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This is ground zero for those with unusual enfacement. This is their tent city in which I’m sometimes welcome. A lending library features everything, which includes the television’s anthemic bleating, the sadcore harp. Why are you smirking up your face making obnoxious facial scenes?, touchscreens, micro-ground coffee, antiqued rose-colored garments and a biographical history of the color pink, Sally Hemings, a spaceship, portable defibrillators, cat memes, nail polish that hardens to a ceramic finish, a repurposed ashtray from a railcar, inside-out pocket watches, strips of plastic with fine grit overlay meant to prevent slippage, a diving suit, the chain latch for a front door, size 7½ bamboo knitting needles, a power strip, a dripping paper sack, avian themed silver pins, a polar bear’s ear that appears much larger out of context of the bear than one would expect, a lock of hair from a seven-year-old white female, the braid of a ten-year-old Korean female, one strand from a Keralan intersexed, fifteen-year-old black male—fingernail clippings, someone’s mother, turmeric,
fraying polyester dragon pattern brocade-backed photo album export, metal-setting amp, dried four leaf clover, dust, young adult historical novel about a pirate and a merchant’s daughter, two Day of the Dead skeletons pushing an infant skeleton in a walnut shell pram, a #10 envelope with plastic address window, water-stained curtains, abalone, a faux brass fire poker, Erlenmeyer flask with crusted rim, diapers, sebum, orange plastic rabbit-shaped egg mold, lengths of black gray and ivory tulle, a phenylephrine HCl tablet, Liam Neeson, hog bristle, nervous habit, Castile soap, book binder’s tape, staple gun, BPA coated receipts, crumbling wings of dead Miller moths, barback’s towel soaked in fumaric acid, index pages from American Psycho, spice jar filled with soil from the volcano Hekla, linen notecards, underwire contour padded bra 36B in nude, a marrow spoon, irony, brake pads, 1/8 inch plastic pegs in pink blue red and white, an oak pew, thirty-pound bag of small-stone white and light gray gravel, cold hands, striated throat, warbler feather, glass jar—
Fuck This House

JOSHUA SCHAEDEL
On the corner of Pasadena Avenue and Figueroa, five people stood in line in the hot sun, waiting to be next to inhale the Egg and see the Saint. It was not long before the truck ran out of Egg and a fight broke out.

“I told you there was no point in standing in line,” Ben told his wife. “Nothing ever works out. We shouldn’t have come.”

Angela wasn’t surprised things hadn’t worked out the way Ben wanted. She was busy with her baby and secretly hoped they would be able to go home without adding Saints and psychobabble to an already long list of complaints.

Ben worked for Caltrans in Malibu and soon, it was rumored, he’d be losing his job. The State parks had all about closed and now, spectacularly, there was talk of closing Zuma Beach in the winter. This Saturday Ben had hoped for a vision or a sign to help him make the next right move. It was nearly impossible to talk to his co-workers about how he was seeing things. By attending protests down at City Hall, the union workers felt they were taking control. What they failed to miss were the signs everywhere of a mass societal collapse. E. coli. Terrorism. Extreme weather. Land-faring mutant worms. Once the transportation system fell apart due to high oil prices and the trucks were no longer able to deliver their goods to the cities, a return to hunting and gathering was inevitable, leaving only the practiced gun owner to survive.

In his chosen field of work, scrubbing public toilets and grooming county shrubbery, overseeing the comings and goings of those appointed by the court to community service, few appreciated philosophical discussion. In his need for the universal he felt alone. Not even his wife Angela liked talking about the future. It wasn’t that she was stupid or small-minded. She just didn’t want to despair.

“Come back next Saturday,” an emaciated worker called out from the banged up catering truck. “A new batch is being hatched as we speak.”

Ben turned bitterly behind him to the cracked sidewalk where a silver-haired amputee suited up in a gray duct tape bag cinched at the waist sucked down the last delicacies of the Spittle and Pittled Eggs of New York catering truck. “Lucky dog.” Ben spit on the dry cracked ground. “Time to hightail it outta here.” Ben tossed a flubby arm about his wife and baby as a crush of embittered patrons moved forward for the truck.

“I’ve been waiting here for over an hour,” a buxom broad shouted up to the Ouroboros worker. “I’m not leaving till I see a Saint.” The Ouroboros worker banged closed the catering truck’s window and started up its engine. “Where you goin’, fool?”

An Armenian homie tossed an empty beer bottle toward the truck and it shattered loudly against the side as the swaying truck pulled out into Lincoln Heights traffic. “Go back to church!” the driver sniped back.

“I don’t want Jesus, I wanna bona fide Tubular Saint,” the buxom woman hollered. “I wanna see Bear, like my sister.”

“C’mon,” Ben maneuvered Angela and six-
month-old baby Hilda toward the car, past the day’s winners sprawled out in the dirt under a broken frondless palm, stoned and inhaling the dregs of the notoriously potent Spittle and Pittled Eggs.

The family boarded the four-wheel drive Ford Hybrid SUV purchased before the End Times had announced themselves via the tubularfamily.com sighting of the black-hatted New Jesus drifting up and down the 5 freeway. In a bombed-out yellow Toyota Tercel, the Manco Incan hailed passersby with endless stigma blood works—turned out Jesus was an illegal immigrant. Too ironic for words.

“This freakin’ sucks,” Ben lamented, stabbing the steering wheel with a meaty elbow. “Now what am I gonna do?”

“You’re so pessimistic,” Angela sighed, carefully buckling Hilda into her seat. “You’re always taking the gloomy view.”

“I can’t go back to being a nurse aid. All that freakin’ illness and misery—I’m not cleaning another bedpan, Angie. Maybe I’ll start cooking meth like that teacher with cancer on TV.”

Angela shot him a look of annoyance. “You’re way too lazy to deal. You’d just end up an addict. Too bad you didn’t take my sister up on becoming a real estate agent when you had the chance.”

“You serious?” Ben lifted a brow. “If I’d gone that route we’d be living with your mother right now.” He huffed. “With Caltrans at least I got a retirement account I can cash out if things get really bad. Thank god I’m not stupid and grasping like everyone else dying to make a quick buck. You’re lucky, Angie—”

She cut him off. “—I can always start selling Melaleuca again,” Angela offered dully, observing out the window the hodgepodge of colorful Latino stores racing by.

“No thank you,” Ben dry-heaved. Angela’s Melaleuca habit, selling tree oil-based products like toothpaste and pain relievers to relatives and friends, cost him a whopping thousand dollars a year to keep afloat. It was a pyramid scheme and she was a lousy saleswoman. “It’s too freakin’ bad about the Eggs,” Ben hunched over the steering wheel. “Imagine if I’d seen a Saint and we won the lottery like that lady in Carson with stage three liver cancer. It’s too damn bad. The lottery’s up to four hundred mil this week.”

“Nobody can prove Saints are real,” Angela countered, jutting her lower lip.

“So?” Ben sniped. “That’s the way it’s always been. Spiritual things aren’t provable, that’s why they’re spiritual. Besides they’ve proven the existence of giant tube worms. They’ll prove the Saints next and the Tubular people. You’ll see.”

“I don’t believe in the Tubular. That’s a myth,” Angela pouted. She didn’t like all this talk of interspecies breeding and the breakdown of culture. Of the unfamiliar. She wanted everything to remain the same. To remain the way it was when she was in school, when her hair was long, down to her waist, and she was good at passing Scantron tests.

“If I were Tubular, I wouldn’t need a job,” Ben said, tailgating the white 1998 Acura up ahead. “I’d just eat plastic bags out of the garbage and get high on Egg,” he guffawed. “Dammit,” he yelled, eying the consumption stats of his vehicle, “something’s wrong with our vehicle. We got 43.7 miles to the gallon last Saturday. Now it reads 37.3. This car is a rip.”

Angela rolled her eyes. She wished her sister hadn’t moved out to live with their mother in Santa Ana. Now the only person she had to talk to was Ben and all he cared about was endless nights of gun practice, picking fights with the gangsta neighbors and mooning over bogus alien invasion stories. She could now add gas prices to the list.

From out of nowhere, a fulsome pair of chalk-white ten-foot-long tube worms, sporting bright-red hydrogen sulfide sucking plumes, booked across the intersection, shedding piles of sand and broken shells in their wake. “Shit,” Ben cried, slamming on the brakes. “Ange, look at that pair. They’re huge!”

“Be careful,” Angela said in a quiet undertone. “Hilda’s sleeping.”

A loud squall came from the back seat.

“Are you teething again, m’hija?” Angela gave Hilda an index finger to suck on. She was
a good mother when it came to the basics, Ben observed admiringly. He felt lucky. Angela was easy on the eyes and she was trustworthy. Not a hella witch like his mother who suffered from a bad case of keeping up with the Joneses. “Quick, you’re gonna miss them,” he pointed to the parking lot of an empty CVS store.

“Where?” Angela brushed long glossy hair from her eyes.

“Right there. In that garbage container dusting the empty milk gallon bottles,” he laughed.

“That doesn’t make sense. What are they doing in our neighborhood? We don’t live anywhere near an oil refinery.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in the cold seeps.” Ben marveled at Angela’s mocha complexion in the ecstatic L.A. sunshine.

“Stop making things up,” she demanded. She had married him for his jokey side, though lately she’d begun to find Ben’s practical jokes tedious. Like the time he scattered his clothes around the living room, then left for the Arco and texted her to say he’d been abducted by aliens.

“The cold seeps are giving me the creeps,” Ben flexed a toneless bicep, showing off a less than exact Thousand Faces tattoo. “I’ll defend you from them,” he leaned in for a kiss.

“I like it when you rescue me,” Angela raised a dark serpentine brow. “Let’s play that tonight, okay?”

“I’m going to see Prince tonight at the Forum. R’membuh?”

She shifted in her seat, tugging at the ends of glossy hair. “Come home early,” she said, a bright gleam in her eye, beams of sunlight reflecting off her silver hoop earrings.

“If I don’t go Tubular,” he warned.

“You’re such a bullshitter.” Angela lifted bemused in her seat. “You don’t have the courage to go Tubular. You hate change worse than me. Tubes don’t even have sex. You’d have to lick your own balls.”

He grimaced, checking on the status of his gas tank through his side view, relieved it hadn’t been tampered with by the legendary mutant tube worms that were an outgrowth of the 2010 BP oil spill. “Those bastards can steal all the petroleum they want from the corporate sonsabitches but they ain’t takin’ jack from me.”

Ben hunkered down, steering past a clutch of twelve-year-old wannabe gangbangers on Valley Vista, and immediately tensed. He had nothing against the orphans unless they were stealing his shit.

“If they steal another one of my pumpkins, I swear, Angela,” he pronounced her name the Spanish way. “I’m gonna pop them with my nine. No joke.”

Angela sighed. He was always threatening to shoot someone or something. The seagulls for shitting on the pavement outside the public bathrooms at work. The postman for delivering bills. His mother for taking him out of her will. The squeaky back door.

Pulling off loud multi-lane Valley Vista Boulevard, gliding silently into his short drive, he glared through the rear view mirror.

“I’ll pick ‘em off one by one,” he muttered.

“I wanna fence,” Angela blurted as they passed a showy row of carved pumpkins, Ben’s pride and glory.

“A fence won’t help. It’ll only give the impression of us being rich.” Ben said, gyrating within his loose, hip-clearing jeans. “Rich. Is. A bitch.”

Teetering in nude patent leather five-inch heels, Angela crossed the unvarnished living room floor into the kitchen where she placed Hilda in her high chair before settling into her weekend ritual of rearranging everything in the cabinets alphabetically. While Angela organized in the kitchen, Ben plowed through four light beers and a large bag of goji potato chips, flicking through crap TV, killing time before his big night out.
It was past midnight by the time they finished the last track and after one before Tyrell got it all copied to the hard drive, backed everything up, and shut down the board. Schaeffer offered to call a car for him, on the company, but that would have meant waiting twenty minutes, maybe more, and Tyrell knew that if he hung around, he’d run into one of the band members—presently holed up in the bathroom—they’d get into it again, and without the session to rein them in, somebody would mouth off, and he would lay out in irrefutable particulars what incompetent clowns they were (could barely play their instruments, much less clean parts, couldn’t write arrangements, ignored Tyrell’s suggestions, then blamed him when nothing sounded right) until one of them, ideally X-Ray himself, would throw a punch, giving Tyrell what he really wanted, an excuse to pound the crap out of somebody. Which was precisely what his delicate balance of legal issues and psychic poise could not afford at the moment. So he thanked Schaeffer for the offer, but said he’d walk up the street to the Marriott where there were usually a couple of cabs out front.

It was a beautiful night, moonlit October, with the light breeze Tyrell loved. He had often thought that if he could design a woman, he would make her like a breeze: gentle, cool, intermittent, unpossessable. She would torment him with her capriciousness and delight him with her soft beauty. His mother, observing early signs of this romanticism—what she called the Irish curse—had assured him he’d get over it before he was twenty. He was past thirty and still waiting.

There were no taxis outside the hotel.

It was Friday, he realized; parents were sending cars to bring their children home from parties, and wiser men than himself were taking cabs so they wouldn’t drink and drive. If only. Tyrell had lost his license back in February (three DWIs in twelve months), so he’d sold his Toyota and stopped drinking. Either one would have sufficed, yet giving up both had been strangely pleasant, the booze even easier than the car. Now he felt clean and strong. He hadn’t punched out X-Ray, hadn’t even mouthered off especially, and if no one had failed to notice his disdain, too bad. Maybe he was finally getting a grip.

Buoyed by these intimations of self-improvement, he thought why not walk home. Already the hotel was dwindling behind him. It was only three and a half miles; he could do it in an hour. The pavement rang through the soles of his shoes. He wasn’t tired or hungry or thirsty. He did, however, need to piss.

He would have gone back at the studio if it hadn’t meant re-encountering the band, and he could have stopped at the hotel except it hadn’t been pressing just then and he’d wanted to keep moving. Now, as the urge grew and distracted him from the beauties of the night, he looked around for where he might accomplish this simple business. He was on the commercial part of South Sixth, and the only appropriate places were in the numerous restaurants that lined the boulevard, most of which had a **Restrooms For Customers Only** sign by the door. Down one of the side streets, no doubt, he could have found a darkened doorway or a convenient bush, but there was always a chance of being seen (and reported and arrested) and, given
the DWIs and the license suspension, that didn’t seem like a good idea. (Even if getting caught was unlikely, Tyrell wasn’t the sort to mark his territory in somebody else’s foliage or entryway.) Nor, frankly, did he want to pay five dollars for a beer he wouldn’t drink (or one-fifty for a Coke he might) just for the right to relieve himself in a men’s room.

Now, as every city-dweller knows, one can stroll into almost any drinking and eating establishment and make it to the men’s room without announcing one’s intentions, after which it is even easier to get back out. But while that might have solved Tyrell’s immediate needs, it failed to address—in fact, it exacerbated—the deeper problem. That one had to pay or sneak around or, worst of all, lie—for what else is it to pretend you’re a customer when you aren’t—that one had to debase oneself simply to be able to empty his bladder in a civilized fashion. How had things come to this?

In fact, he had no idea how. He could barely have explained why the Civil War was fought, much less traced the steps by which an agrarian world, with its innate sense of hospitality to the stranger, a world that still remembered the Biblical injunction not to harvest the corners of one’s field but to leave them for the poor, had turned into one where a wanderer on foot like Tyrell not only couldn’t knock on a door and ask for a glass of milk, he couldn’t stop to pee in the woods, had there still been woods.

Tyrell understood none of this except that it was so and that he hated it. And not, it must be said, because he had been unable to negotiate the system. He was widely regarded as the best sound engineer in this admittedly middle-sized and backwater city, and was always much in demand, despite a well-deserved reputation for being difficult. He earned his money, paid his taxes, kept to himself. Besides work and music his pleasures were few: alcohol, pot, once in a while cocaine (these substances now forsaken) and, from time to time, a woman. He lived alone; he liked it that way. He never read the paper.

Yet he knew things had changed. He was aware of it every minute of every day. In the faces he encountered, in the bleak colors of the cars on the road, in the flavors of the fast food that constituted his chief diet, in the jokes told on South Park, in the fury of the political rhetoric he avoided like the clap, even, it seemed, in the transports of his occasional sex partner—in the very phrase “sex partner”—Tyrell, like a blind man, felt the contours of this new, unwelcoming world. Here he was, walking through the town in which he had lived his whole life and, at least for the next couple of miles, he didn’t have a pot to piss in.

Perhaps it was just this—the need either to prove that the world was as horrible as he feared, or to force it to show its better nature—that made him step into a restaurant called Conley’s, a local place he’d driven past a thousand times but never entered. He stood in the entryway, dutifully heeding the “please wait to be seated” sign. They had a full bar, but it had closed at two, now they were only serving food. It was busy for such a late hour. All but a couple of tables were occupied, and it took a minute or two before a harried young woman appeared from the back, grabbed a menu from a slot by the register, held up her forefinger, and said, “One?”

