, but all uninterrupted—and this was the novelty—all uninterrupted by the restless bouts of sleep to which we'd grown accustomed. We didn't fight sleeplessness, but instead stayed awake while the baby slept, and each time she woke, we were already there, waiting for her. When we returned home, it was as if we were starting anew, as if we'd done this all before and were simply going through the motions, but in the best way possible. Things felt manageable for the first time in what seemed a long while. I returned to my duties at the university refreshed, and earnestly set myself to teaching a class I hadn't taught before, an evening seminar for upper level students which I had designed in conjunction with a colleague of mine. The students, eight of them, all in their mid to late twenties, came at the class with a confidence born of having sat through many such classes in many such classrooms and earned many high marks. I knew some of them from other classes in which I'd taught them earlier in their careers, and our meeting again on that first day of the new term was like the reunion of old acquaintances, which is to say that it had almost no significance whatsoever. One student, however, a young man

who I had taught several times before, and whose writing I remembered had been a pleasure to read, stayed behind after that first session ended, and we wound up walking together across the campus to where we both caught our respective buses every day. I asked him how his studies were going, and he smiled a circumspect kind of smile and said that they were going well, which he repeated once over as if the phrase were a precious thing that he was turning and examining in his palm. He asked how I was, and I told him about the new baby, which made him smile again, though this time he was unguarded; he grinned. The conversation meandered, and turned inevitably to literature, and I asked what he'd been reading and he asked the same thing of me, and stupidly I said Raphael Martin's name knowing that I was opening a door that I'd hoped I could avoid ever going through again, and knowing too that he would ask me about Martin, for this student loved poetry above all else, and that I would wind up having to either tell an improbable lie—that I had nothing by Martin to pass along, when I had just said I'd been reading him—or that I would have to finally read the poems again, for I wouldn't be able to help myself, and because it would feel vulgar to pass along those poems that I no longer really knew anything of, because it would be a lie, too, in a sense, to imply my adoration of the poems by giving them to him when for all I knew they were nothing but drivel, drivel that I had elevated to the level of scripture in my mind—though, I said to myself, what about Swinburne.

That night, during my usual walk with the baby, I found myself incapable of telling her the stories I'd been telling and incapable, too, of recalling those lines that had so enchanted me the previous term. I walked as a man must walk home to a wife he knows will leave him, as a man must walk when he knows that walking is no longer the

thing. The baby cried and I shushed her, but those were the only sounds; all else was complete and total silence. When I returned home, I kept her in the carrier for longer than usual, and then put her in the crib and tucked her in and kissed her forehead. The magazine was where I'd left it, waiting on my desk. I spent a long while looking at it, considering its cover and yellowing pages. I am still standing there. It is still waiting. My wife and baby are asleep and I am the only one who is still wide awake.

I went to Belfast to make love to two women, though not at the same time, and intending to keep my ~~visit~~ visit with the first woman a secret from the second woman, and the other way around. I was married and had been for just over two years, and my wife, Bernadette, was one of the two women whom I intended to see — she worked for an international law firm and had been in the U.K. since not long after we'd married — I, in what some would call my misspent youth, had overstayed a tourist visa in England by about three years, and am still not allowed back across those borders, but Belfast was, at the time, a city in flux, part of the Republic of Ireland one day, under the rule of the Crown the next, and I fully intended to waltz through customs, welcomed with open arms into a country that hated the U.K. as much as the U.K. hated me. The other woman was named Sarah, and I loved her. She's dead

“Belstaff”

I went to Belstaff to make love to two women, though not at the same time, and intending to keep my visit with each one a secret from the other. I was married and had been for just over two years. My wife, Bernadette, was one of the two women I intended to see—she worked for an international law firm and had been in the U.K. since not long after we’d married. I, back in my twenties, had overstayed a tourist visa in England by about three years and wasn’t allowed to re-enter the country. But Belstaff was, at the time, a city in flux, part of the Republic of Ireland one day, under the rule of the crown the next—I fully intended to waltz through customs, welcomed with open arms into a country that hated the U.K. as much as the U.K., it seemed, hated me.

The other woman was called Sarah, and I loved her. She’s dead now, and has been for ages. But at the time she was young—we all were.