Tyrell, with no intention of mocking her, held up a finger of his own. “I’m not eating,” he explained, “but would it be all right if I used the men’s room?”

He said it in his mother’s lace-curtain voice to convey that he was a gentleman whose needs might be indulged. But the hostess either didn’t notice or didn’t care and, exasperated at having been called away from whatever else she had been doing, merely said, “It’s for customers only,” dropped the menu back in the slot, and turned to go.

He said, “I saw the sign.”

She stopped. A warning bell was ringing. “I need one minute. I’m kind of desperate.” In fact, he hadn’t been desperate until then, yet the moment he said the word, it seemed to become true.

The hostess—weary but attractive, in other circumstances he might have tried talking to her—wasn’t prepared to give in, but neither did she have
the heart to turn him down. She said, “Jason,” and caught the eye of a young man in dress slacks and a white shirt standing by the pick-up window. “He just wants to use the bathroom.”

Jason glanced at Tyrell as he came over. “Is he eating here?” and, before the girl could respond, said to him, “Customers only.”

It is worth noting that at this point Tyrell did consider soliciting sympathy with something like, “Look, man, I’m out there walking, I don’t have a car, and I don’t want to go piss on your customers’ hubcaps. Give me sixty seconds and I’ll be out of here.” The problem with this, of course, was that, like peeing in a bush, or buying a beer, or sneaking in without asking, it begged the question. And the question was, could Tyrell, presenting himself merely as a human being, without recourse to cunning or pathos, get treated like a human being? So instead he said, “Come on, I’m a person. I need to pee. Just let me use your fucking bathroom, and I’ll be gone before you know it.”

Obviously, the word fucking was ill-advised, but too late now.

Jason looked him over more carefully. He was a few years younger than Tyrell, a couple of inches taller, twenty pounds heavier with a lot more gym time. He said, “Either order something or get out.”

“So it’s really a pay toilet. I have to pay money to pee in it, right?”

One could see a fleeting struggle in Jason between the guidelines the owners had given him for dealing with customers and his own irritability. With a precarious forbearance he said, “That’s right.”

What dark pleasures descended through Tyrell’s heart as he saw this encounter turn toward confrontation. He told himself to walk outside and just piss in the parking lot, but every time he turned to leave, something stopped him. He said to Jason, “Is that really the world you want to live in?”

The manager stared at him blankly.

“What if instead of...what if we just...were a little generous with each other? We gave what we could, that was the attitude, instead of squeezing out every nickel and dime.” He meant that not so much about Jason as about the nickels and dimes themselves, the human pettiness they seemed to contain in their very being. But there was no time to explain such nuances, for Jason was already saying, “In fact, it’s not a pay toilet. We don’t want your business. Now walk out the door.” He pointed.

Tyrell took a breath.

He was calm. It was hopeless now, and he felt a strange joy. The crucial moments in life usually passed unnoticed, and you didn’t realize until later that you’d missed them, but this one was teed up like a golf ball on a spring morning.

“If you came to my house,” he said, “and knocked on the door and told me you needed to use the bathroom, I would let you do it.” He was not entirely sure this was true, but it didn’t matter.

Jason took a step toward him. Tyrell held up both hands, a conceding gesture, and walked to the door where he stopped, paused a moment, then unzipped his fly and began to urinate on the floor. He wasn’t sure where this was going, but it felt great, like Superman leaping into the sky. He began to shake with laughter.

It took a moment before Jason realized what was happening. As soon as he did, he ran over and grabbed Tyrell, who spun around, still peeing, first on Jason’s shoes, then his trousers, then directing the stream up onto his shirt, face and well-combed hair.

Jason cursed and leapt backward. Tyrell arched it like a rainbow, spattering the tiles. The hostess stared in wonder, trying not to laugh. The bartender tossed Jason an aluminum baseball bat, but Tyrell kept him at bay as long as the urine lasted, then ran right at him and tackled him before he could get a swing in. A moment later he felt many hands pulling him off Jason, after which an indeterminate number of people beat the shit out of him.

In the matter of the State of Illinois vs Anthony Michael Tyrell, the accused wanted to go to trial, but his Public Defender advised him that given the
witness accounts and his recent DWIs, he could end up doing a mandatory three on the assault charge alone.

"Assault? I assaulted them? Look at me." His face was a rotten melon, swollen, misshapen, stitched up at the lips, eyebrow, ear, everything bruised a yellowish purple. "Look at my hands...." His hands were pink and clean. "I never threw a punch. I pissed on the floor."

The lawyer scanned the file he'd picked up as he walked in the door. "You tackled the manager."

"He was going to hit me with a baseball bat."

"You didn't deliberately spray him with your urine?"

"Oh, come on. Only in self-defense." It hurt all over when he laughed.

"Most people would want to hit you for that," the lawyer said. "I would."

Tyrell sighed—this wasn't his world—but had to admit he might have felt the same way. Valor exhausted, he pled guilty to indecent exposure and malicious mischief on a promise of six months probation.

However, between the plea agreement and the sentencing, record of his juvenile pot bust, which somehow hadn't appeared on his rap sheet, now found its way to the prosecutor and thence the judge. And though Tyrell argued vehemently that the State had agreed at the time to expunge that from his records—had assured him that it "in no way affect any future proceedings"—and though his former attorney, presently living in Arizona, submitted an affidavit to that effect, and though the Public Defender did "everything in my power" to obtain the records of the case, all files from those years had been moved to a storage facility outside of town and, as the city was now eighteen months in arrears on its payments there, the owner was denying access until it received at least half. Or maybe the P.D. never really tried because by then he had other, more serious cases piling up. In the end, all the judge knew was that the pot bust was still in the computer with no flag attached, so he yielded to the prosecutor and gave Tyrell 120 days at a state correctional "farm" near the Missouri border saying that this would afford him time to "think things over." They would have put him in county lock-up, but it was so overcrowded that a prisoners' rights group had filed a lawsuit, whereas no one had yet sued the farm.

It was not a bad place as state prisons go. Prisoners had nicknamed it Mekong back in the '70s and now everybody called it that, even the warden. It wasn't horrendously crowded or violent, though violent enough. By the time Tyrell arrived, he'd mostly recovered from the beating, even if his nose had been flattened and the vision was still blurry in his right eye. On his second night there, he took a seat in the TV room, unaware that it "belonged" to someone important, and when told to move, held up a finger because the game they were watching was at a particularly exciting point and he wanted to see how the play ended. He never did. He came to on the floor, covered in blood and missing another tooth. Thereafter, he tried to keep to himself and stay inconspicuous, but that read as fear and weakness and attracted exactly the kind of low-level predators it was meant to discourage. He got beat up twice more over the next week, and in the second one they cracked his rib, which punctured his lung. Lying in the infirmary while the lung healed, he calculated that he had 107 days left on his sentence and figured, now that everyone smelled blood, he might make it through four or five of them. After that he would be dead, crippled, or worse. He considered suicide, but knew he lacked the necessary detachment.

At the far end of Tyrell's tier lived a Mexican O.G. known as El Jugo. He was not quite thirty, squat, heavily muscled and tattooed, with a head like a milk pail. Yet Tyrell had sensed, behind his tiny eyes, a flicker not just of intelligence but also of judgment. And with nothing much to lose, the day he got out of the infirmary he approached El Jugo in the yard and asked if he could have a word with him. They stepped aside and Tyrell laid out his situation as concisely as he could manage, trying to appear calm while, at the same time, conveying that he knew where all this was headed.

The Mexican listened without comment or even a nod until Tyrell began to wonder if the
guy spoke English. After he'd finished, El Jugo remained silent, his flint-chip eyes scanning the yard like a radar installation. When he turned them on Tyrell, it was without any sympathy at all. He looked him up and down as if seeking some furtive strength in this puny creature, then simply grunted as if in agreement with Tyrell's analysis: yes, he seemed to be saying, you're in trouble.

Tyrell wondered if this meant, in effect, you're dead meat so why should I bother, and he wanted rather desperately to ask what he could do about it, but sensed that such a display might squander what little good will he had here. Finally El Jugo said something, but in the noise of the yard and through his own terror Tyrell couldn't make it out. He said, “I'm sorry,” and leaned in as if to bring his ear closer to the message. “You do it first,” El Jugo said. “If you wait 'til they come for you,” his gaze tracked the yard again, and Tyrell followed it, hoping it might show him where the danger lay, “it's too late. You gotta go for them.”

“Who?”

He shrugged, “Whoever,” and walked away. Tyrell wanted to ask for a name, an hour, a suggestion of method, but El Jugo was back with his friends, laughing and carefree. His audience with the king had concluded.

He spent the rest of the day looking for something that could serve as a weapon. That night in his cell he pulled the mattress off the bunk, thinking he might take apart the frame and use one of the legs as a club, but saw immediately that they were too short to be effective and too fat to hide. Then he noticed the lattice of springs and metal strips that supported the mattress. He unhooked one of the strips and, with difficulty, managed to fold it diagonally the long way over the edge of the frame. He bent the cheap steel back and forth until, stepping on it with his foot and pulling up with both hands, he was able to tear it along the fold. He sharpened the resulting point against the cement wall. He didn't have the time or means to sharpen the long, diagonal edge, but it had a lot of nice spurs from the tear. It was thin and flimsy; he wouldn't be able to slash with it, but would have to stab straight down on the point to keep it from bending. The finished object was just under a foot long. He enclosed it in a sock, secured it to his forearm with two rubber bands, and when he buttoned his shirt cuff you saw nothing.

The next day, as everyone was coming out of the dining hall after breakfast, he deliberately caught the eye of one of the less fearsome guys he'd had trouble with—a wiry little bully in a knit hat—and when that one started whispering to a slovenly friend, both their gazes flicking back Tyrell's way, he headed off down a hall as if trying to escape, his left hand freeing the shank from the rubber bands and letting the base drop into his palm.

Only now as he hurried along did it occur to him that these people had friends and he had none. For the first time he considered the possibility that El Jugo could be setting him up, or using him in some way he knew nothing about. But it was too late for second thoughts. It had taken everything he had to launch himself in this direction; he didn't have the wherewithal to deviate, and anyway, with their footsteps coming hard behind him, there was nowhere else to go.

He barely beat them to the bathroom (where there were no cameras). Holding the blade by the sock, he turned back and met them as they came through the door. He went for the first one's groin, got the inner thigh instead. He sensed the skewed angle, felt the flesh squirm around the blade, then the metal hit something that might have been bone. He yanked it out. The guy folded over, screaming, and though the weapon was now bent Tyrell stabbed him twice in the face, he couldn't be sure where. He'd worked so fast, he had time to go after Slovenly—already turning to run—cutting his left hand as he straightened the weapon, then stabbing at the guy's kidneys and buttocks, and when he went down Tyrell let the shank fall to the floor, wiped the door handle with the sock and walked unhurriedly back up the hall and out into the yard where he wandered around in a daze for some minutes. Then he sat down against a wall and waited to be killed.

He didn't wonder which direction it would come from or who it would be. He was exhausted beyond exhaustion and couldn't have gotten back
onto his feet if he’d tried, much less run away or fought whoever might be coming. He waited for perhaps a quarter of an hour but, in the end, the only one who came was El Jugo, who said nothing, just squatted down beside him, and they sat there in silence while the sun warmed them, and the clouds and an occasional bird passed overhead in the blue winter sky.

After a time the trembling stopped and El Jugo asked him, “You know Gomez?” His gaze indicated an elderly Mexican across the yard talking with some of the men he’d seen in El Jugo’s court the previous morning. Gomez was a distinctive figure: Tyrell had noticed him almost from the first day. He was short and already a bit stooped, but with an enormous head of silver hair that he wore a little long. His skin was smooth, and his dark, handsome, heavily creased face looked like it had seen more things than Tyrell ever would. “He’s old,” El Jugo said. “He’s going to die here, and he doesn’t want to be alone.”

As if on cue, Gomez looked over in their direction for a moment, then headed up the yard the other way, chatting merrily with his companions. Tyrell said, “Unh huh.” He tried to put a question mark on the end, but it didn’t stick. “He’s tired,” El Jugo said in his flat, unreadable way. “It’s mostly just to be with him, you know?”

What this meant, Tyrell understood, was that he’d gotten lucky with the two guys in the bathroom who, he now saw, were simply stooges, Curly and Moe. He’d had the advantage of surprise, which he wouldn’t have again. He’d bought himself a few days, but he needed a hundred and two, and it was strange how clearly he grasped that this proposal was a thing he’d earned. He’d showed a little something, they were saying; therefore they offered him a sinecure. If he didn’t accept, no offense would be taken and it would cost him nothing except his life. Not because they would be offended, but because now he had new enemies, and without their protection he wouldn’t last out the week.

What troubled him about the proposal wasn’t the obvious requirement but what he saw as the public nature of the arrangement. He would lose the very autonomy and respect he had attempted to claim for himself thirty minutes earlier and would become instead a piece of property belonging to Gomez and to the Mexicans generally. In exchange for that, he would get to live. Of course being property would diminish the value of living, but there it was. He was free to choose. He watched the wind break up a towering mass of cloud and scatter the pieces.

When Tyrell was released—with three weeks off for good behavior, he served precisely ninety-nine days—he had intended to return to Springfield, but Gomez counseled against it. He worried that Tyrell would tend to get in trouble there and suggested he go to Florida instead, where a friend of Gomez’s had recently opened a sound studio outside of Sarasota and needed an engineer. In Florida, it turned out the friend didn’t know Gomez, they simply had some acquaintances in common, but he hired Tyrell as promised, and even found him a small apartment.

In fact, there wasn’t much music work to be had—suddenly everyone without a record label was recording themselves on Garage Band or Logic or Pro Tools—so the guy soon had Tyrell mixing soundtracks for the commercials, industrials and occasional indie feature that, since the arrival of inexpensive HD cameras, people seemed to be making everywhere. Film didn’t absorb him the way music had. He couldn’t crawl inside it and live there. But that had its advantages. He didn’t blow up at the filmmakers when they were unprepared or lazy or couldn’t hear the difference between good and better. Film wasn’t an art form, he decided; it was a recording technology. If the directors didn’t care, why should he? He’d sit in the big airy studio and advise college football coaches what music to put on their recruiting videos.

In prison Gomez had started him lifting weights, and Tyrell had been surprised at how
quickly his body changed, and how that had bought him an enlarged personal space, more breathing room in the yard, the corridors, and the dining hall, even when he wasn’t with the Mexicans. He liked that—it fascinated him, actually—and as soon he got settled in Sarasota he joined the most serious gym he could find and tried to spend two hours there every day “working on the instrument.” Somebody had written on the wall of the Mekong weight room IRON SAVES YOU WORDS, and this seemed no less true on the outside. For twenty bucks he picked up a rusted beach cruiser at a garage sale and rode it to the studio, the gym, the store, the beach. Anywhere he couldn’t get by bike, he tended not to go, though every month or so he would take the bus over to Fort Lauderdale and have dinner with Gomez’s son Edgar. Tyrell’s parole officer would not have approved of these visits, so he didn’t mention them. They were pleasant, largely innocuous evenings in nice restaurants. Once, Edgar had him bring back a small package and deliver it to a furniture store in Sarasota. That was all.

In February, the studio hired a new bookkeeper, and the next week Tyrell asked her to lunch. She was a half-Cuban woman named Lorraine, almost forty, very sexy in his opinion, and he kept her laughing the whole time with prison stories. The next evening they went to hear some of the cracker country music he had come to like, then ended up back at his little apartment, and after that they were together. She was crazy about his new body. The rougher he got with her, the better she liked it, and he found he enjoyed that, too. When summer came, he moved into her place, which was bigger than his and faced west so it caught the breeze. Lorraine didn’t want to get married or have kids; there was no pressure that way. They went to the beach and flea markets, followed some local bands, and spent time with her family, who seemed to like Tyrell, or at least had no objection to him. On his thirty-fourth birthday she made him a cake, and as she and her sister and her sister’s husband and their kids sang the usual song, he looked at the candles and realized he was a year older than Jesus.

A week later, he bought an eleven-year-old Mazda with decent compression. When Lorraine asked why he suddenly needed a car—he already had full use of her Civic—he couldn’t think of an answer. He just wanted it, though except for doing a few repairs—he fixed the A/C, replaced the brake pads, bought a new set of black walls—the thing sat on the street for a month untouched until it became a sore point between them. The mere sight of it could put her in a mood.

Then one rainy morning when Lorraine and her sister were over in Orlando visiting their parents, he took the Mazda down to Fort Myers to look at a clarinet he’d found on craigslist. It was a fairly new Selmer Signature asking only $795, though when he sat in the guy’s apartment and tried to play it, it sounded like a duck. He changed reeds; it didn’t help. Tyrell acknowledged he hadn’t played in a long time, his embrasure was for shit, but when the seller picked it up, it was even worse.

“It sounds good,” the guy insisted. “That’s how it’s supposed to sound.”

Tyrell had brought along his old Leblanc, so he got it from the car and played a little for the guy. “You hear that? You hear the tone? And that’s basically a student instrument.”

The guy said, “What if I give it to you for six hundred?”

He zipped the Leblanc back in its case. “I don’t want it, man. It sounds shitty.”

Then the seller was on his feet, holding the horn and standing, perhaps inadvertently, between Tyrell and the door. “What about five hundred? You can resell at a profit.”

Tyrell laughed. Was the guy a drug addict or just stupid? “Why don’t you resell it. Cut out the middleman.”

He walked straight for the door. The guy stepped out of his way. A year ago he wouldn’t have called it shitty. He’d have said he had to think about it or, at most, that it didn’t have the tone he liked, it wasn’t for him. He would have been nice and lied. Now he didn’t care.

On the way back up 75, he saw the sign for “Fruitvale Road 3 Miles” and figured he’d get over in a minute. Then it was a mile. Then the exit
was behind, and he just kept driving. He drove another four hours through the flatness of Florida, stopping once for gas, turned west on Interstate 10 and kept going through the night, the Florida panhandle, gas, food, Alabama, Mississippi, then on the far side of Lake Pontchartrain, milky in the dawn light, he caught 55 North. Somewhere before noon he had to pull into a rest area. It was wooded and cold and he was still dressed for Florida, but he managed to sleep for a couple of hours, then went on. In Arkansas he bought a zip-up sweater, three fresh t-shirts, socks, a hat, and some coffee. He wasn’t really hungry. He was in a road trance of movement, miles, numbers and nothing in his head. His cell phone hummed against his thigh from time to time, but either he ignored it or didn’t notice. He got into Springfield past midnight and went straight to Conley’s.

There were only two customers left, both at the bar talking with the bartender, a different one from last time, who, when Tyrell walked in, seemed unenthused at this advent of a new customer and instead of What’ll it be? said, “We’re closing in twenty minutes.” The clock on the wall, an old electric with black face and white hands, read one twenty-five, so it should have been at least half an hour with, in Tyrell’s opinion, a certain grace period, but he let that go and ordered a ginger ale. The bartender gave it to him then went back to his friends. Tyrell, staring into the ginger ale he didn’t want, said, “Where’s Jason?” He just interrupted their conversation without waiting for a pause.

All three looked over. The bartender frowned at the others. One of them said, “Woodley.” That clicked, and the bartender told Tyrell, “He doesn’t work here anymore. He went to the Red Dog. They made him assistant manager, I think, but that was like a year ago.”

One of the friends asked, “Did he get benefits?”


Tyrell asked, “The Red Dog on South Veterans?”

“Is there one on South Veterans?”

“There was.”

“I think it’s the one at the Taplin Center.”

Tyrell hadn’t heard of the Taplin Center, but just nodded. He sipped his drink for another minute, then left. Afterward he wished he’d taken a piss in the men’s room, but it hadn’t occurred to him at the time.

He could have stayed with friends or even his mother, but he drove back out to the highway where he found a motel room for thirty-eight dollars, and in the morning the desk clerk directed him to the Taplin Center. Once he got there, he realized they had started building it before he left—he remembered the huge construction site—and finished while he was away. It had a fourteen-screen movie theater, a Macy’s, a Bed, Bath & Beyond, maybe thirty smaller stores, and several restaurants, of which the Red Dog was the largest. When he asked for Jason, the hostess told him his shift started at four o’clock.

He drove back to the motel and played scales on the Leblanc for a couple of hours, then tried a few simple pieces he remembered from middle school, Bach, Mozart, a Sousa arrangement that somehow came back to him. He put the chair by the window and watched traffic go by on the Interstate while he played. The rush of the cars added an irregular rhythm track that was unlike anything he’d ever heard.

At some point in the afternoon he lay down on the bed, and when he opened his eyes it was dark. The room clock kept blinking 12:00. His cell phone said 8:13. He stripped and did pull-ups on the door molding, then a full set of push-ups, crunches, squats, some stretching and twisting. By the end, he was pumped and sweat-drenched. He showered, dressed, and drove to the mall.

It was a Thursday, and even at eleven the bar was crowded with state office workers, lawyers, legislative aides, lobbyists, some grittier members of the Assembly, and what looked to Tyrell like a drug dealer or two, everyone trying to get laid before tomorrow when they’d have to go home to their families for the weekend. He talked to a woman from the insurance industry trade association, and under cover of that watched Jason
going about his job. He seemed busy, tense, focused, monitoring the crowd, redeploying barbacks and waiters, speeding busboys. Once or twice his gaze drifted Tyrell’s way, but never settled.

After twelve, the place began to thin out and Tyrell wanted to be alone. When he asked his companion for her number, she said, “You don’t have to call me. I’m right here.” He smiled and leaned toward her, “There’s something else I’ve got to do right now. Why don’t we get together next week.” She made a face. Next week he wasn’t going to matter. Just to be polite, she gave him her number; he punched it into his cell and kissed her cheek as she left.

He had caught Jason’s eye three or four times without getting a look of recognition. Now, he spotted him with a female barback counting bottles and filling in a re-order form. Tyrell carried his glass over and slid up onto one of the stools. Jason had been cute two years ago, cocky and aggressive with a little lost boy behind it that the girls must have loved. Tonight he looked tired, flabby, his hair beginning to go. The Red Dog no doubt paid better than Conley’s and there would be benefits, but it worked him harder and probably didn’t pat him on the head as nicely.

Tyrell caught the barback’s eye. “Could I get another one here?” She took his glass, asked what he was drinking, and went to refill it from the soda wand. She was a black girl, chunky, bright-eyed, quick. Jason waited with grim impatience for her to return to their task, and when he glanced over to see what was taking her so long—ginger ale syrup had gummed up the pump—Tyrell said to him, “Remember me?”

Jason stared at him mutely. Had he heard the question? Had it registered? Some cowboy movie music began to play, and he pulled out his cell to see who was calling. He held up an open hand, said to Tyrell, “We close in five,” and walked away, talking into the phone.

He had no idea who Tyrell was. Tyrell looked at himself in the mirror behind the bottles. His face had changed and his body even more. Was it that, or had Jason just forgotten? Because it was no big deal. Maybe at Conley’s people got stomped so often you couldn’t keep track. At the Red Dog it would be a special event.

The barback still hadn’t been able to clear the hose, so Tyrell told her to forget that and give him a Dewar’s straight up. She glanced at the time on the register and said, “We’re going to lock up in a minute.”

He nodded. “Jason told me.”

She poured half an inch into an old-fashioned glass and set it down just beyond where his hands rested on the bar top. He stretched out his fingers like tentacles until they managed to touch the glass and draw it to him. He felt himself on the edge of a cliff. Gomez had told him not to go back to Springfield, but he’d also said that you could not ignore an insult. It was a matter of honor, yes, and also of health. Health and honor and many seemingly disparate matters were connected in ways most people missed because they rushed through life. Gomez maintained that prison was the best school he’d ever attended because the danger forced him to think clearly.

The kitchen lights were going off, and a few final customers exited the place. He could hear Jason on the phone making excuses, defending himself. The barback came over and said, “We’re closed now.”

He said, “I need to talk to Jason a minute.”

“He’s busy.”

“I’ll wait.”

She walked over to Jason who waved her away, and she stood nearby while he finished the call. She sensed trouble, but knew not to intrude on her boss.

The last kitchen workers left, waving goodbye as they went out. Jason nodded to them while he talked. The girl locked the door. There were only the three of them now. At the bar, Tyrell heard Jason’s voice rise as he tried to get off the call, then tried again until finally he snapped the phone shut. The barback spoke quietly to him, pointing at Tyrell.

“Hey, excuse me, we’re closed now.” Jason crossed the room as he said it, at once watchful and calm. His manner was different from the
last time, relaxed, friendly, trying to read if Tyrell was simply drunk or maybe disturbed. He didn’t seem especially worried either way. He spoke again before he got there, the way you would with a dog you didn’t want to startle. “What’s up?”

“Just finishing my drink.” He held up the Dewar’s, which he still hadn’t touched.

“Come back tomorrow, I’ll buy you a double.”

Tyrell shook his head. “It’ll only take a minute.”

If Jason had seen this coming, he might have asked a couple of the kitchen staff to stay, but he’d been on the phone and now they were gone.

Tyrell put the glass to his mouth and tipped it just enough to feel the sting against his lips. It was poison. If he let even the tiniest drop into his bloodstream, it would take the edge off, and he would lose his purpose here. Maybe that would be best. Let it go.

Jason put a hand on his shoulder, “Come on,” and eased him off the stool.

Tyrell’s feet hit the floor. “You don’t remember, do you?” Jason looked at him. “At Conley’s, two years ago October.”

Jason made an effort to recall. Tyrell could have added details, the hostess, their argument about the bathroom, pissing on the floor, but suddenly it didn’t matter if the guy knew. He hit him just below the ribs. The wind went out in a rush, and Jason crumpled sideways against the bar, looking bewildered. Tyrell hit him with a left that traveled up his sloping body and caught him flush in the mouth, snapping his head back. He started to sag and Tyrell lifted him up with a right from below, then another, propping him against the bar. He tried to keep him up with the punches because once he went down, he wasn’t going to hit him anymore. The whole thing lasted no more than five or six seconds, maybe less, but he did a pretty good job of it. Jason hit the floor with a thud, his head just missing the brass foot rail. Tyrell was tempted to kick him a couple times for symmetry, for the kicks that had cost him some teeth, but he didn’t.

Across the room, the barback was on her cell phone. Calling the cops, no doubt. He unzipped and pissed carefully all around Jason’s body, like the chalk outline of a corpse, but not letting a drop get on him. Well, maybe a drop. When he was done, he left, nodding to the barback. In the parking garage he had to walk up and down the levels looking for his car—which, for some reason, he couldn’t remember, not even the color—while up above he heard the approaching police sirens. Yet he didn’t hurry or even want to. He had completed his appointed tasks and now he experienced the mix of pleasure and relief he used to get at the end of a long project, when the final playbacks had been checked and backed up; then he’d walk out of the studio and out of the building into what might have been day or night, summer or winter, clear or rain or snow, into a world refreshed for him by his absence from it. The quiet joy he felt in his indifference to the sirens, his lack of fear or impulse to hurry—these seemed to him the greatest happiness of all.

By the time he found the car and turned toward the Chatham Road exit, he could see red lights sweeping across the buildings opposite, so he backed up and went around to the Wabash exits. It was quiet there. He put his ticket into the yellow plastic reader and it told him that even with the two free hours, he owed $2.75. He only had a twenty, and while the woman made change, he wondered if there was a security cam whose feed the cops would review. If he lowered the sun visor now, or put a hand to his face, would that be a giveaway? Maybe they could see the license plate. But why should he hide? He wasn’t ashamed of anything.

The gate lifted before she’d handed him the change, and he fought the impulse to drive away without it. When he got the money, he eased the car forward between two curbs. Ahead, where the lane emptied onto Wabash, there was a police cruiser parked to one side, its dome light going. A uniformed cop standing beside it signaled him to slow down. If he had remembered where he parked, if he had thought to park on a side street instead of in the garage, if he hadn’t bothered to piss around Jason, he would have been gone by now.

The cop leaned down to look at him, swung a flashlight beam around the interior, and had just
started to wave him on when he heard something and glanced back over his shoulder. He said, “Hold on a second,” and straightened up. Another cop was walking this way accompanied by a smaller figure in a hoodie. As they got closer, Tyrell saw that it was the barback, arms crossed over her chest, shoulders hunched against the cold.

He considered several options, but in the end simply turned off the engine and put both hands on the top of the wheel.

4

The D.A. acknowledged that Tyrell had gotten reamed the last time (they had found the pot bust expunge order, he never should have gone to jail) and offered to accept a guilty plea on a reduced assault charge in exchange for two years at a minimum-security facility, possibly in a work release program. Otherwise Tyrell would face all five counts: aggravated assault, aggravated battery, indecent exposure, public urination, and, just to run the total up, a misdemeanor theft charge for leaving the Red Dog without paying for the Dewar’s. And, he carefully pointed out, in sentencing his previous assault conviction would be taken into consideration.

“In my previous,” Tyrell told his lawyer, “all I did was urinate.”

“And you urinated again this time, didn’t you?”

Clearly the lawyer regarded him as a nut, possibly a pervert, found him distasteful, and would not have represented him if he’d had a choice. He was not a public defender, but a court-appointed counsel who got a certain amount per case and, evidently, couldn’t afford to turn one down. Tyrell said, “I want to go to trial. I want a jury.”

The lawyer seemed poised between boredom and fury. “They also found a tire iron in the trunk of your car. That’s a weapons enhancement.”

“It’s a tool. It was in the car. I never took it inside.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Ask them. Did anyone say I had a weapon?”

“Dude,” the lawyer was practically shouting, “it doesn’t fucking matter. If you get convicted on all five, with your priors and an enhancement you could get twelve years. Instead of the two they’re offering. How old are you?” He glanced at Tyrell’s jacket. “You’d be forty-six when you got out. Or you could be thirty-six.” He spread his hands as if to say: your choice, I don’t give a shit.

Fair enough. But what would he do when he got out at thirty-six? The world was going to go on being the world, and Tyrell would either capitulate to it or keep going back to prison. He had not liked prison, but there had been, once he got settled, an integrity that he didn’t find on the outside. Everyone knew what you were, and you didn’t have to apologize for it. Even the physical violence was clarifying. There wasn’t much value in pretending to be tougher than you were. “I want to talk to a jury.”

The lawyer flung his hands in disgust.

The trial took one day. The State put on the barback first, then Jason, who actually did look a little beat up, then the E.R. doctor who’d seen him initially, and last a urologist who had been treating Jason for renal bleeding and now speculated about permanent kidney damage. Having fallen out with his lawyer, Tyrell presented his own defense and called only one witness, himself.

The moment he stepped into the witness box, it occurred to him that he did not have a “defensive strategy” or, indeed, a strategy of any kind, and he suddenly wished he’d thought the whole thing out more carefully. He’d simply wanted to tell his story to twelve strangers and see what they thought, and only now, in a panic, did it seem that risking ten years of his life to win two might not be the smartest bet. He wondered if he could go back and take the prosecutor’s deal after all. But who would he talk to about that? The prosecutor? The judge? His own attorney whom he hated and didn’t trust? Could he just call time-out and pow-wow informally “at the bench” the way they did in movies? He didn’t want to look stupid or bumbling, when really the smart move would have been to look stupid and try to get the ten years back. But he was too crazy or stubborn or
frightened. Then he calmed himself and thought, no, he wanted to tell the story. He was going to tell the damn story.

He described what had happened at Conley’s almost two years ago. The prosecutor objected, but the judge overruled. Tyrell pointed out that although he was the one who had been beaten up, he was the one charged with assault and sent to prison. He described prison with a candor that startled the jury, the judge, and even the prosecutor, who again tried to cut this off; but by then the judge was so engrossed she simply waved away the objection and told Tyrell to go on. Before he could, the prosecutor asked, “What is the relevance of all of this, your honor, to the case at hand?” Not entirely sure herself, the judge invited Tyrell to explain.

He was already nervous, but now his heart began to pound. For two years he had been telling this story in the privacy of his thoughts, and there the “relevance” had been obvious. Yet when he looked into the faces of the jurors, he saw that although he had their full attention—indeed, they were hanging on every word—they weren’t following the argument. And why should they? He wasn’t making an argument. He was telling a story. But the prosecutor had distracted and confused them. Now they needed an argument, relevance, or they would send him back to prison.

That was not the worst of it. Prison he could manage. What he could not bear—what he thought might literally kill him—was that having put up ten years of his life to rent this stage, he would fail to make them understand what it was that had happened.

His hands were trembling so hard he had to press them between his knees to still them. He was more frightened than he’d been at Mekong going after Curly and Moe. There he’d only had to do something, lure the guys, stab them, die if necessary. Here he had to think, speak, he had to take the experience that was inside him and bring it out into the world so that the jury could see it was an argument, and a relevant one. He didn’t know where to begin. Half of him wanted to collapse in his seat so that they’d lift him onto a stretcher, wheel him away, and maybe even inject him with something—anything—that would put him out of this agony.

Yet there remained a tiny cube of will at the center of his brain, like a light in a darkened building, and when he finally found the door and went into that room, he not only remembered what he had to say, he knew that he had to say it now even if he couldn’t, even if they didn’t understand, if he lost control of his bowels or had a heart attack and died.

He said, “Before I went to prison, I was a certain kind of person…”

For the third time, the prosecutor intervened. They had been through this; the witness was repeating himself. The judge asked Tyrell to come to the point.