•

To see Belstaff now is not to see the Belstaff of all that time ago, nor—I’m sure—would it be to see the Belstaff of a decade or two from now. It is now a vintage city: a city of boutiques and cobblestones and chimneypots (though surely there were chimneypots and cobblestones then, too, and I simply didn’t pay them any attention)—historic tours and delicate restaurants. It is a city like so many others in the U.K. and elsewhere, though of course the Belstaff which I’m trying to conjure now was by no means any more unique at the time—yet it was the kind of city that demanded so much of one’s attention as to blot out all memory, all thought, of other locales. It was wartorn, and it was sad, and it was beautiful. I have since returned only in my dreams, but I have traveled to places in the

EU so like it as to suddenly be there again, to see the ghosts of IRA nationals in the street—as if superimposed—over the façade of a glorious department store or to hear the echo of a bomb across town in the plaintive wail of a benign police siren or the mournful baying of a dog, or to see Bernadette—or to see Sarah—in the face of a Parisian girl, or a Dutch girl, or a girl in Berlin. It is all the same, late in life. Perhaps that is all I'm really trying to say in these pages, that I went to Belstaff to be with two women when it could have been twenty, or only one. When it could have been any city.

Though, of course, it wasn't.

•

Here is what I will leave you with, then: the precipitating event of this spotty recollection: I was awake last night, as I am most nights, at 3:00 a.m., and so I suppose I should say I was awake this morning, though I hadn't yet gone to bed. And my son called from the other side of the planet, from China, where he lives and teaches English, and has for years. And for a moment—really no more than a second or two—there was an echo on the line, and I heard myself, and I heard him, and we sounded the same. And then the echo was gone.

•



Note Pad

96 PAGES 5mm RULED

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ESSELTE

- "Bear and His Daughter"
- Robert Stone
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- Jonathon Lethem
- "Book of Illusions"
- Paul Auster
- "Where I'm calling from"
- Raymond Carver
- "Trying to save Piggy Smeets"
- John Irving

Andy,

I think the better way for me to write a letter to you (which is to say that I've tried — and failed — to write several letters to you, and that they have repeatedly died in the water) is to keep a notebook as I keep any other notebook, but for this notebook to be composed of thoughts to and of and about you, and for me to

send you this notebook
once it's full, and for
me to hope that's enou-
gh. It would be enough
for me, were the roles
reversed — so that's
what follows. An
occasional notebook
for Andrew Miller.

- Dave

(Jose and I have been
doing these artist books
— for lack of a better
term — occasional pi-
eces of fiction/collage
where the occasion
is simply that we

thought of someone
who we like — and
the pieces are handmade
minibooks by Jose.
Colored construction pap-
er, stitched spines, inter-
mittent collage, and then
I sit down and hand-
write an entire story
in one sitting, and then
it's done, and we
photocopy it and
send the original (when
I first met Jose I
was handwriting these
serial stories in any-
where from 4-6 parts
— one page each — the
parts of which I would

then disperse amongst
as many people as
needed, and I never
made copies of those
things, and Jose was
reading them as I
composed them, and
one of them, about an
amateur paleontologist,
we still remember as
being one of the best
things I've ever writ-
ten. And it's gone for-
ever. Like Hemingway's
apocryphal first novel
off the side of the
ship. So we make cop-
ies now and send the
original to whoever

— There are books
in Oakland and Minneapol-
is and Scotland and some-
where here in Seattle.
And I'm falling this not-
ebook in a similar sp-
irit, and imagine Jose
and I will collaborate
on a project for you
at some point — we do
these for people we
think will appreciate th-
em — but now's not
the time, fiction comes
later. Though I may
— I think I certainly
will — include a print
of the first book we
did [the originals in

Scotland], which I
was selling for a buck
a pop. The other night
after doing a brief read-
ing of some of these
stories, reading from the
photocopies, projecting
images of the pages on
the wall. But aesthet-
ically — conceptually —
I wanted to tell you
that this letter is very
much of a piece with
everything I've been doing
recently that I feel has
any value whatsoever.
That's the art I've been
making. — D)

I'm writing a long essay
— it's all notes right now
— notes and a shape in
the back of my brain
— but I have a title (I
think): "The Fire That Con-
sumes All Before It." It's
the title of one of the
ten paintings in Cy Twom-
bly's "Fifty Days at
Iliam." The essay will
be arranged into 50 rela-
tively brief sections. I'm
going to be writing about
gestural abstraction in
literature. Action writing.
That's the plan.

Egret & Tromso

A Novella

David Frederick Thomas

Egret & Tromso

Egret and Tromso cross the street to the bank.

Egret is holding a gun.

The gun is a pistol.

The pistol is loaded, and Egret is scared.

Egret has never fired a gun before.

Tromso has fired a gun, but only once.

Egret says to Tromso, *What if I miss?*

Tromso says, *You're supposed to miss, that's the point.*

Dead bodies equal more cops—every cop in Nebraska.

They have practiced, but this is it.

They enter the bank.

They are both wearing masks.