He looked up at the bench and said, “This is the point, your honor. This is really, finally,” and then he smiled, “the point.” Suddenly he felt fine. He straightened up and faced the jury. “Those guys at Conley’s beat me up.” His eyes found Jason where he was sitting in the gallery. “Not just Jason Woodley,” he said, “all of them. But, okay, I could deal with that. Sometimes you get beat up.” Everybody laughed, which startled him; he wasn’t trying to be funny. “But then they lied. Jason lied. He said I hit him, which I didn’t.” In the gallery Jason showed no emotion, as if Tyrell had been talking about someone else. “He fucked me over,” then quickly added, “I’m sorry, your honor. Language, I know.” He tried to think of another way to put it. “My life changed,” he paused, then simply repeated, “My life changed.”

He didn’t mean Gomez, whom he liked and thought of fondly, so much as the whole situation—not even just prison, but what prison made clear about everything. But how could he explain that to people who had no idea and were just sitting in a jury box staring at him with their moon faces? He was silent for so long that he could feel the judge getting restless, the prosecutor about to pipe up again and his own jerk lawyer snickering as if this proved his point. But Tyrell knew how to hold a beat, sustain the tension. He let the silence stretch out and waited without fear for the words
to come to him. And they did.

“It’s all a fight,” he said. “That’s what you realize. Everything is a fight.”

The room was still. He studied the jurors’ faces. They were with him.

“If you get hit, you’ve got to hit back. Otherwise they will fuck you. I’m sorry, your honor...” He could pause as long as he wanted. He was master of time and silence. “If you don’t hit back, you’re dead. You’re dead meat.” Dead meat was more accurate. He hoped they saw the distinction. “If you’re just dead, you don’t feel anything. But dead meat, sitting there, waiting for them to fuck with you, because all they want to do, everyone, anyone, is fuck with you.”

No one made a sound. Every eye was on him. The prosecutor complained and the gavel began to sound as the judge belatedly remembered her part in this, and Tyrell apologized once more, sincerely, and asked if he could be allowed to finish. “If you do it quickly,” she said, and he realized that she liked him despite herself.

For some reason he thought of the Rodney King video that they’d shown a billion times back then, and each time, as the cops pounded him, King kept trying to get up. Over and over he never stopped trying; that was why they kept hitting him. “Jason hit me in the bar, he and his friends. He hit me again when he lied to the cops and sent me to prison.”

The prosecutor said, “Your honor...” She waved him to silence.

“And then he was in there,” Tyrell pointed to his head, “hitting me every day. Every day, even after I got out.” He might have said every minute, every second, but that wasn’t quite true, and anyway they got the point. “And either I had to hit him back, or he would have gone on hitting me for the rest of my life until I was dead.”

His heart was pounding again, but not in fear this time or even rage.

“So what I did at the Red Dog was actually self-defense.” He looked again for Jason, but he wasn’t there. “It was life and death. Because if you don’t hit them back, they’ll kill you. It’s all about killing you. Always. Everybody.”

Everybody, he thought. Everybody.

He’d gone so far inside himself he’d lost track of his audience, but when he looked again the twelve faces were with him. They knew what he was talking about and they knew it was true. How could they not know? Tyrell sat back with an almost unbearable sense of relief. He had said it, they had heard it. Nothing else mattered. There were some further remarks by the prosecutor and his own lawyer, formalities, but all that was a distant murmur to which Tyrell paid no attention.

When the jury went out to deliberate, he was handcuffed and taken into what turned out to be an empty courtroom rather than downstairs to the holding cells in the basement. He wondered what the sheriffs who were guarding him had thought of his testimony, or if they’d even been in the room to hear it. He had been terrified that he wouldn’t be able to express his thought, but in the end he felt he had never expressed anything so well. He had had something to say, an idea so troubling and irrefutable that it seemed to him the first real thought he had ever had in his life. If it wasn’t truly original, if thousands or millions had had it before him, that didn’t matter. He had come to it on his own, the fruit of his experience, of his very being. And that he had been able to discover a truth about the world, however dark, however familiar, seemed to redeem his entire life. All the countless stupid, even catastrophic mistakes he’d made, and the stubbornness of spirit that had compelled him to repeat them over and over so that now, instead of having a wife, a child, a sound studio of his own, happiness, he was up on his second felony charges in two years, all of it had brought him to this thought which was so hard and clear and real that, for the moment at least, he regretted nothing.

He dozed off in a wooden chair and slept until somebody woke him with the news that the jury was coming in. He said, “What time is it?” surprised that there was still light in the sky. He asked how long he had been asleep, but no one answered.

As the jurors filed back into the courtroom, several of them met his gaze and one or two
even smiled, all of which he took for a good sign. They regarded him, he thought, if not quite as a friend, at least as a man who had been honest with them. Who had opened his heart and told them something it took courage to say. Then the foreman got up and announced that they found him guilty on the four most serious charges. They acquitted him on the misdemeanor theft. All without explanation. Planetary systems whirled through his head. The judge set sentencing for the second week of January, thanked the jurors, excused them, and they filed out past Tyrell’s table carrying their coats and purses and shopping bags. He wanted to grab their arms as they went by and ask how they had come to their decision, but there seemed to be no procedure for that.

He spent the holidays at his mother’s place under house arrest, wearing an electronic ankle bracelet. He had to call a probation officer for permission anytime he wanted to go out, though that wasn’t often. Parties, restaurants, movies, and so on didn’t interest him. A couple of old girlfriends offered to come visit, and his mother indicated her willingness to vacate the tiny house for a few hours, but Tyrell passed even on that. His mind was elsewhere.

What preoccupied him was not the verdict itself, which he’d half expected, or even the upcoming sentence, but a single detail of chronology. The judge had finished her instructions to the jurors and sent them out at about quarter to five, and court had reconvened just after six. Tyrell had been on two juries himself, and he knew that in those eighty minutes they would have had to use the bathroom, gather around the table, discuss procedure, elect a foreman, review the indictment and conduct at least one ballot on each of the five counts. Leaving no time whatsoever for “deliberations.” Which meant that they had not considered the possibility that he might be innocent, or at least not guilty, or guilty but under circumstances worthy of discussion. There had been no discussion. His speech to them, the one idea of his life, had not even come up. Everyone had listened when he spoke—he was sure of that—they had heard him, understood, been affected. He had seen it in their faces. And they never mentioned it again.

The mystery of this took possession of his thoughts. What should he have said or done differently? How could he have made them understand? And perhaps that was a good thing, for it distracted him from the tedium of Christmas, from Lorraine’s silence (he called, emailed, nothing) and finally, in January, even from the judge’s sentence, eighty-four months, which by then didn’t seem so bad. With good behavior he could be out in six years. “You’ll be forty,” his mother whispered, “you can still have children.” He looked into her hopeful face, kissed her, and the sheriffs walked him away.

5

In prison—the Muscatine Correctional Center, out in the cornfields—he told the jury story to the prison psychiatrist, the chaplain, other inmates, to anyone who would listen, and each time he did their eyes glazed over in a way that was curiously similar. Dr. Ike, as the shrink was called, wondered whether this wasn’t precisely “the type of thinking” that landed Tyrell in trouble in the first place. When Tyrell asked what that meant, the doctor just smiled as if the prisoner were being deliberately obtuse. The chaplain, a gentler soul, asked if he was taking any medication, and offered to speak to the psychiatrist about it. He also hinted that maybe this wasn’t a topic to discuss with people who might some day be asked to write letters to the parole board on one’s behalf.

Eventually, however, Tyrell met a guy in the weight room whose eyes did not glaze over. Marshall Claymore Haugse was a former college baseball star—left-handed pitcher, power hitting outfielder—serving a mandatory twenty-five for killing his wife and her boyfriend. He listened attentively to the story, asking pertinent questions even as he continued his workout. When Tyrell had finished describing the trial, his testimony and what little effect it seemed to have had on the jurors, Haugse sat back rubbing his elbows after a
set of reverse curls, smiled, and said, “What did you expect?”

It was funny that until now no one had asked him that, not the chaplain or the shrink or even his mother, and maybe funnier still that he couldn’t think of an answer. At first it seemed obvious, but when he opened his mouth to say it, nothing came out.

“Did you think they were going to acquit you?”

“No, no,” he assured Haugse, he wasn’t that stupid. Or was he? Deep down, hadn’t he felt justified in beating up Jason and believed that if the jury understood they would let him go? “I guess I thought at least they’d talk about it. Discuss it. They’d see the problem.”

“Tell me about the problem,” Haugse said expansively. He had plenty of time. Wasn’t it obvious? “That if you don’t hit Jason back, he keeps hitting you. Forever. No one could stand that.”

“When you were living in Florida, was Jason hitting you?”

“Every day.”

“Yet your life down there sounds good. You said it was good. You had work, a girlfriend, the gym, you liked the beach.”

He had loved the beach and the weather, especially the storms.

“Then why leave? Why’d you go back?”

“Come on, man, you killed your wife. Why’d you kill your wife?”

“But you get the deal, right? You see the deal.”

“What are you saying? You saying this never happens to the jury? They never get hit?”

“Au contraire.” Haugse smiled the way one does at a child who is refusing to understand what he doesn’t want to hear. “It happens to them all the time. It’s all that happens to them.” He laughed. “They get hit by their bosses, their wives, their kids, the insurance company, the guy who fixes their car or doesn’t fix it. And they never beat anybody up. Ninety-nine percent of them.”

“Cause they don’t want to go to jail. Or get beat up back.”

“Because they get the deal, Tony. It’s a deal. Take it or leave it.”

“Then they eat shit,” Tyrell said in a sudden fury.

“They eat shit,” Haugse agreed, “that’s the deal.”

How long it takes to see what is right before you. This was part two of Tyrell’s great truth. Everything’s a fight was part one. Part two was: you lose the fight, if not to Jason then to the prison, the State, the world. Therefore, you eat shit, after which you eat more shit, and the minute you stop eating, someone shoves a fist down your throat until you start again. “Or you die,” Tyrell said.

Haugse nodded. “Eat shit or die. It’s in the Constitution.”

And once he thought about it, he saw that the rule applied as much to Dr. Ike and the Chaplain and Bill Gates and the President as to the likes of Haugse and himself. Everyone ate shit; that was the nature of things. Which, he supposed, made it fair.

He’d no sooner had that thought than he had another, that all of this was obvious, everyone knew it. Most people might not know they knew it, but they did. You could tell because they lived by it: they took the punches and went to the beach. A few actually knew they knew, and they ran the world. If you figured it out early enough, and you were smart, worked hard, and, above all, didn’t take things personally, you couldn’t escape the thing, but you might be able to get to the upper reaches where you were in charge of the machinery. You weren’t free, nobody was free—maybe over in India or somewhere there was a holy man under a tree, but that was of no use to Tyrell—but you helped run the unfreedom. In fact, knowing you weren’t free constituted a kind of freedom, a shadow of the real thing.

But if, like Tyrell, you didn’t learn all this until later (i.e., too late) or you lacked the opportunities and, let’s say, the temperament to make practical use of it, then knowing how things really worked messed with your head. It became an impediment in the path of the blind, and you tended to stumble over it. Prisons were bulging
with the stumblers. When people complained that prison didn’t rehabilitate, they missed the point; prison provided twenty-four-hour-a-day instruction in the two most important social skills; eating shit and shutting up about it. True, many inmates failed to master the material, though clearly a lot of them had learning disabilities. Yet prison, to its credit, refused to accept excuses; all were instructed and tested, regardless of ability. And the ones who couldn’t learn, and refused even to fake it, got what he came to think of as the definitive lesson. A prisoner named Baines—Tyrell never knew his first name—a black man who terrified everybody, was up on a roof one day replacing some ventilator flashing when he had a heart attack, a seizure, it was never clear what. The guards in the tower saw it right away, but they let three or four hours go by before they got around to sending somebody up to check on him, and by that time Baines’ spirit had fled. No one, frankly, was sad to see it go.

Yet the incident became another piece in the ominous argument taking shape in Tyrell’s thoughts. Then one morning, while trying to repair a sprinkler system (he worked on the maintenance crew), Tyrell looked up into the first glorious sky of spring and suddenly he saw that “eat shit or die” made it sound like you had a choice, but that was an illusion. Eating shit was actually a form of dying, and vice versa. This was the flaw in the prison pedagogy. The world did everything it could to convince you there was a difference between them, that it was worth eating shit so they wouldn’t leave you up on the roof to die, but the habitual recidivists—a group Tyrell had begun to think included him—couldn’t see it. Dr. Ike called this a character flaw, but to Tyrell it seemed more a perceptual problem, like color blindness. The recidivists were unable to see that life had inherent value regardless of how much shit had to be eaten to sustain it.

For the color blind, it was eat-shit—and-die. There was no choice except the direction from which one approached extinction. Baines had forced others to kill him. Most humans, prisoners included, seemed to prefer to kill themselves. But to Tyrell the difference was meaningless; eating shit and dying were indistinguishable. The one crack of light between these two darknesses was murder. You were allowed to eat shit and you were allowed to die. What you couldn’t do was kill. Which meant killing set you free.

It was a simple thought, the logical end to a certain line of reasoning. Yet with that, a hole seemed to open in the sky and a strange light flooded down. It was a terrible light, yet when he stood there and let it pour over him, he felt uplifted, as if he’d been released from prison, the real prison, the one you were always in.

Tyrell had been assigned to the maintenance crew because he could fix almost anything—plumbing, an oven, a lawnmower, a double-hung window in the deputy warden’s office, the nurse’s instrument sterilizer, the library computer, and an endless succession of Walkmen, boomboxes, radios, and headphones. As a result, he had complete access to the tool room, so when it came to fashioning a weapon, he didn’t have to rely on a cheap item like at Mekong.

After some thought, he took apart a pair of garden clippers—two flat blades joined by a spring and a screw—and sharpened them, first with a grinder, then on a whetstone. When he balanced the result on his palm and let it fall against a tautly held bed sheet, it cut through the fabric using no force but its own weight. A thing that sharp, he thought, could slide between a man’s ribs almost without his noticing. He took off the handles with a hacksaw, wrapped electrical tape around the stub ends, and fit them into the lining of his boots. He could feel the stiffness when he walked.

From there, it got tricky. Haugse had killed his wife and her lover out of fury, like an enraged child; that wasn’t freedom but its opposite. Tyrell’s murder, the one he’d begun to construct in his head, would not be an act of passion, or even self-defense, like his attack on Curly and Moe back at Mekong, nor instrumental like the guards’ de facto killing of Baines. He would do it so that for one moment, at least, he neither ate shit nor died.

Yet could he actually kill anybody? Curly and Moe had been a desperate act; beating up Jason
a compulsive one. What he was thinking about now had to be different. Killing for its own sake, killing because it was wrong, forbidden, because it set one apart from the rest of imprisoned humanity. Even from his fellow inmates whose murders were not of this kind. When he heard these things in his head, they seemed absurd. Yet the thought of this murder gave him comfort and, in fact, pride. He carried it around inside him like a torch.

By mid-June it was stifling in the weight room and eventually, as he did every year, the warden allowed the prisoners to move the equipment out into the yard where they strung up a plastic tarp to keep off the rain and sun. The tarp was blue and cast a blue light on everything so that working out felt a little like being underwater. Let’s go to the pool, became a way of saying, Let’s go lift.

Late on a Saturday toward the end of July, Tyrell was out there spotting for Haugse who lay on the metal bench doing presses. He did seven with deteriorating form, managed to get an ugly eighth up in the air, and said, “That’s it.” He held it there, arms trembling, waiting for Tyrell to put it back on the rack. The bar had two fifties and a ten on each end, and Tyrell calculated that if he dropped it, it would crush Haugse’s skull or break his neck—either way his friend would be dead before the weights hit the ground.

He knew in the instant that he could not have planned this and that no plan would ever present such a perfect opportunity. Haugse was his closest friend in the place. There was no motive. All he had to do was let the bar slip through his fingers and shout out a warning everyone would hear, but that would come too late. Even if there were suspicions, he never would be charged. It was a free shot, but he didn’t take it. He didn’t know why. He fit the bar over the hooks with a clink. The hole in the sky closed up and he became again just another prisoner doing his time. Eating shit and dying.

Not that he should have killed Haugse. It would have been stupid, an impulsive act when he wanted a rational one, sneaky when he had no interest in “getting away with” anything. (That would be eating shit all over again.) Still the refusal wormed its way into his heart, for it wasn’t just cowardice that had stopped him—fear of being caught, of losing his friend, of his own guilty mind—it was that at the crucial moment he simply couldn’t imagine it and, therefore, he couldn’t carry the thought over into action.