Egret's is blue; Tromso's is yellow.

Everybody get down, this is a robbery, yells Tromso.

He brandishes a shotgun.

Everybody panics.

Egret fires a shot at the ceiling, and some plaster rains down on his head.

Tromso kicks him in the shin.

Not yet, he hisses. *Save it. You're wasting the shock value.*

Fuck you, says Egret. *I'm embodying the moment.*

Tromso snatches the gun from Egret's hand.

Embody the safe, he says.

Egret goes behind the counter.

Everybody is still panicking, but in a quiet way—muttering.

Egret makes a teller open the safe for him.

They can hear police sirens outside.

After a minute or two Egret comes out of the safe with several backpacks stuffed with
money.

Tromso hands him the pistol.

The safety is on.

Tromso fires the shotgun at the floor.

They leave.

The police are almost there.

They run away.

The police arrive.

The police are too late.

Pastor Lewis in Bogotá

Here is Pastor Lewis.

He is a pastor in Bogotá.

He is also a deep cover MI6 agent.

He is trained in several varied styles of martial arts.

His church is made of clapboard.

His church is in a slum.

He practices his deadly kicks on a sandbag in the hovel out back, where he also lives.

He was once married, but she is dead now.

Everyone he has ever loved is dead.

On Sundays he preaches to his congregation.

He preaches about love and respect.

But also about hell.

Hell awaits us all if we do not walk a narrow path of righteousness.

There is a young girl, the daughter of a widow, who sits beside her mother every Sunday.

The girl is no older than fifteen.

Pastor Lewis feels a deep connection with the mother, she who lost the one she loved as well.

Yet he is in love with the girl, not the mother, who is his age.

He wants to spend his life with the girl.

He is confused by this love.

Pastor Lewis has been deep cover in Colombia for thirty years.

His wife was murdered by communists.

He is playing something of the long con, for God and country.

There is a man, a leader of criminals, whose grandmother is part of a congregation in a neighboring slum.

His directive is to wait for the older pastor, of that church, to die.

When the older pastor dies, Pastor Lewis will benevolently take the old pastor's flock under his wing.

The grandmother will surely be dead by then too, but she has family.

She has a large family.

Pastor Lewis will win their respect.

He will advise them on all manner of things.

And when the time comes, Pastor Lewis will do what must be done, and the leader of
criminals will die.

Pastor Lewis is not a God-fearing man.

Pastor Lewis has made peace with his demons.

He no longer sees a distinction between communism and the criminal world of Bogotá.

He practices his deadly kicks on a sandbag in the hovel out back, where he also lives.

He practices all night.

Egret & Tromso Head For Border

Midnight or later at the bottom of Texas.

Egret and Tromso on bicycles.

Egret's chain squeaks.

Tromso's brakes don't work.

But he doesn't need them.

They are pedaling through the desert.

From time to time they bump over small rocks or sleeping lizards.

Earlier, at dusk, they crashed into a gulley, and now the front wheels of both of their
bikes are bent ever so slightly.

Their arms ache from having to constantly correct their direction.

They believe they are on track to make the border by dawn.

The backpacks of money are heavy on their backs, and soaked through with sweat.

Egret's hair is plastered to his forehead.

Tromso has tied his shirt around his head to keep the sweat out of his eyes.

They pedal faster.

They stopped speaking to each other hours ago.

They pedal faster.

The Prostitute in Pajama Bottoms

In the center of Bogotá there is a district where prostitutes stand like statues against
graffitied brick walls.

Old men drive by, or walk by, or are brought in rickshaws, or send boys in their stead.

One of the women, named Gloria, wears a T-shirt with a picture of David Bowie on it.

She also wears pajama bottoms.

The pajama bottoms are a deep, lemon yellow.

She is shoeless and curls her toes against the curb.

She charges little and is infrequently bought.

Other women wear short skirts and high heels.

Halter tops and lots of make-up.

A man in a baseball cap and suspenders pulls up in a truck.

He beckons to the prostitute in pajama bottoms.

What's your name? he says.

She tells every john a different name.

Esperanza, she says.

She leans in close.

The man smells of dirt.

She wonders what she smells like to him.

Do you need a ride? he says.

She nods.

Money? he says.

Not much.

He unlocks the passenger side door and she climbs in.

The floor is clean.

The seatbelt latches are buried in the crack between the seat bench and the seat back.

She holds onto the dashboard as he changes gears.

They drive to a part of town she has never been to before, and after he has done his money's worth with her, he lets her out and drives away.

She looks around.

The slum is quiet.

Her bare feet feel suddenly too bare.

Broken glass on the street.

She walks carefully.