This seemed the most terrible failure in his vast failure-strewn life. In the days afterward, desperate to escape that judgment, he would sit in the dining hall or stand in the yard scanning faces, but the right person became less and less easy to find. Some were too tough; he wasn’t sure he could handle them. Others, frankly, were too weak; killing one of them would have been pathetic. And since the victim had to have no meaning to him—so there would be no practical motive to the act—he had to know them well enough to be sure of that, yet not so well that they acquired a value after all.

In short, the more Tyrell thought about it, the harder it got, until his very scrupulousness came to seem another form of avoidance. And the further he drifted from the act itself, the more unbearable life became. He had had a moment of clarity, that killing would set him free, and then he looked away.

In the evenings after the eight o’clock count, if they weren’t on lockdown, the prisoners were allowed out of their cells again until midnight. And one Friday—or maybe it was a Thursday, or maybe it was every day at once—Tyrell wandered into the TV room for no particular reason and took an empty seat in the third row. They were watching one of those shows where the cops always catch the criminals, and this audience of criminals who’d been caught watched in rapt silence as if nothing could be more entertaining.

The room was crowded and dark—somebody had turned off the overhead light, and the CO, a decent sort, hadn’t made them turn it back on—so you could actually see the screen for once. Tyrell sat in his plastic chair, not really following the story, but aware of the dark shapes of the men around him, their attention on the
TV, their defenses down. Silhouetted against the shifting light, they were blocky and anonymous. He could attack one without knowing who it was, without feelings or motive. He wouldn't know how tough they were, but in the dark, with the considerable advantage of surprise, he could probably pull it off.

He flexed his right foot and felt the stiffness in the boot. He looked at the four shapes more or less in front of him and picked one, the second from the right. He was of middling size and girth. He sat like somebody who could handle himself, and Tyrell felt better for that.

Without bending over too conspicuously, he reached down with his right hand and found the taped hasp of the shank. He eased it up out of the leather to get a grip on the handle. He would stab the guy at the base of neck, front left, just inside the collarbone, trying to hit the aorta. The blade was more than long enough and wonderfully sharp, but he would have to use his left hand. He could try with his right, but the angle would be wrong, and he wouldn't get a second chance.

He began to watch the show, looking for a dramatic moment to cover his action. He saw one coming, a man about to kill another man, his friend or former friend, it wasn't clear, someone he knew. He wrapped his fingers around the tape and gathered himself, then, just before the murder, the show broke for a commercial, and everybody relaxed. A couple of guys got up and left, though not the target. During the break they muted the sound, and people turned and talked to each other. Tyrell looked down, not wanting to see the guy or learn who he was, though he could hear his voice. It was gravelly, older, a white man. He would go for him when the show came back on. Another inmate he knew, Alvarez, came and sat beside him and asked what they were watching. Tyrell named the show, but felt like he was hallucinating. He knew Alvarez from the maintenance crew. He was good with the plants. The commercial ended, the show resumed. They unmuted the sound. The guys who had left came back and sat down again, or maybe it was other people. The murder he had been anticipating seemed to have happened somehow, but how could he have missed it? Detectives were questioning a suspect. Tyrell slid the blade out of the boot and switched it over to his left hand. Was that weird? Should he have used the one from the left boot? It didn't matter. It didn't matter.

It was time now. He leaned forward to get the weight over his feet, but he didn't push himself up. On screen the suspect was scrambling, trying to hold together the lie he'd been telling, but the cops bore down on him, relentless, exposing the contradictions, forcing him to see how what he'd been saying didn't hold together, didn't make sense.

Tyrell stood up. Alvarez said, “Where are you going?” He looked down. He could kill Alvarez; it would be easy. The knife was against his left thigh where Alvarez couldn't see it. He sat down again to throw him off and, yes, Alvarez turned back to the screen. He could push off his left foot, pivot in the chair, and hit Alvarez right at the aorta. It would be easier than doing the guy in front; less surprise, but the angle was better, and he could use his right hand. He imagined the blood jetting like a fountain.

He told himself: do it now. Do it. But he didn't move. He wanted to do it, and he wanted to stop. He wanted to be bathed in blood, and he wanted to be nine years old, asleep in his bed on a snowy morning. He wanted to come to his senses and see that this was stupid and wrong. It did seem wrong. He didn't believe in violence. There was no one he wanted to kill, not Alvarez, or the guy in the row in front, or Curly and Moe, or Jason Woodley. Not even his fucking father. He had thought himself into a corner that killing seemed the only way out of, but now he had to find another way. He had to see that killing wouldn't help—as it surely wouldn't—yet when he sat back in the chair, when his grip on the blade loosened, the intolerable fact of imprisonment, of eating shit and dying, rushed through him again like a fever, and there seemed only one escape. Even if it was stupid and hopeless, it was the only way out of this stupid, hopeless world. He wished Jesus would come down and fill his heart with a love that made the whole eat-shit-and-die problem meaningless. Maybe Jesus' love would give him a freedom beyond anything murder could offer, but
what would that be? Would it lift him up to a place where the world was not the world, and he could see it all as illusion? Was that what turn the other cheek meant? What the hell did it mean? It meant not of this earth.

He stood up again, the knife tight in his hand. Alvarez didn’t glance over this time. He could kill Alvarez and maybe the other guy, too. Maybe he could kill them all.

And even if Jesus saved him—which he wouldn’t—would that change anything? Wouldn’t all the rest of them, the prisoners and the prisoners and the prisoners, still be down here eating shit and dying? Wouldn’t the machine—the monster that humans had built or the monster they were—go on crushing each life one by one? And wouldn’t he need to kill somebody then, just as he did now? Maybe if he was up in heaven it would all be different. But he wasn’t. He was as far from there as he was from the holy man under the tree or the cunning bastards who’d fought their way up and ran the show. He was down here in hell and always would be. He couldn’t imagine how he would ever kill anyone, and he couldn’t imagine how he wouldn’t.
I have lost count of the days since the explosion in Chenkalady turned the street to dust and a soldier to fragments. Four or six or twelve civilians, one or three children, a possible mother, flayed by shrapnel and cracked flying rock. I have an uncle who may or may not live there but the phones have never been good and, anyway, I’m afraid of being traced. Finally I am learning: the numbers are not specific and the news cannot be trusted.

I have to believe there is a way to speak of this violence without transforming it into a lie, an embellishment, another of the stories with which I grew up. Without draining it of its power. I would like to have in me the courage to say to you, This woman with her baby girl, she was cut down in the street by the Tamil Tigers, the SLA, Karuna’s people, though anyone’s God knows where Karuna himself has gone. Fled to Malaysia or living in Colombo or the jungles of the eastern province, or dead. Months ago I could picture it so clearly: hands bound behind his back, on his knees, gun firing point-blank into the back of his skull. They would burn his body in a limekiln as they did my uncle’s father when they shot him, so no evidence would be found.

I am anxious when it comes to writing about this in a form that makes it true.

I don’t know if the baby was a girl, or where she was cut down or whose hands held the rusted machetes. (Were they rusted? Did they gleam a warning in the sun as her attackers came to meet her?) Only that a woman was left in pieces on the sidewalk and it was said her child was taken. We string assumptions together like colored beads on fish-line, desperate in our poverty to make necklaces that make sense. I sift through endless news articles to find a kernel of truth and suspect that breaking that seed open would reveal a worm-eaten labyrinth.

In my life there always has been a mysterious They to whom I ascribed unnatural powers of observation. They see what you write. They know. They will find and kill you. They have no scruples; They are everywhere. In August a Tiger sympathizer was arrested in Connecticut, no more than a state or two away.

Sometimes I am very conscious of how my body holds itself together, the physical forces and gravitational pulls that keep us moving and whole. Printed on the inside of my eyelids are photographs of the dismembered, the charred beyond recognition, the youthful, the still recognizable. My father tells me our family in Batticaloa laughs about the time shelling shook their street and made them hurry to the basement. My young cousins’ ages fall into the ranks of child-soldiers. I fight sleep at night to avoid waking to the feeling of metal ripping my stomach apart like cloth.

I do this to myself and smile when people ask why. It is easier to laugh about death. I put it down to my burgeoning masochism.

I am calling my anxiety white van fear for the terror inspired by the unlicensed cars that sweep through cities and villages at night. Where they go, disappearances follow. Aid workers and journalists write up the sob stories but personally I think no family would have the courage to publicly grieve. Anyway aid workers die here and journalists have disappeared too.

A measure of truth would allow me, I think, to sleep with my eyes open.
Finding a child
who lives in the twilight
away from the sun,
yellow charlatan.

Killing that child
to give myself work
deep in the woods
where truth be told

puke is released
from a tree’s complexion.
Putting that child’s
body on, and what do I mean

by a sea, little sleeper?
Where motion has ceased
in a far-off loin
and no more incandescence.
It took about three weeks for the parts to arrive, and all this time Rini is calling like four, five times a day from Toronto, or what’s left of Toronto. “It would not be my genes!” On the speaker-phone, her voice booms out all over the Farm. “It would not be my mitochondria! It would not be my womb! I feel so alienated.”

“Rini! For God’s sake,” Rauden tries to calm her down, “it’s an adoption—an open adoption—the most open adoption in the history of adoption. It’s so goddamn open you can watch the pregnancy through a high-powered scope. You can watch right up until the day it’s goddamn born!”

“And suppose it never is?” goes Rini’s voice. “Suppose it dies in the tank?”

“We do multiples! You know that, Rini. Everyone does multiples—even the regular way,” and he snapped his puffy fingers. “Five!”

Rini again. “And what if they all live? No! No! No! I must have only four. Inez must take one. Put Inez on.”

Rauden reached the phone mic over to me but I froze so bad he pulled it back and said, “Rini, she doesn’t want one.” In the end he just said fine, I would take one. It didn’t matter what he said—some of them would die, and one of the ones who died would be mine. What Rini called mine. I didn’t totally know what that meant but I didn’t have to know. I just have to give Product and do what they say. For now, drive to Goshen and get scraped by the shady OBGYN. This is not the shady OBGYN we used before. He’s in jail.

The scraping is invasive.

When we got back to the Farm, we fixed up the basement room where the tank is going to go. It’s really two rooms with a special window in the wall between so you can watch what’s going on. The inside room is where it’s going to happen. It is hygienic. Rauden says the other room will be a regular rec room. He got two sofas for it. One card table. Chairs.

Once the parts arrived, he put the tank together pretty fast. It looks like a ball, or really an orange with, you know, sections. He hung it from a frame, on wheels. You need wheels because you have to move the tank a little, but just a little. If it moves too much the things that are going inside could get knocked off and die. But it has to be a little like the regular way. The regular way, the Host moves.

And I will tell you, if Rini has a problem with mito-whatever, you can be sure she went ballistic when she heard the Host will be a tank. Come on! She really wanted a Virgin Host. Most clients do. But that didn’t work. It also didn’t work when Rini tried to Host, herself. It’s never going to work in me, I’m missing too much parts. I even sold my teeth, half of them, and got a good rate, too.

Rini was so mad when she heard about all that, I thought it’s going to be a deal breaker. “Will this girl do anything for money? Has she no character at all?” She’s worried my Product will not
have character! She got over it, though. She cut the deal. She was mad with grief. She told us so. You could see the scars on her face, like on each cheek three lines go down? She had scratched them till they bled, from grief. We weren’t even supposed to put the News on when she’s around, because the new thing could start her crying about what happened to her four daughters from the last one.

It’s not going to happen to this bunch. Not if they got my Product in them. Rauden calls my Product, soma. Whatever that is, I still got a lot left. It just has to work.

At first it looked like it wasn’t going to. Rauden had done this kind of thing before, but only with livestock—all the vets around here could do that. He pulled a good Harvest from Rini and mixed it with my soma, and he tried fourteen times, but it didn’t work. So he squeezed a Harvest from what’s left of my ovary and that did work. But the Hosts didn’t work! We’re starting to worry Rini will just give up, when this guy Lucas showed up with his tank gizmo, Rauden checks it out and says, Well the tank has an excellent track record, on cows, and face it, what else is left?

And Rini came around. We knew she would. She was mad with grief.

Almost ready. The new shady OBGYN rigged me up on the IV and did a dry run with my blood to feed the tank. Rauden miked my heartbeat. He called Rini. While she is driving down in her hybrocar, they start my shots. Lucas is helping double check the generators. They have lined the sections of the tank with stuff the shady OBGYN scraped in Goshen. Maybe you think they are treating me like I’m Product myself, scrape this, rig that. Not to mention, when it’s over, some stranger’s walking around Toronto with my soma in them. Well, I had worse jobs. A lot worse.

I’m only telling you all this because it is part of your Heritage. Well, I think it is. Nobody totally figured out yet how Heritage works with us. Maybe it’s not your Heritage. Well, some of you, it is. I want you to know how it worked. At least how it worked with me. Ani and me. Maybe you could even see it in a good light.

When Rini got to the Farm, she went right down to the rec room where all of us are waiting. She didn’t even say hello, just went up to the special window and looked at the tank a long time. Then at the monitors. Then she nodded at Rauden. Him and Lucas put bubble suits on over their overalls and beards and went in the tank room. The new shady OBGYN wore a, like, green suit, plus mask. I just wore regular clothes. Rini wore the same sari she wore when I met her. She sat down on the sofa and patted it, for me. I drag the IV cart and sit beside her. She wants to hold my hand.

They got five monitors. One for each section.

Their names are on their section. Rini already picked them out.

Rauden calls them viables. He calls them viables even if you make them the regular way. The viables are in five bags hanging from hooks with, like, tubes going down, one to each section. They will get squeezed through the tubes.


Rini says Ani’s mine.

“OK, Rini.”

Unless one of them dies. Then Ani will be Rini’s.

“Whatever you say, Rini.” You have to talk to her like that.

Well! If the one who died is Madhur, one of the other ones will change her name to Madhur. Rini has to have one Madhur. Rauden hit the roof the first time he heard the name. “Madhur’s dead. Don’t kid yourself you can replace her. Dead is dead.” But Rini hung tough. “This is not your child,” she told Rauden. “This is my child. I call her what I choose.” I think Madhur was the last one of her girls to die.
Lily died right away.
Rauden thawed a new viable and started her down a new tube. Her name was also Lily. She died, too.

It’s a problem with the section. They’re not going to use that section any more. They take it out.

Rini was OK. Even when they had to replace Chi-chi, she just squeezed my hand. They called the replacement Chi-chi, too. The shady OBGYN took a break and sat with us in the rec room. Nobody talked. We’re supposed to keep as quiet as we could. Rini did not eat, Rauden stayed with the tank. I got a Beverage with a straw and hold it in the hand Rini was not squeezing.

Now, I have heard people talk about what we were doing here. I saw programs about it, when I went back to what’s left of Queens. I want to tell you, in case you hear the kind of thing those people say—well, they got no idea how it works. They act like, to make Chi-chi, Madhur, all of them, what Rauden had to do fourteen times or more before he even got a single viable, oh that is just a walk in the park. Like, the only question is, how ethical was it? Will we take over the world? Are they me?

Look, we all been here going nuts for six hours now and all we’re thinking is, Will it work? Well, that and, Will we go to jail? Even Rini could go to jail. Keep the door closed. Be on the safe side—Rauden didn’t even let us use the regular word for what he made, in case the wrong person hears. We have to say Somatic Nuclear Transfer. You got to watch your language in this business.

The shady OBGYN went back to the tank room and Lucas took a break. Rauden did not take a break. Neither did Rini.

The new Chi-chi was still OK.
They got Rini to take a Beverage after eighteen hours and I am working on a second Process sandwich when Berthe’s section lit up. Later Rauden said that was when he knew it’s going to work. Someone said it’s bad luck to even say that and maybe it was. What did I know? What did any of us know? We don’t even know when Ani and Madhur nested. We’re all, like, doing something else and next minute, they lit up. We’re not even supposed to talk in a regular voice, in case we shock the viables. Be careful even when we whisper, let alone shout. When Chi-chi lit up, though, we did. Everyone shouted, even me. Nobody even looked at me when I did. They are too busy shouting, too.

All four lights are lit up in four sections. The viables all nested, except Lily.

It’s going to work.

In four days Rini was allowed to go in the room with the tanks. She made me come in too. We both wore masks, I don’t even know why. The tank is airtight and, come on, the viables are hardies like me, but nobody knows exactly how that is going to work. It was nice in the tank room, it was so dark and warm. They put thermometers on the tank. They got special lights so you could see in the dark. Rini seemed happy when she came out but still nervous. Rauden was nervous too. His hands shook. I was excited. People will tell you how I’m used here, it is all oppress, exploit, like that. They never say it’s interesting. I never did anything so interesting before.

The shady OBGYN went home. Lucas still hung around, getting on everybody’s nerves. Once we knew it’s going to work he would sometimes, like, stare. He stared at the tank. He stared at me. I heard Rauden tell him once, “Lucas, for God’s sake. They’re not her. That’s not how it works. If they were Inez, she’d be dead because Lily is—they all would be.” After a while we all had it with Lucas and Rauden sent him home.

It’s not like I spend so much time asking, Am I me? Let alone, them. They could be me, if they want, just so long as I still get paid. But don’t say that to Rini! She doesn’t want to think it’s about the money. But let me say this, because when people tell you it was just about the money—money this, money that. If it wasn’t for the money,
it would never of happened. Like if you sometimes ask, why was I born? Well, I don’t know but I can tell you this. Money was a factor.

But not the only one.

Rini and me both slept on the rec room sofas but she did go for drives. They think it could be OK for me to move around the Farm a little. They have my heartbeat miked to a receiver in the tank. I’m supposed to stay inside, though—if I go outside I might do something stupid. Like I’m really going to run away to what’s left of Queens because I miss selling hardy Product at some shady bazaar! The clientele you get there, what they want to pay you to do? I’ll be honest. I rather lose what’s left of my teeth.

Rini went back to Toronto. She had a meeting. Now she’s gone, we could rig up Lily’s monitor to the regular News and see how things are going. Vancouver got quarantine, even though it’s only twenty thousand dead. It hit what’s left of San Francisco. Boise, Idaho got cases. It took a while to even get that far from where it started. Mumbai, India. It still has a way to go before it hits us here, if it does.

Even if it does, I’m not going to get it. Neither will the viables. If it works.

The feeding traffic was arranged like this. They stuck an IV in my arm with two lines, one out, the other in, both attached to bags. The out bag pulls my blood and other stuff. When it’s full they bring it to the tank, which also has lines, in, out, that run to a kind of track. The track goes to each section. Each section has a wall, made from the part of me the shady OBGYN scraped in Goshen. It’s not part of me now. Well, maybe it is. Rauden says nobody knows whose part that part is, once it starts to work. It is about the food. Not regular food. Well! They don’t get regular mouths. So they use that part that nobody knows whose part it is to bring food that is not regular food. Even the regular way, it’s not. It’s a little hard to follow all this.

The blood goes in the viables’ out bag when they’re done with it. Then it goes back in me. I can’t keep giving blood without getting it back. I got to stay alive or it’s not going to work. To tell the truth, Rauden is worried something in that used blood could kill me. He never did this kind of thing before. Maybe hardy viables throw off toxins, who knows? He can’t just put a filter in because there’s other stuff in the blood I need—the viables send a message. Without the message the whole thing might not work. It’s mixed up in the blood. Rauden calls the message Hormone. The Hormone will instruct my own blood, change. And I will tell you this. I’m pretty sure it did. It changed.

I felt different. My breast felt different. Then my changed blood got sent back to the viables. They changed, too. Rauden got really excited. He took a picture with the high-power scope. He sent it to Rini. She got excited too. She said they’re cute.

They got tails.

Rauden says it’s regular.

He has put a phone in the rec room with speakers in the tank room.

I’m just glad Lucas was not there to say they’re me.

Six weeks in. Still alive.

There is early snow. I was allowed to go upstairs and look. They made a loop of my heartbeat for while I’m gone. They could use it any time I got unmiked. I was really tired—when I got back downstairs I conked out on the sofa till Rini woke me up phoning again. She changed her mind again who would get what. She still wants me to take Ani. She will settle for three. Not less though. OK, Rini.

She does not need all four, but she must have three. If one of the four died, that was mine, the one who died. The others would be Rini’s. If they all lived, one was mine and three were Rini’s. Otherwise, if one of them died, the rest were Rini’s.
OK, Rini. Just let me go to sleep.

The truth is, Rini was the only one who thought all four would be born. And how it turned out, just before Christmas, Berthe died. She was nine weeks in. They called the shady OBGYN but, I mean, what is he going to do? They took Berthe’s section out and saved what’s left of Berthe in a freezer. Rini was in Ottawa. Rauden phoned to tell her.

It’s funny, I missed Berthe. I cried. Rauden said it is the Hormones in the blood. Rini thought it is because there were only three left now and none of them is mine. He’s just yelling at her on the phone, “Rini! She doesn’t want the goddamn child!” I missed Berthe, though—I don’t even know why. Maybe it was Ani I missed. Maybe Rini was right. Ani was still alive but she wasn’t mine anymore because she had to replace Berthe, who had died. Why would I miss Ani? I really thought Rauden was right. What am I going to do with a kid, the life I live?

I used to watch Ani special on the monitor, though. She moved. I told Rini all about it when she called from Ottawa. Rini rather hear about Madhur. I said she moved too. So did Chi-chi. She wants to hear how I am. I’m sleeping a lot.

Rini is stuck in Ottawa. It got quarantine. It was most of January till they figured out it’s a false alarm. The Mumbai thing did not reach Ottawa or even Chicago. The border got quarantined though. Rini went back to Toronto. But she called every day, Are they still alive?

They’re still alive.

Fourteen weeks in.

They’re about the size of Rauden’s thumb. You don’t even have to set the scope on high to see them but you got more details if you do. One day I saw—man! It looks like Ani is swinging on her, you know, cord? Then they all start doing it! Man!

It’s OK. Rauden says it’s regular. Just don’t tell Rini.

When they’re sixteen weeks in, it snowed so much I went upstairs to look outside and got back down so tired I slept till night, and when I woke up Chi-chi was dead in the tank. Rini drove straight down from Toronto in the snow and when she got to the Farm she comes in the rec room, walks to the special window to the tank and stood looking in a long time. Then she turned around and scratched both cheeks till blood dripped down her face. It dripped on her clothes. She made a noise. She just began to walk up and down, holding up her hands with blood in the nails, making the noise. It was awful.

Rauden went in his office and shut the door. When he came out, he was drunk. “Get her out of here!” he said. I hooked up my heartbeat loop and went with Rini for a drive. It was four months since I went outdoors. We looked at scenery in the snow. It was cold. Rini stopped at the top of a hill still bleeding and said, “All I ask is for one child to stay alive. Is it so much?” Then she drove back to the Farm, went in the rec room and made the noise again.

It was like when she looked at the ones who were still alive, she just saw the ones who weren’t. She seemed to get nervous looking at Ani and Madhur.

They had heartbeats. Rauden miked them.

Rini went back to Toronto. She didn’t even call to let us know she got there safe. There was a lot of border trouble. Mumbai didn’t even get to Detroit yet but they got quarantines at every border crossing. Rauden is just as glad she didn’t call. She was driving him nuts. He’s already nuts. He been on the wagon this whole time, now he’s drunk. He’s even popping pills. He’s cold, slimy. If he goes totally off the deep end, that’s it for Ani and Madhur. Sometimes I had to remind him to check the IV bags.

I want to tell you something now. I’m not saying all this was not terrible. I’m saying if it never happened, you might not of been born. Some of you, I don’t know which. Because what happened now, Rauden’s such a mess, his brother
Henry who I never met before came down from Albany and said give him a new project, that usually works when he gets like this. So Rauden started making viables from what is left of my Harvest and soma in the freezers. By the time he finished, nineteen brand new viables is in the freezers, in nineteen little cryoPaks, instead.

Maybe you sometimes wonder, “Why was I born?” I’m sorry, I don’t know. I don’t even know if you were in one of those cryoPaks. But if you were, I can tell you why you got put there. To keep Rauden sober, so Ani and Madhur would stay alive.

Maybe you think that is a bad start. Look, it could be worse. I don’t even know for sure those viables were you. The who is who is hard to know for sure. But I can tell you this. The two left in the tank are not you.

Twenty-two weeks in.

Ani is blinking, in the monitor.

I didn’t feel so great. I was so tired. Hungry, too. Generally it is Rini who says, “Did Inez drink her milk Process? Did she rest?” Now she’s forgetting to call.

It is raining.

Rauden is getting worried again about the toxins. Oh, shut up, Rauden. What? I’m going to die? Or why did Rini buy my soma in the first place? Look, the things I didn’t get—I been expose to four Pandies, not counting two mutations of the one from Luzon, plus pneu, pneu—monic plague, cholera of course, the anthrax thing, well! Every goddamn flu that came through Queens, and what about fleas not to mention the original Big One that was a total slatewiper— I mean, I had heard Rauden tell Rini once, “I have never seen hardy talent like this Donor has, in my life!” And I’m going to die from Ani and Madhur, who are not even born? They got that talent, too. So do you. But I’m getting ahead of myself.

Because Ani died in the tank at twenty-six weeks. So Madhur is all that’s left.

When Rini showed up at the Farm this time we’re sure she will be a total mess but she did not even have fresh blood, just scabs still left from Chi-chi. She just walked straight to me in the rec room, took my face in her hands and I will tell you, I’m worried she will scratch my cheeks, but she just looked down at me. Then she pulls me in to her, the breast, and pressed me hard. Man! She was tall. I’m in her breast, her veils. She didn’t even cry. At least that I saw. She just pressed me, then let go, took my hand, and walked me to the special window and stare at the tank. Ani’s section was gone.

Her name was still up.

Well, maybe you are thinking, did I cry? I will tell you this. I don’t want to say.

I will just say, Rini unhooked my IV and took me by the hand upstairs to Rauden and said don’t leave Ani in the freezers. We’re going to burn what’s left of her, in a ceremony, in the woods, her, me. Even Rauden went. He seemed really nervous. He wasn’t drunk, though. Lucas came and kept an eye on Madhur and the tank. When the ceremony was done, Rini took ashes and shared them with me. Then we both went for a long drive.

We drove to a hilltop where there was an old farm, or used to be farm, which was burnt. We got out of the car and walked around the ashes of this farm. It was March already, wet and windy. Rini’s skirts and veils were flapping hard.

She turned to me, in the wind. “You must promise me,” she said, and she had to shout for me to hear, “if something happens to me, you will take the child.”

“What could happen?” I shouted back. But to tell the truth, it was easy to picture. She looked like death. The ashes in this burnt farm—well, the ashes we burnt Ani to—her face looked like that. Gray. Her lips look like old blood. There are large black shadows and hollows under her eyes. Her hair was dirty.

“You must promise!”

“Rauden—”

“Rauden would sell the child to
someone else! Promise!"

Finally I said, “Rini, I don’t think you get this.” I didn’t think I’d be that good a mother. It’s not in my Heritage. The only thing that was worth anything about me was that after all I’d been through, I was still alive, and I didn’t even pass that on to the original Ani who would of been mine.

“No! No! No! You must promise!”

I don’t even know if this is in your Heritage. I mean of course it’s in my own daughter’s Heritage, but I’m pretty sure it ended up in yours, too, indirect. Maybe Rini even ended up there. I hope she did. She hung so tough! I hope that passed on to you. I promised Rini if anything happened, I would take her child. Then she went to Toronto, to make preparations. Madhur’s birth is coming soon. She had to start work on the shady papers.

Rauden was beside himself. “Rini, you can’t leave now! It’s the last trimester. The birth could be any time!”

Rauden had preparations to make himself. The new shady OBGYN totally disappeared. Rauden had a bad feeling about him anyhow. But now he has to find someone to help with the birth. Lucas had done tank deliveries but just with livestock, and Rauden himself had only delivered livestock the regular way. A midwife might be good enough. It’s not like all the extra things OBGNs knew would matter, with the tank. A regular OBGN would not know how this works. None of us did. All any of us knew was that it was the twenty-ninth week, it stopped raining, and Madhur was still alive in what’s left of the tank.

They tried to have Rini come down to meet the midwife. They couldn’t even get her on the phone. Then Rini sends a message from Iberville. She will trust our judgment. It sounded funny. She never trusted our judgment before. Is something wrong with Rini? Did she get sick from the Mumbai thing? Why did she even go to Iberville?

The midwife is named Mariah and when she got to the Farm, she prayed, and she tried to get all of us to pray with her. Rauden refused and got drunk again. I heard him shouting at the midwife from the back. “She’s not the mother. Maybe she’s not even the birth mother. She’s the Original!”

Mariah just shouted back. “I don’t care if she’s the boy next door! I want her at the birth!”

Maybe it isn’t even a birth.

Mariah went away, then, till the time. Rauden went on a bender. Rini was out of touch. We got messages. We didn’t get a call.

We had six weeks left. Maybe five. Maybe four. No one was exactly sure how we would know the timing, but Mariah thought we didn’t have to know, Madhur would tell us.

Which she did.

One day in May the tank began to move until the frame rocked on the wheels. I don’t know why it did. The birth was coming early. They tried to call Rini in Toronto. They tried Ottawa. They tried her Mobile.

The first thing Mariah did when she showed up was play a tape of women screaming in labor. Rauden was furious. Mariah said shut the door. That’s what it’s for. As soon as Lucas showed up, they got the squeezing started—they don’t squeeze the section. They squeeze some plastic clamp that squeezed the entire tank, then the whole tank began to rock harder, on its wheels.

Mariah and Rauden are looking at their watches, for the timing. They’re just in masks and gloves this time, not bubble suits. Meanwhile, Rini was nowhere to be found.

I was supposed to be in the other room, taking deep breaths. I don’t know why I was supposed to take deep breaths. I wasn’t the mother. I wasn’t the birth mother. I was the Original. I didn’t know what that even means. I just sat there frozen in my chair until the phone rang. Everyone else is in the inside room. It’s Rini. I took the call and put her on speaker.
“Who is screaming?”

I said it is the tapes. I said the baby was on her way.

Rauden was screaming, too, from inside.

“You make her get her ass here, fast!”

I tried to make Rini hurry. I told her she would miss the birth. She said something had happened to her. She was in Delhi. Then she hung up.

“In Delhi?” Rauden shouts. “What’s she doing back in Delhi? They’re dying like flies in Delhi!”

“The squeezing is too weak.” That was Lucas.

They don’t know what to do. Rauden gave me a shot. They called it estro, and while they’re waiting for it to work Rini called back and said, on the speaker, “I have found Madhur.”

“Your daughter Madhur?” I ask.

“She is my daughter now.” Rini was in India and found a Madhur who survived Mumbai and adopted her already. “I have always known your Madhur was not mine.”

“Rini!” I go. “If you take her, she will be.”

“You made a promise. You must take her.”

“No, Madhur is yours!”

Rini said, “Call her Ani, then.” She hung up.

They must draw my blood that they put the shot in. They send it back to the tank. So my own message went back to the tank, to the part that had Madhur or whoever she was. It didn’t work. The wall of her part didn’t do anything. Finally they stopped giving anything to me. They just put the estro right into the track in the tank. It didn’t work.

They drew blood from the tank and relayed it to me in case there was a message, which there was. I felt something, in what’s left of my uterus. They had me squeeze a gizmo that went to a tube that went all the way to the plastic item that squeezed the tank. Squeeze each time I felt something. It was good for the baby’s brain, supposedly, but besides that, the regular way it also helps her pop through a regular hole, what Rauden calls cer, cer ... anyhow it didn’t work. The regular hole is in the regular uterus, but this is not regular anything. It’s liner they made from what the shady OBGN scraped from me, and Lucas made a hole in it but the hole didn’t work. You could see the top of the head, with hair, but Mariah couldn’t pull the head out through it. None of this hurt me. I was glad they didn’t make me try to scream. The screaming was already too loud. Finally Rauden said, “Turn that goddamn thing off,” so then I just heard Mariah grunting and Rauden muttering. “Dear God!” and “Shit! Shit!” Then I heard him say, “That’s not her heartbeat!” It was mine. They had a heartbeat but it was the wrong heart, mine, and when they got it all sorted out, they could tell something was wrong with hers. Finally they just cut right through the wall, put their hands in up to the bloody wrists and pulled her out. She was still alive.

Now, let me say this here. I don’t know how it worked for you, when you were born. I don’t honestly know how it works for anyone, anywhere. All I’m saying is, when I woke up, someone is singing. I fell asleep again and when I woke up, Rini is on the speaker going, “If you do not give Inez this child, you will all go to jail.” Through the window Mariah is walking with a, like, bundle. Rauden is in the rec room, on the other sofa with his head in his hands. “Oh, just give Inez the goddamn child.”

So I took Rini’s child. But it is not my fault. Rini said I had to. It’s not like I stole the kid. I did what I was told.

Rauden said, “I want the others, though.”

And that’s what I been saying. There are others too. We don’t know if they’re you. Not just those nineteen but others, later. They could be you. This is just how it was with me. With Ani and me. It could be totally different with you. I’m just telling you all this because you could hear about it some other way. Believe me, you should hear it
from me first. They’re not going to say Nuclear Transfer. They will call you clone. All of you, they will call all of you that, like it is a bad thing. Like you should never of been born.

Look, what do they know? What does anybody know? Rini’s original daughters were born the regular way. It did not work so great for them.

At least I am alive. I passed it on to Ani—my Ani—for a while. I’m pretty sure I passed it on to you.

And maybe you think it’s not worth it.

What if it’s true what people say and you are me? It’s too high a price. I hope you’re not me. For your sake.