She walks carefully and slowly.

Pastor Lewis

Pastor Lewis begins each day with a prayer.

He prays to God to deliver him from Colombia.

After the prayer he eats two eggs.

Eggs are hard to get in the slums.

Eggs are hard to hold on to as well.

Twice in the last month he has woken at night to a crash in the kitchen, or a shuffling of feet.

Both times he found young men, hoodlums, heads buried in his refrigerator.

He chased them away both times, but they escaped with his eggs.

Those mornings he had gone hungry.

He has vowed to never be stolen from again.

He cannot use his formal training to fight back, he knows.

He cannot use a weapon.

To do so would blow his cover.

He must remain passive.

He has moved his bed into the kitchen.

Now he is lulled to sleep every night by the hum of the fridge.

And he wakes to the hum of the fridge.

And lies in bed and says his prayer to the hum of the fridge.

Dear God, deliver me from Colombia as you once delivered Moses from Pharaoh's land.

And fries two eggs, sitting on the edge of the bed as he listens to the whites crackle and

spit.

Gloria & The Church

The sun goes down and Gloria continues to wander from one street to the next.

This slum is strange—it is filthy, like all slums, but feels safe.

What, she wonders, is the secret.

Gloria grew up in a slum, far from here, in Honduras, where her parents worked in a
factory when there was work to be done.

That slum was dangerous.

The people who lived in it never slept.

This slum was asleep when the man in the truck left her behind.

Old women taking naps on benches in front of their shacks and young men playing cards
in the shade.

No violence.

Only poverty.

There is no light now and Gloria is cold and her feet ache.

The hems at the bottoms of her pajama bottom legs are dragging in the dirt and growing
heavy with filth.

She decides—it is not a hard decision for her to make—to break into a house and see
what there is.

Maybe she will sleep on a bed if the house is empty.

Or eat if the larders are—they won't be—full.

If there is a man she will sleep with him.

If there is a woman she will beg.

If there is a child she will pretend she is a friend of the family.

Your mother said I could take some fruit.

Your mother said she was done with this jacket.

Your mother said I needed the money more than you do.

She reaches a dead end where the houses are piled atop one another like dominos.

Beyond these homes she can see a clapboard church in a clearing.

Even better, she thinks to herself. Churches are home to everyone.

She resolves not to steal, but to take willingly what God has offered.

The River

The river is black.

The sun is up but the river does not reflect the light.

It is muddy and polluted and thick.

Upstream there is a factory, but the factory is only one of many.

The river is wide.

Egret and Tromso stand on the shore and watch the water.

It seems to crawl along, though surely there is a strong current hidden below the surface.

It is the middle of summer and they are sunburnt from the day before and now the

morning sun is like salt on a wound.

They have thrown their bikes into the water, but the water is shallow here at the edge, and

the bikes lie half-submerged at their feet.

Egret spits on his.

Don't do that, says Tromso.

Why not? You're not my mom! says Egret.

You'll dehydrate even faster if you keep spitting.

Egret spits on everything.

It is how he shows his disdain for the world.

Or perhaps simply how he shows his disdain for saliva.

Tromso is thirsty.

We have to cross, he says.

Across the water is Mexico.

They will have enough money to live like kings until they die.

They will have women and eat whole pigs at every meal and bathe in milk.

But first they must baptize themselves in shit.

Tromso is thirsty.

We have to cross before we die of thirst, he says.

We have to cross before we die of gunfire, says Egret, looking back over his shoulder.

The desert is empty.

The bikes rock slightly as an eddie catches them.

Egret spits on his.

Tromso begins to wade in.

An Intruder

Pastor Lewis is still awake, though it is late for him.

The sun has gone down and often he is in bed by now.

But tonight he is awake, practicing his kicks.

There have been more and more nights like this as of late.

He dreams of battering the sandbag so hard and so often that the sand turns to glass.

He kicks and kicks.

Then there is a sound outside, across the clearing, in the church.

It is a sound he knows well, for it is the same kind of sound that has led to his kitchen
becoming also his bedroom.

He ceases his kicks and stands completely still.

The hovel creaks.

It is a windy night.

But the sound he heard is not wind.

The sound is the exact sound he thought he heard.

He steps into his sandals and steps out the front door.

Across the clearing he can see the church, low and alone.

Beyond it, the sky is filled with storm clouds.

Tonight will be a long one.

He crosses the clearing quickly and enters the church.

Inside it is quiet.

He knows every floorboard as well as he knows every soul in his congregation.

He walks silently from the back entrance to the small closet beyond the pews.

In the closet, unaware of him yet, is a young woman.

She is wearing yellow pajama bottoms and a T-shirt and no shoes.

She is rummaging in the boxes in the closet.

She is not like the hoodlums who have stolen his eggs.

She is merely lost.

Merely searching.

She does not know what it is she seeks.

He steps back.

Can I help you? he says.

She whirls around.

She is younger than he thought she would be.

She is barely older than the widow's daughter for whom he pines.

Though even in the dim light here, he can see that her eyes are old.

She sees his collar, and he sees her visibly relax.

Father, she says. *Forgive me.*

He smiles.

I cannot forgive you for something you have not done, he says.

But in his mind he knows he can, and he already has.

Gloria & The Pastor

Pastor Lewis invites Gloria into his hovel.

He makes a pot of tea and washes two cups.

She looks out of place in his home.

She does not comment on the bed in the kitchen.

What is your name? he says.

She tells him.

She does not lie.

That is a beautiful name, he says.

She does not reply.

They drink their tea and he offers to let her sleep in the bed for the night.

At first she begins to say something, then says she can't, but he realizes she has
misinterpreted his offer.

I mean for you to have my bed for the night. I will sleep on the floor in the other room.

I couldn't do that, she says.

I insist, he says.

They turn out the lights and she goes to sleep.

Pastor Lewis lies on the hard wood floor and listens to the wind rattle the walls.

He says his prayer again, as he sometimes does before bed.

And then he prays for the old pastor to die in the night.

Gringos

Egret and Tromso enter a small Mexican town.

They are covered in the scum of the river, though the sun has baked it into their clothes.

They give off a smell like old shoes, like mildewed paper.

A man on a seat outside a café meets Egret's eyes and says something in Spanish.

Egret does not speak Spanish.

That man just called you a faggot, says Tromso.

Egret looks back over his shoulder and fumbles for his backpack—for his pistol.

Tromso smacks him in the face.

Don't fucking do that, says Tromso. *Don't be a moron.*

Egret glares at Tromso.

Tromso keeps walking.

He has a shotgun down the leg of his pants, the muzzle tucked into his boot.

He walks like he has a stiff knee.

Egret catches up.

What about that guy, what did he just say? says Egret.

I don't know. I didn't hear him, says Tromso.

They come to a moneychanger—a small concrete building.

Tromso looks at Egret.

Just stay here. Don't move.

What? Okay. Fine.

Just stay here, says Tromso.

He goes inside.

The moneychanger is a bald man with a heavy brow and a heavier mustache.

He nods at Tromso.

Tromso slings the backpack off his shoulder and sets it on the counter.

He unzips the zipper the littlest bit and takes out a stack of hundred-dollar bills.

The total value of the stack is five-thousand dollars.

He lets the moneychanger see it.

He feels like a god.

He peels ten bills from the fold and slaps them down on the counter.

Change these to pesos, he says to the man, in Spanish.

The man grunts, stands, takes the money, and disappears into a back room.

Tromso unbuttons his pants and reaches down for the shotgun.

He checks the safety.

Sweat beads on his upper lip.

Outside

Egret stays put.

The ground is hot.

The backpack is heavy—with money, with his pistol—and for a moment he considers
going back up the street and putting a bullet in the head of the guy at the café.

Or at least scaring him.

But he does nothing.

Some boys are playing in the road a few storefronts down, a game probably of their
own devising.

They yell and whoop.

They jump around.

There is a ball and they kick it.

There is a stick and they throw it.

There are some girls and the boys grow quiet as the girls pass.

The girls pass Egret.

They are young, but not too young.

He watches them walk.

They sway.

A gust of wind kicks up.

The girls walk faster.

They must have caught wind of his stink.

He stoops down to tie his shoe, and as he puts the finishing touches on a beautiful double

knot, the sound of Tromso's shotgun being fired inside rips a whole in the air.

A second shot.

A moment of silence.

The boys down the street have disappeared, and he feels as if he is being watched from

every window on the street now.

Tromso bursts through the front door of the moneychanger.

He has his backpack and his shotgun in one hand.

In the other he has a bulging paper bag.

Run, says Tromso, and he thrusts the paper bag at Egret.

They take off at a sprint and don't slow down until they're way out in the desert, far from

any roads or towns.

Then they walk.

Seven Countries: An Interlude for Two Voices

Mexico

I'm thirsty.

You're an idiot.

Guatemala

I'm thirsty.

You're an idiot.

El Salvador

I'm thirsty.

You're an idiot.

Nicaragua

I'm thirsty.

You're an idiot.

Costa Rica

I'm thirsty.

You're an idiot.

Panama

I'm thirsty.

You're an idiot.