But I don’t think it works that way. And I will tell you why. When it came to Ani? It’s true maybe I let Rauden sell my own daughter to Rini, but that was before I knew she was my daughter. I never sold a single part of Ani since—teeth, soma, nothing. Not once.

As far as I could tell, that proves she wasn’t me, right there.
Jimmy Wynn added a new bone to the growing voodoo pile for each day his phone didn’t ring and his tools gathered dust. He’d collected remains sufficient for two skeletons of some deviant, dead-end species minus their skulls, as though the indigenous predators favored the weak and wandering headless.

His latest offering followed a twelve-day windstorm that had littered his property with the wholly mundane detritus from the wild west of clandestine drug labs, classified military testing, endangered species and UFO sightings that was the Mojave Desert. Armed with an improvised trash poker—a broken broom handle rigged with a six-inch framing nail—Jimmy had set about canvassing his five acres of Wonder Valley when he discovered the backbone lying sun-bleached and meatless beside a spent shotgun shell and a rusted beer can from the pull-tab era. Gauging the size of its vertebrae and degree of curvature, he reckoned it the sole trace of Slim’s incessantly spastic and noisy mutt, which had gone mysteriously but mercifully mute some months prior.

Slim was the local water man. For seventy-five bucks in cash, he filled Jimmy’s 2,500 gallon tank, which lasted Jimmy about a month. He picked up halfway into the third ring, every time Jimmy called.

“Slim, it’s Jimmy.”
“James. Seen my dog?”
“Nope. You still looking?”
“Nope. I just like saying ‘dog.’ Tank empty?”

“Yeah. How’d you know?”
“One of my gifts. How’s this afternoon?”
“Got the cab later, so I won’t be around. I’ll leave cash under the bucket.”
“Do that. And call if you see my dog.”

Cab driving sustained him during dry spells between construction jobs. Like construction, the fares came in waves. Most were honest citizens, folks without cars or licenses who needed groceries or a lift to the doctor. Sometimes he got lucky with the odd jackpot to Palm Springs Airport, but he mostly fed his meter a steady diet of stranded motorists, soldiers from the base, drunks and bartenders. For every stretch of paying civilians came a run of deadbeats. Last one was an icy pale stick-figure kid who’d positively hummed with jackrabbit vibes the whole ride and finally did a Carl Lewis on his $14 fare. It was for the sprinters, Jimmy reckoned, God invented rattlesnakes, which he prayed lay coiled at the foot of whatever greasewood shrub where the meter dodger ducked his headlights.

A few haggled, offering drugs or hum jobs. Jimmy refused the drugs because drugs were the reason he was living alone in the desert instead of married to a centerfold in Laurel Canyon with his own reality show. As for comping a ride for a few minutes of wet skull behind the wheel, it amounted to hiring a hooker. He didn’t judge, but he figured whatever a man pays for should be, at minimum, as good-looking as the palm of his hand.
Ford’s had his dispatcher on speed dial so he took to drinking there and tipping well, made sure they had his card. He sat down, nodded to Molly. She wore a black wifebeater, slightly faded and very shrunken, so much that with the body glitter shimmering in the dangerous scoop below her neck, Jimmy forgave the Guns N’ Roses logo bobbing at his eye level.

“Hey,” Molly said. “My eyes are up here.”

“I know.” Jimmy reached for his wallet. “I was looking at your rack.”

Molly served him his usual bottled Bud, held up three fingers. “You got one on the house, ever you decide to grow some manners.”

He handed her a five, she rang him up and turned back long enough to give him a smile that could melt an ice block, then dropped his change into her tip jar and left him alone.

The guitar duo on stage billed themselves as Chicken Wire and looked like a desert hillbilly version of Laurel and Hardy. They played honky tonk blues, a mixture of standards and originals. Jimmy sent them a round, dropped an extra ten and asked Molly to split it between her tips and theirs. She came back with another Bud. “And that’s how you get a beer on the house,” she said. “I’m a fast learner.”

“Bet you’re a musician, too.”

“Long time ago.”

“How long?”

“Very.” It had taken Jimmy ten years to learn that the stories of his Sunset Boulevard glory days had a short half-life, and he’d spent the next ten never telling them again.

“Is this your sad and tragic story?”

“Nope.”

“What’d you play?”

“Guitar.” *Rhythm guitar. I was the disposable one.*

“Why’d you quit?”

“Industry’s all fucked up. Had to get out of Hollywood.”

Jimmy’d been with plenty of women who looked like Molly. Not as weathered and not as relaxed, more injection-molded and vacuum-packed, and unlike Molly they didn’t care what part of them you stared at, as long as you didn’t ignore them. He could fall in love with her as had every other man who’d ever walked into the place and the rest who ever would. Molly was the kind of bartender who could serve their drinks until the end of the world without ever breaking a single one of their hearts. She lowered her eyes level with his and said, “You in there?”

“Yeah.”

Slow nights made it too easy for a couple of beers to become six so Jimmy cut himself off. He left Molly another card with his cell number on the back, but she never obliged him with anything more than calls to his dispatcher. Indeed the garage radioed him around last call, sent him back to Ford’s where his fare, an otherwise faceless and forgettable man in his thirties, strode straight and steady from the bar without a hint of liquor in his step.

He jumped into the back seat and said, “South on Saddleback, go about a mile.”

“You got it.”

Jimmy made a left onto Saddleback and drove about a mile and a half before the passenger spoke again. “Left,” he said. “Right here.” After a quarter-mile, he told Jimmy to make another left.

“Looks like we’re going in a big circle,” Jimmy said.

“Can’t be too careful.”

Twelve bucks was twelve bucks. The passenger didn’t seem close to passing out or throwing up, and he lacked the twitching and claw marks of those prone to bartering with twenty-dollar shards of kitchen crank.

“Great song,” he said. “Can you turn it up?”

Jimmy obliged and immediately regretted it. The signature opening riff of “Sweet Child O’ Mine” had slipped past his ears while he’d been gauging his fare’s deadbeat potential. A mixture of bile and heartache seized him just before the passenger burst out singing along with Axl Rose. Raspy and off-key, like sandpaper on Jimmy’s eardrums. Tonight
could be the night he murders a man.

“This is good, right here.” The passenger left his cab without another word, walked to an old Datsun with a garbage bag taped across the back driver’s side window. Jimmy switched off the meter and stepped out, still lockjawed and white-knuckled from the Axl Rose flashback.

“Hey, dude.” No excuses or drugs. Twelve-fifty or he’d take out the rest of the windows, maybe do something worse. “You forgot something.”

“Oh? Thanks. What’s that?”

“Twelve-fifty.” Jimmy tapped the glowing rooftop light with his knuckle. “This ain’t a school bus.”

“Thirteen dollars? We’re eight goddamned feet from where we started. And you’re trying to screw me out of twenty bucks?”

Most any other night, Jimmy could have held at bay the urge to grab the tire iron from beneath his front seat, but the night’s Axl Rose sing-along had spent his resistance. “Twelve dollars and fifty cents.” He strode toward the deadbeat and his Datsun. “I take cash. Not IOUs or weed.”

When it came to guns, Jimmy knew little more than the difference between a revolver and a semi-automatic. He didn’t know exactly what a caliber was, or any of the brand names beyond Smith & Wesson. What he knew for certain was that the pistol leveled at his chest had greater speed, accuracy, range, stopping power and penetration than the tire iron in his hand. Under the circumstances he was willing to reconsider both his extortionate $12.50 fare and his wholly unreasonable standards regarding blow jobs as barter.

“Okay,” he said. “Easy.”

“Fuck you.” The passenger’s voice shook, the gun did not. “A hundred goddamned dollars so I can walk six inches.”

“You’re right, man. I made a mistake. I was wrong, that’s way too much.” The tire iron was gone. Jimmy hadn’t felt it slip from his hand or heard it strike the ground. “I’m sorry. Look, I’ll get out of here. I’ll forget I ever saw you.”

“Drive me around half the night, think I don’t know we been going in circles, shithead?” The passenger paused, took a step forward and squinted through the dark. “Wait, wait. Hold on. Got cameras in there, don’t you?” He pointed the gun barrel at the windshield, then back to Jimmy. “One of them TV spies, shows people fucking in your back seat, that it? Who you with? Ain’t the goddamned BLM, that’s for damn sure. Who are you, asshole? NSA? DHS? I never seen you before tonight and you pulled up out of nowhere, look like you came from the airstrip but we both know it goes dark at 10 p.m. on the dot. So where’d you come from? Who the fuck are you?”

Jimmy said, “I’m nobody.”

A muzzle flash and a crack of thunder.

A concussion of hot air hit him the split second before his chest turned to fire.

In the mid-1980s, the Los Angeles Times reported that the concentration of struggling heavy metal bands in Hollywood bore all of the major sociological traits of a burgeoning immigrant population. For every Tran or Samir who spoke two languages, there was a Stagg or Johnny Z. who spoke half of one. A goodly number of these bands were by reputation, rumor or self-proclamation, dubbed the next Guns N’ Roses.

Ian (real name Wendell) Ross of Ian Ross Management, LLC, told the members of Road Killer, “Everyone’s on the lookout for the next Guns N’ Roses and you guys are it.”

Road Killer had formed with Jimmy on rhythm guitar in 1985. After three years of Monday night opening slots, pay-to-play gigs and several thousand dollars out of pocket for demo tapes, press packets and lost or stolen equipment, they signed with Ian, who then secured them a six-figure, seven-album contract, and after that the doors were off the hinges. They quit their day jobs. Rehearsals went from two nights a week to four, shows from Sundays and Mondays at the Anti-Club and the Gas Light to Fridays and Saturdays
at the Whisky, the Teazer, Club Lingerie, the Roxy and Gazzarri’s. The clubs paid them cash instead of drink tickets, provided bottled water backstage, and quit swiping their microphone stands and amp cords. Jimmy remembered the exact moment he became a rock star. On June 15, 1988, at the Rainbow room, he signed a woman’s breasts.

After Ian’s commission and other legal fees, the members of Road Killer split their windfall five ways. Jimmy spent his share on the following: Cocaine; an apartment on Crescent Heights; more cocaine; a Harley-Davidson Heritage Softail Special; a 1954 Fender Stratocaster and a 1958 Gibson Flying V. And more cocaine. Three weeks after signing their contract, their drummer found Jesus. He returned his portion of the advance, signed a waiver releasing the record company, Ian Ross Management, and the four remaining Road Killers of any royalty obligations, left the band and moved to Utah. With Road Killer’s recording schedule on hold pending a new drummer, Jimmy bought more cocaine. He read an article in Guitar Player magazine on vintage guitar forgeries after finishing an entire eight ball on his own and so promptly drove to Norman’s Rare Guitars for appraisal of his recent acquisitions, where he received some disappointing news.

After nearly a month out of the spotlight, Road Killer headlined at the Whisky, their first live show with a new drummer. They finished their second encore and in a moment of glorious but calculated rock’n’roll mayhem, Jimmy swung his ’54 Stratocaster axe-like into the ground with all the blow-fueled showmanship he could muster. The audience screamed and the amplifiers shrieked but the Strat prevailed. He swung again and again, and cut a divot into the stage floor. The guitar held fast. Jimmy paused for a breath, adjusted his grip; the pegs hadn’t moved, the Strat was still in tune. He swung again and felt the neck snap at last, though it took two more paddle-style swings before it came apart completely.

With his portion of the advance dwindling, Jimmy returned, sober, to Norman’s with his ‘58 Gibson. They informed him once again that the Flying V, for which he’d paid roughly twenty thousand dollars, was a forgery. However, if he were interested in selling his Stratocaster, they were happy to do business with him.

The sensation was like free-falling groundward, Zen calm with a post-orgasm heartbeat.

“Shit, brother, I am so goddamned sorry.” The passenger ran to Jimmy and threw his arms around him, the hot tip of the gun barrel grazed the bare skin on the back of Jimmy’s head like a quick cigarette burn.

The passenger stepped back. He paced in a tight circle and wiped his eyes with the wrist of his gun hand while he blathered.

“It’s just, everything. I got this lien on my place. My ex in Laughlin bleeding me hard as she can. I got warrants. Black choppers circling over my property all hours of the night. Can’t see them, and they got that technology makes the rotaries silent. Trick is, you put a stethoscope to a window. Glass picks up the vibrations. Guy taught me that, ex-CIA, half-Indian, totally off the grid and he swore me to keep my mouth shut. Said you can’t hear a thing less you listen to the glass, then it sounds like a goddamned mustang stampede. Brother, he wasn’t lying.”

Jimmy’s t-shirt was shredded in front as though he’d been dragged through a thicket of acacias. He wasn’t bleeding, but the tender hashmarks on his skin stung like a nuclear sunburn.

“Snake shot,” said the passenger. “First one, anyway. Maybe all of them. Guy who gave this to me kept the load mixed, I think. More like a blast of sand than a bullet, but it’ll take care of a rattler inside of twelve feet. You just been exfoli-something, whatever it was my ex called that sandpaper soap was supposed to make her look sixteen all the time. Or when the Pope says you can’t pray any more, I’m not sure. But you ought to be fine. Showering’s going to hurt like a bastard, though.”
He held out the pistol, grip first.  
“Here,” he said. “Ain’t even mine, and it’s worth a shitload more than the ten bucks I owe you.”

Jimmy accepted. With the pistol out of the passenger’s hands, his adrenaline ceded to a wave of relief.  
“We cool?”

“Sure,” said Jimmy.

The passenger put his hand up, palm down and hooked at the wrist for the surfer-soul grip. They shook hands and the passenger pulled Jimmy in for a hard hug that set his chest on fire again.

The winds that had brought Jimmy the spine were the last for a while. Insects swarmed his headlights in Biblical numbers. The daytime heat rendered the highway an upturned mirror, two of everything shimmering in the distance.

The old man who flagged Jimmy the next afternoon from outside a scrapyard, with whatever he’d salvaged wrapped in newspaper and tucked beneath one arm, looked like a prospector. He was twisted and hard like a manzanita branch, his eyes petrified into a permanent squint—gray beard, braids, and a red bandana à la Willie Nelson circa forever. Except Willie Nelson didn’t wear hiking shorts, didn’t have a plastic leg with a chromed robot hinge for a kneecap.

“Where to?”

“Way you’re pointed.”

Jimmy was pointed east on Amboy Road, so he drove east on Amboy.

The prospector uncapped a half pint flask of Yukon Jack, took a long pull then said, “Mind if I smoke?”

“Go right ahead.”

He flipped open the door handle ashtray and fired up, filling the cab with Hawaiian skunkweed fumes. He kept his silence, taking a hit of whiskey whenever it suited him. Amboy Road veered north after a while through a piercing-white crust of salt flats too hard and hot for anything to walk across or much less take root.

“Give me a heads-up when I need to turn somewhere.” Jimmy glanced into his rear view mirror. “Or stop, or whatever.”

The prospector returned a flint-slitted snake stare that bespoke bunkhouse and barroom fistfights, a look that made it clear he’d beaten other men to near death for lesser insults, men half his own age and twice Jimmy’s size who’d dared malign his judgment on all matters of liquor, music, the American flag, or navigating the road from Twentynine Palms to Amboy. At last he said, “This here’s my stop.”

Fifty yards of unmarked dirt road. A jackrabbit shack no more than twelve-by-twelve, an Airstream trailer, and a glossy, cinnamon red antique pickup that shone like a giant Christmas tree ornament. It sat beneath a sheet of corrugated metal atop a square of four-by-four posts.

The meter read $109.00, exactly the same as the outside temperature. “Okay, so like it says there on the seat back, there’s a fifty-percent surcharge after ten miles. You saw that, right?”

“Yup.”

Jimmy shut off the radio, no sound but the air conditioner. “So, we’re looking at a hundred and forty-eight bucks.”

A tortoise slogged across the road. It was the region’s indicator species, the fulcrum of the local ecosystem. The welfare of its population was a measure of the whole Mojave’s health. Jimmy had never seen one before. He’d have to remember not to drive over it when he made a U-turn. Maybe even get out, carry it the rest of the way across.

“Look, I know the fifty percent thing seems a little steep,” Jimmy said. “That’s just to make up for the lost fares on these long drives. But nobody’s out today, so I’m willing to just leave it at the flat meter rate. A hundred and nine bucks. Can you live with that?”

The prospector didn’t say a word, nor did he appear eager to exit the cab.

“You don’t have it, do you?” said Jimmy.

“Nope.”
“Any chance you could have mentioned that before I drove us out here?”

“Suppose.”

“You got some ideas on how you can settle this, then?” He tapped the glowing red $109.00 above his dashboard.

“Nope.” Two stiffs in twenty-four hours. Jimmy could take out the windows and headlamps of that museum piece pickup, but he’d still be out a hundred and nine bucks with the old man no closer to not needing a cab again.

“Give me your leg,” said Jimmy.

The tortoise cleared the yellow dividing line and kept walking, underwater-slow.