Colombia

I'm thirsty.

You're an idiot.

Gloria

In the fall, Gloria returns to the pastor's home, after only having spent the one night.

He is older, as is she.

She arrives during a service and sits in the back and listens to the sermon.

I was awake last night when I should have been asleep, and I asked God...

She wears a long skirt and a sweater.

She has come to beg.

She longs for the chance to repent.

She has left her old life behind.

After the sermon, she goes out back.

I saw you inside, says Pastor Lewis.

In the back of his mind is the fear that she is deep cover as well—that she is out to undo

all that he does.

But to act on this fear would be to show his hand.

He accepts her and she lives in the spare room that was once his bedroom.

He hangs a curtain between the rooms.

Life goes on almost exactly as it was.

In the spring he is visited by a contact who he'd thought long dead.

A man from Wales who uses the name Eduardo here.

No last name—just Eduardo.

Eduardo is merely a messenger.

The Americans have asked for MI6's cooperation.

There are two men, armed and dangerous, who have made their way into Colombia.

They have stolen their way south.

They have killed nine men and two women. They have wounded others.

They have robbed anyone that they could.

They were last seen in Panama.

There is no way, Eduardo says, that they would be foolish enough to retrace their steps
and return to the north.

Thus: Colombia.

Pastor Lewis nods.

Eduardo disappears.

This is at night, on the outskirts of the slum.

The meetings are always arranged by code, by signals.

Pastor Lewis returns to his hovel.

Gloria is awake in the kitchen.

She is sitting on the bed.

She has prepared dinner.

This is how many nights are now—they eat together like husband and wife and then retire to their separate rooms to sleep.

In the mornings they cannot wait to talk to one another.

Pastor Lewis tells her everything about the life she knows him to lead.

And in the moments, the snatches of day when they are apart, he begins to put out feelers for the Americans.

It is only a matter of waiting.

The Americans

Egret and Tromso enter Bogotá in a soft-top Jeep.

They have more money than they can carry on foot.

In El Salvador they had stolen a hand truck from a deliveryman.

The handtruck worked for them all the way to Costa Rica, but Costa Rica was filled with Americans.

And Egret and Tromso knew how to steal from Americans.

It was like they were home.

Sometimes they didn't even need guns.

Just masks.

They improvised masks out of their sweat-stained T-shirts.

Americans, as a people, for all their flaws, have devised an ingenious system to expedite thievery and to minimize the loss of innocent lives.

Masks, for Americans, are like shorthand for guns.

They put on masks and stole a Jeep.

And crossed the canal.

They enter Colombia in a Jeep and enter Bogotá in a Jeep and begin throwing money
around before the engine's cooled.

Egret buys his own car.

They settle in.

They are in South America.

They feel invincible.

They have crossed over to a new continent, and in their minds they are free, they are no
longer running.

Tromso buys a villa in a fine part of town and hires a woman to do his cleaning and a
different woman to sleep with him.

She has her own room and he only ever sees her when he calls her, which is often.

He has a cook.

He spends his days in the sun.

Egret sees less and less of him.

Egret saves his money.

He hides it in banks.

He hides in the homes of poor men who will watch his millions for a small price that is a
year's wages to them, and they will keep their mouths shut for fear of retribution.

Egret lets it be known that he has decapitated a man.

In truth Egret has not fired a gun since the day he shot the ceiling of the American bank.

But his money inspires more fear than his words do.

Men who do not have it know that it can buy anything, and that no single one of them
watches it all.

There is always more with which to buy the violence he might need.

He lays low.

He and Tromso do not speak.

The Calle Vista

Pastor Lewis receives word that one of the Americans has a habit.

The American goes to the Calle Vista every Sunday afternoon and plays dice.

He plays dice with a group of men in a little cantina.

Afterwards, with his winnings—for somehow the American always wins—he goes to the
center of town and buys a prostitute and spends the evening with her.

And so one Sunday, after his sermon, Pastor Lewis makes his way from the slums into
the city.

The American is not hiding.

He is dressed like any other wealthy criminal in Colombia.

He is dressed like the leader of criminals whose grandmother worships in the neighboring
slum.

The old pastor is not dead.

Not yet.

Not yet.

Pastor Lewis removes his collar and stuffs it in his pocket.

For the first time in decades he is not a man of the cloth.

He spends the afternoon sitting at the bar.

He drinks tequila without fear of blowing his cover.

The tequila *is* his cover.

He spends the afternoon at the bar watching the American throw dice and bellow in accented English.

When the American leaves, Pastor Lewis leaves, and he follows the American along the

Calle to the Avenida Buscar, where he almost loses him in a crowd of teenagers.

But then he sees him get into a car.

And he notes down the license plate number and goes home to Gloria.

She has made empanadas.

He lies to her about his afternoon.

They go to sleep early.

Pastor Lewis cannot sleep.

He has not practiced his deadly kicks since Gloria moved in with him.

Pajama Bottoms

Pastor Lewis spends a long time deliberating.

There is no other way around it.

He must get close to the American.

Gloria has to return to the life she left behind.

He agonizes over how to bring up.

One day, after a sermon on regret, Pastor Lewis and Gloria are sitting on rocking chairs
in the clearing.

Gloria is reading Leviticus.

Pastor Lewis clears his throat and says, *Gloria, I wonder if you have any regrets.*

About what, she says.

About the life you once led.

What do you mean?

Perhaps you should not have given it up.

It was sinful, she says.

Some would agree.

Do you?

He is silent.

He agrees.

At last he says, *This is not for anyone but you to decide.*

Nothing more is said on the subject just then, but at dinner she surprises him.

Sometimes I miss it.

She will not meet his gaze.

He understands he has been given this one opportunity.

He chooses his words carefully.

Perhaps you miss it because you miss the feeling it gave you, he says.

He continues: *But would the person you are now get the same feeling from it?*

She does not answer.

She doesn't know how.

The next morning she is awake before he is.

He has stopped saying his prayer every morning.

Sometimes he goes days without saying it.

She has prepared breakfast and they eat in the clearing.

Afterwards there is a long silence—the kind of silence that precedes a sound.

Finally, she speaks.

She stares at the ground.

I have to know, she says.

He doesn't dare even breathe.

He stays completely still until the moment has cemented itself into the world.

Egret

Egret gets a job.

There is nothing else to do.

Without Tromso there is nothing else to do.

From time to time he sees his old friend, strolling some plaza with a woman on each arm,

and he understands that he was merely a placeholder.

Merely a body.

He gets a job at an archery range teaching rich children how to shoot arrows at targets.

He learns, himself, how to shoot arrows at targets.

On the job training.

He passes the time between lessons—between the arrivals and departures of his
students—daydreaming about his money, and knowing he'll never spend it.

It waits for him somewhere unseen.

Regret

On Sundays Tromso goes to the Calle Vista to gamble.

He has not missed a Sunday since the two Sundays in a row when he won every throw.

He has won every throw since.

He has a drink he drinks.

And clothes he wears.

He has learned to enjoy life.

He has learned to embody the moment.

To become the moment.

After the gambling is done he buys a woman—a different one every week—and takes
her home and sleeps with her instead of his house-woman, who is more like a
wife.

He prefers unglamorous women—women who are the opposite of his house-woman.

He prefers women who seem wrecked in some way.

One night, one Sunday night, he has gambled late and he goes to the Plaza and looks at
the women and sees one he's never seen before.

She is wearing lemon yellow pants.

They look like pajama bottoms.

She is older.

She looks out of place.

Not wrecked, but...out of place.

He is drawn to her.

He can't explain it.

He beckons her to him.

She comes to the window.

How much? he says.

She tells him and he pays up front.

This was not planned.

This was the one thing left up to chance.

Left up to God, thinks Pastor Lewis, standing in the shadows.

She gets in the car and he, on a moped rented with church money, follows at a
considerable distance.

Tromso & Gloria

His home is gigantic.

There are tiered balconies.

She remembers why she missed this—the taste of glamor.

He gets out of the car and comes around to her side and opens her door and gestures her
out onto the gravel drive.

She feels out of place in her old pajamas.

He is dressed like a millionaire.

Most likely he is.

They go inside.

She takes off her shoes.

In the bedroom, as in a dream, or a memory—more like a memory—she removes her
clothes and stands naked before this utter stranger.

He removes his and tells her to get on her knees.

And tells her to close her eyes.

And to open her mouth.

She is there, waiting, for longer than she expects, and finally she opens her eyes.

He is nowhere to be seen.

The room is empty.

She stands, shivering in the cool spring air, and walks to the en suite bathroom and
pushes the half-closed door all the way open.

In the bathroom, on the white tile floor, first she sees blood, and then the body of the
man.

There is a hole in the center of his forehead.

His eyes are open but unseeing.

He—his body—is slumped against the wall.

She screams.

Pastor Lewis

It has been so long.

Too long.

Decades.

What have I done, he says aloud without really meaning to.

It just escapes.

What have I done?

The Other American

Egret wakes, goes through the day, sleeps.

Teaches (advanced) kids to shoot crossbows.

There is nothing else.

Sometimes he makes love to the mother of a student.

One day he is sick of it and goes to one of the places where his money is hidden.

You're money is gone, says the man.

He doesn't say it indignantly, nor insolently—he says it trembling with fear.

He has to spit the words out.

Egret walks away.

The money was already gone.

If he wasn't spending it, it didn't exist.

He realizes this right then and feels suddenly at peace.

He feels an all-consuming peace.

And he no longer resents Tromso for ignoring him.

He goes to Tromso's villa and is told that Tromso is dead.

He's too late.

The woman who tells him tells him there was a girl.

The way she says it makes it sound like an accusation.

*There was a girl that night, she says. In yellow pants, though not by the time he was
dead.*

Egret leaves.

The Church

The church is still there.

Hard to believe.

Almost as if it shouldn't be.

He doesn't deserve it.

In the trough behind his hovel he washes his hands and then scrubs the gun with steel

wool and alcohol.

The church lurks beyond the clearing like a judgmental parent.

He tears off his clothes and leaves them behind the house and stalks into the hovel

wearing nothing.

He slides into his sleeping bag.

It's cold.

He curls up into a ball.

He'd forgotten about killing.

He'd simply learned to outwait.

He'd forgotten that sometimes you had to circumvent time.

The next day Gloria still isn't back.

He delivers a sermon for the Monday congregation about faith.

Faith in a greater good.

For God and country, he thinks.

But then he thinks about the *American*.

The *American* who'd robbed only from Americans.

And realizes that none of it matters.

He'd executed a man who was alive—he was *alive*—before the bullet left the muzzle.

And now he was dead.

The Girl in Yellow Pants

Egret sits with that.

The girl in yellow pants.

Though not by the time he was dead.

He knows what that means.

He begins to visit prostitutes, though he never sleeps with them.

Much of his money is gone, stolen by small time criminals or big fish.

It doesn't matter, really.

But he finds some of it, in one place or another, and uses it to pay these women for their
time.

And he asks them about the girl.

Yellow pants.

One lead after another runs dry.

He is ready to give up.

And then a woman who has been working the streets for a long time gives him some
information.

The name of a slum.

The name of a pastor.

Egret doesn't understand.

Go there, says the woman. Go and see for yourself.

And so he does.

The Slums

Egret goes to the church.

Pastor Lewis has never seen Egret's face.

Gloria is in the hovel.

She is in bed.

She has not left the bed since she came home three days after the killing.

Egret listens to the pastor's sermon.

I have been tested by thee, oh lord...

Egret understands—he knows not how—that this is the man.

He has come with a crossbow.

He has fired it countless times.

He can hit a bullseye from 300 yards now.

He comes close regularly at 500.

It's all instinct.

It's all second nature.

In the clearing behind the church he doesn't wait longer than a second—simply fires the

bolt into the back of the pastor's neck.

The pastor drops to the ground.

The pastor bleeds out in the dust.

Egret crosses the clearing and yanks the bolt from the corpse.

Death

Gloria waits twelve days after coming home before she leaves the hovel.

The pastor's body is where Egret left it.

It has been picked at.

The collar is gone.

Not like in the bathroom—there is no blood, or what blood there is has dried and is

flaking off in the breeze.

Not like in the bathroom she does not scream, merely begins to sob, for she knows that

death has come for her.

It is close.

She returns to the hovel and gets back in bed.

She waits.

Visitors

People from Pastor Lewis's congregation come to visit her.

They come into the hovel one by one, or in pairs.

They bring her food and water.

News from outside.

This is how she hears of the old pastor's death.

A heart attack in the middle of the night.

The slums, the people say, are without God.

Rumors spread that she can perform miracles.

More and more visitors come from farther and farther away.

One day a white man comes.

In his way he reminds her of Pastor Lewis.

In his way he reminds her of the white man in the bathroom.

He is quiet.

She says nothing.

This is how it is with all who visit now.

They expect a miracle, and all she can give them is silence.

Perhaps that is enough for them.

After a long time the white man speaks.

He tells her a story about two friends far from their home.

And about vast amounts of money.

And about a girl in yellow pants.

And she knows he is death, come at last.

Honduras

She goes with him.

And she waits for the moment when he will destroy her.

But it never comes.

She waits and waits until eventually she stops waiting.

Or forgets what it was she was waiting for.

Years pass and they marry.

There are children.

A boy and two girls.

They take their family and return to Honduras.

They settle into a quiet life.

He takes a job maintaining an old church.

In the end this is how life passes.

He dies before she does, in the night, after many years of marriage.

Their children are grown and have families of their own.

She lives a while longer on a widow's pension.

And then, one night, she dies.