“I’m dead serious. Call my dispatcher and you can have it back when I get my money.” He flipped down the visor where he kept a stack of cards held with a metal clip, took his time pulling one out so maybe the old man would have some frantic brainstorm, remember that sachet of gold dust buried on his property or the antique muzzle-loader wrapped in oilcloth beneath his bunk.

The leg kicked his mirror out of alignment as it flew over the front seat, slammed onto the newspaper and bunted the commuter cup of lukewarm Coke with its shiny android knee. The prospector jumped out of the cab, slammed the door, hopped a few yards down the dirt road, spun on his one foot, and hurled the empty flask toward Jimmy. It clattered across his hood, unbroken.

Whatever time had done to the old man’s body, it had spared his backbone and remaining leg. He sprung away with the ease of an acrobat.

Jimmy reset the meter with a slap, stepped on the gas, and spun the cab around, his back end fishtailing and his tires smoking. He took a closer look at the leg beside him. It still had its boot, a size ten smoke jumper with a loose flap of sole held to the toe by a collar of electrical tape.

He’d forgotten about the tortoise.

The record company booked Road Killer a shoot with a top-tier L.A. music photographer who shouted like a drill sergeant for three and a half hours. A drill sergeant wearing a hundred-dollar t-shirt and a gold earring.


But Jimmy couldn’t slay anyone after he’d caught the pale patch on his crown in the dressing room’s overhead mirrors. Like seeing a face in a cloud, he could fixate long enough to regard the white swirl as the perfectly normal amount of scalp visible at the apex of his voluminous hair, dyed no. 22 black, aka Midnight Sable. When he tried putting it out of his mind to slay the camera, he saw his hair falling out like clumps of wet seaweed. He stopped his bi-weekly, black dye tune-ups. The little hurricane of skin visible in the hand mirror shrank but never went away. Ian forbade him to bleach his hair. Road Killer’s lead guitar player was first to the peroxide bottle after their original drummer found religion, so the band had hit Ian’s mandated blond maximum of twenty percent.

“I signed you guys as the next GNR,” he said, “not the next Bon Jovi. I don’t give a shit if the Roses got two blond guys, that’s one too many. How about you wear some lipstick and eyeliner while you’re at it? I hear Poison’s looking for a harpsichord player.” And that settled it.

Two days after a contact sheet arrived from the photographer, their bass player quit. He met with Jimmy over afternoon drinks at the Cat & Fiddle. “No, we are not about to break big,” he said. “It’s a scam.”

“We just did a photo shoot with Derek Mars,” said Jimmy, who’d covered his bald spot with a Harley-Davidson bandana. “They’ve signed the Crüe’s producer for our first record. Dude, the money, the shows they’ve booked, that studio … what part of everything that’s happened over the last few months isn’t legit?”

“It’s all legit. And it’s all going on the balance sheet in the negative column. Along with
those bags of cash they handed us. I know mine’s
gone, how about yours?”
“I got some left.”
“Yeah? How much?”
Jimmy said nothing.
“I thought so. The studio? No better than
a dozen places we can get for a fraction of the
cost. Same with all those amp and mic doctors,
that producer, the catering, all those assistants’
assistants and every single limo ride we’ve taken.
We’re paying for everything they’re lavishing on
us, Jimmy. By the time we finish recording, shoot a
video, and tour as somebody else’s opening act, the
hole will be so deep we’ll need two gold records to
break even. That doesn’t happen, we stay in that
hole. We’re buried. The record company owns
us, and even if, and I mean if, we get out of our
contract, the stench of debt will make us a really
tough sell for Ian to take to another label.” The
bass player was the only band member who’d been
to college.
“Who’ve you been talking to?” said Jimmy.
“Does it matter?”
“Yes.”
“Wrong, it doesn’t. Ask around for yourself,
you’ll see I’m right. We’re chum for the label
sharks, is all. I’m out.”

Recording was once again on hold. Road
Killer recruited a new bass player from a recently
disbanded group out of Reseda; they had three
weeks to rehearse before recording resumed. Ian
booked them a Friday night slot, their first live
performance in months. Two nights before the
gig, an electrical short arching with all the gusto
of a birthday cake sparkler on the club’s marquee
had the venue padlocked on a string of building
and fire code violations. On the night of their
cancelled show, their lead guitar player accepted
membership to an already signed and highly
successful group from the midwest who had lost
their guitarist to rehab, their drummer learned
he was not on Mötley Crüe’s guest list and took a
drunken swing at a doorman and broke his wrist on
the Will Call window, and their singer purchased
a felony quantity of cocaine from an L.A.S.D.
undercover narc. During his arrest, he watched as
the Sheriff’s deputies impounded the unregistered
and uninsured Harley he’d borrowed from Jimmy.

Jimmy broke the wax seal on a bottle of Maker’s
and sat idly working the frets of his remaining
guitar, a butterscotch Fender Wildwood he’d
played on the acoustic ballad for the original Road
Killer demo. It was the last time they played that
song. Metal bands couldn’t do ballads, the record
company had said. Three years later, Billboard
logged the GNR single *Patience* at number four.

A Duraflame crackled in the iron stove.
A pair of votive candles lit the bone pile atop the
blown-out Marshall. A solemn St. Jude beside the
cat scapula, a beatific St. Cecilia above the dog ribs.
He’d added the spine along with two femurs and
a chunk of hip to the growing mound alongside
rippled tin cans gone completely to rust, native
plant scraps festooned with thorns and dried to
lethal hardness, and a Mexican Coke bottle he’d
found half-buried in the dirt but fully intact from
which now protruded a bouquet of bird feathers.

The prospector’s leg leaned against the amp,
a hazy pinstripe of highlight running down the satin
finish of its synthetic shin. Whenever Jimmy stood
up to stoke the fire or retrieve a pick, he imagined
the prospector hopping about his Airstream every
time he took a leak or opened a beer.

Downtown 29 to Amboy without a dime.
Fuck him.

Jimmy sifted through song fragments with
a bottleneck slide until the fire went dark. He
stumbled back to his bedroom, switched on the
radio and started to undress, then picked up an
old huarache to flail at a pair of mosquito hawks
on his ceiling. With one down and the other still
dodging him, *Patience* came on the air and Jimmy
traded the sandal for the bartered revolver. It felt
heavier than the tire iron yet lighter at the same
time, its shape perfectly cast for his palm. He fixed
the sight on the right hand boombox speaker, held
it, felt the trigger’s resistance, the rubber seam around the walnut grip.

Snake bullets.

Just blowing off steam.

The recoil kicked his wrist upward and the air pulsed like a baseball bat to his eardrums. Goddamn that felt good.

Jimmy fired twice more. The boombox topped and a cloud of gypsum burst from the drywall. Something winged his eye. The speakers droned and his ears rang. He pulled the stereo plug and ran outside. If any dogs were barking, he couldn’t hear them. No porch lights in the distance.

He opened the cylinder and ejected the shells. The first two had been snake bullets, the last four were standard .38 rounds. He dropped the revolver into a sock, wrapped the sock in a t-shirt and stashed it away.

The call came the next morning for a demolition job at a Palm Springs motel. Jimmy spent the afternoon with a sledgehammer and crowbar in triple-digit heat, took his pay in cash and drove home to shower before his taxi shift. He turned onto his dirt road and a pair of coyotes darted from behind his house.

The shower trickled, the water pump outside the kitchen whined like a lawnmower. Outside, he switched off the pump, startling three jackrabbits and Mojo, his nearest neighbor’s cat. His back yard was suddenly a big draw for the local fauna.

A hundred and four in the shade with zero humidity, but a puddle eighteen inches across ringed the base of his freshly filled water tank, surrounded by a fifteen-foot moat of shallow mud. Jimmy added his own footprints to the others, the roadrunners, coyotes, bobcats, house cats, jackrabbits, desert cottontails and a score of desert birds he couldn’t name.

The .38 exit hole in the pink stucco was the size of a quarter, its edges caked with powdered sheetrock. He followed the line with his eyes, found where the slug grazed his now useless $1,400 water tank at the fifty gallon mark before it lodged in the dirt.

Partially deaf and very drunk, he hadn’t heard the 2,500 gallon jet-pressure leak blasting outside his bedroom window.

Jimmy dialed Ian from a strip mall pay phone on Crescent Heights at Sunset, across from the 8121 Club. He’d been without a phone ever since taking up residence at the band’s unused rehearsal space at Hollywood and Western, and his twice daily calls to Ian after the cancelled show were either dumped to Ian’s voice mail or stonedwalled by his secretary. This time, Ian answered.

“Ian, it’s me.”

“I know. Listen, Jimmy. I’ll make this quick.”

“Make what quick?”

“Just listen. They’re pulling the plug.”

“Who?”

“Who do you think? The record company.”

Before the contract, Ian had referred to the record company. After the contract, he would say your record company to the band members. Now, it was the record company once again.

“What do you mean? Can they do that? Didn’t they sign a contract with us?”

“You know what I mean, Jimmy. Yes they can do that, and you don’t have an ‘us.’ Your band’s in splinters. Just listen. You owe the record company six figures. The advance plus your portion of expenses incurred thus far. We both know you can’t pay that back, and so do they. They’re cutting you loose. Be grateful and just walk away.”

The 8121 was at the foot of the Coconut Teazer. Both clubs looked smaller in the daylight.

“Okay,” said Jimmy, “I’m going to check the papers, see if anyone’s looking for a guitar player. Maybe even start something of my own.”

“I have to go.”

“Can you keep your ear to the ground for me?”

“Of course I will. Anything comes my way, you’ll be the first to know. Now listen, I’ve got another call. Take care of yourself, Jimmy.”

The whorl of skin on his crown had grown
to the size of his palm. Jimmy threw his bandana into a garbage can on Melrose, where he sold his leather jacket to a used clothing store. Later he paid a downtown barber seven dollars to shave his head.

The demolition job lasted two more days, then his phone went quiet again. Jimmy spent his days on the porch with his Wildwood and a bottleneck slide he’d cut and sanded himself, playing for an audience of ground squirrels and desert birds. Afternoons grew longer and the air didn’t move. The thirty-foot mud puddle behind his house hardened to an inverted relief of animal tracks. They’d been out in greater numbers, even after the water dried up. He grew restless, took up his trash poker and a contractor bag to clear another half acre of beer cans, fast food wrappers and junk mail blown from the far elsewhere of Wonder Valley. More scattered bones. Pale and brittle offerings for the voodoo mound, company for the prospector’s leg.

Another night of meager fares, a day of silence from the telephone, another bottle of whiskey by the fire and another hot afternoon audience of squirrels and birds. There seemed to be more of them, birds especially, milling about his front yard. He canvassed another patch of his property and found eleven rusted cans, a hub cap, six empty gallon milk jugs, a blue plastic tarp and an eight-inch black cat tail. He’d last seen Mojo the day he discovered the bullet hole in his water tank, which he’d since patched with marine epoxy but with no success. And now the birds were flocking fearlessly to his yard.

Following the collapse of the band, Jimmy had spent two years catching up with his unpaid taxes and sundry DMV and court fines before he could afford the down payment on the Francis Road fixer-upper. One bedroom, one bathroom and a wood-burning stove, five miles outside of town and five acres from his only neighbor. Seen through his lens of regret, the burrow-pocked stretch of scrubland he called his property was a fitting finish to his recent past, that neon shark tank where he’d watched his ambitions get eaten while he pounded helplessly against the glass.

The first lizard back then was an anomaly. The second and third he attributed to some flux in the weather or local food supply. Not counting their tails, they were as long as his forearm, their scales the color of the surrounding dust and when they held still, they disappeared. The white ground squirrels likewise first appeared one or two at a time, invisible when they froze against the pale dirt. And then they were everywhere, the ground moving like a rippling lake surface. Rain was rare and sudden, flooding sections of the highway without warning and just as swiftly the sky would clear again, lighting an eruption of wildflower blossoms that colored the desert floor from his front porch to the horizon.

The tail was stiff, like some prop for a practical joke. Once the surest gauge of Mojo’s readiness to pounce on Jimmy’s foot or fall asleep in his lap, it was now an inert stick of black fur. The coyotes in Wonder Valley were the size of German shepherds, not like the feral runts in the Hollywood hills. Along with the bobcats, they ate giant jackrabbits and family dogs. Ravens tore apart tortoises, hawks flew away with cats. Real predators didn’t frame gold records or pose for photographs. They didn’t rotate arm candy for public appearances and didn’t own beach houses or sports cars. They left behind severed limbs and bits of wet bone for the vultures, the scavengers.

The larger half of Chicken Wire sat solo on Ford’s riser with a black semi-hollow electric. The overhead spot flared from the chrome tremolo, the guitar player’s slide hand moving like a stalk of grass in a breeze, the notes melting together into a sad song twisted through a funhouse mirror.

Molly wore a Lynyrd Skynyrd t-shirt and her jeans slung low, moving her hips to the slow rhythm of the music. The regulars at the bar clocked her every move and she moved as though
she had the room to herself. She pulled a beer from the ice, slipped the bottle opener from the waistband of her jeans and smiled at Jimmy.

“Thanks,” he said.

“Early break?” Molly opened a second beer for herself.

“Not working tonight.”

“Here’s to that.” She tapped bottles with him.

“Where’s the other guy, the skinny one? Thought they were a duo.”

“Got a job in Florida. Picked up and left. Bert there’s looking, case you’re interested.”

“Sounds like Bert’s doing just fine without my help.”

Molly went about her business and Jimmy lost himself in the music. When he took his final slug of Bud, he caught a dim swatch of red near the stage. The Willie Nelson bandana, gray beard, and braids of the prospector, likewise lost in the music as well. The one empty leg of his jeans was doubled back and pinned in place, a single crutch propped against the nearest wall. Jimmy flagged Molly for another round.

“The old guy by the stage,” he said, “the one with the crutch. He a regular?”

“Hopper? Yeah, regular but not frequent.”

“What he goes by. One of your passengers?”

“One, yeah.”

“Real chatterbox, isn’t he?”

“Right. Think I counted eight words from him the whole ride.”

“Sounds like Hopper.”

The last song faded to heavy applause from the thin crowd. Hopper clapped as enthusiastically as anyone else, his face the same cracked and leathery deadpan Jimmy had seen in his taxi mirror. “Wondering if you could do me a favor,” Jimmy said.

“What might that be?”

The guitar player switched to an acoustic. He opened with a gentle, rapid-fire picking that sounded like an Irish folk song, but then sang a ballad that rang a distant rusty bell in Jimmy’s memory. The story of a young bank robber who meets his violent end, and with his dying breath he bequeaths his motorcycle, a ’52 Vincent, to his sweetheart. “I’ve … I don’t know.” Jimmy cleared his throat. “It’s … I’ve got his leg. It’s in my truck.”

Molly half squinted, half smiled, awaiting the punchline for a beat before her smile emptied and her face said she knew there wasn’t a punchline.

“It’s … look, he ran up a big-ass fare all the way out to Amboy, more than a hundred bucks. And then stiffed me. Son of a bitch flagged me down for a ride to goddamned Amboy without a dime in his pocket.”

“He stiffed you?”

“Yeah.”

“So, how is taking an old man’s leg going to make it better?”

“It’s not … Jesus, what would you have done? You telling me nobody’s ever run up a tab without tipping you? Or just walked out on it?”

“Plenty of times,” Molly said. “And I get it, you’re pissed. He screwed you and it’s wrong and he should pay. But you took his leg. That’s a lot more than a hundred bucks worth of hurt you put on him.”

“It was just for collateral,” Jimmy said.

“Right.”

“Listen,” Jimmy said. “I just … okay, look. I was wondering, maybe, I could leave it with you. I’ll bring it in, I’ve got it wrapped in a blanket. I’ll leave it with you, then send him a beer and be on my way. I don’t need the money that badly.”

Molly put two fresh beers in front of Jimmy and said, “Why don’t you do it yourself?”

Jimmy could think of a hundred ways approaching Hopper could go wrong, beginning with the business end of the old man’s silent, chiseled-ice stare. Precisely what Jimmy received when he took the empty seat next to the old man’s empty leg.

“Hey.” Jimmy slid a beer to Hopper but Hopper didn’t reach for it. “Molly—the bartender, I mean—bought you one.”
The drink not coming courtesy of Jimmy seemed to agree with the old man’s principles, so he accepted.

“Guess you remember me,” said Jimmy. “Been doing okay?” Right then he wished he’d thrown the old man’s leg on Molly’s bar and driven away for good.

“Dandy,” said Hopper. “I like walking in circles.” Hopper let the silence hang for a beat then said, “You know John Hurt?”

“No,” said Jimmy. “I don’t know too many folks out here.”

“Course you don’t. Making friends ain’t in your toolbox, no question. Fella I’m talking about is Mississippi John Hurt and he’s long dead. You knew him, you’d know his music, which is what Bert’s fixing to play next. You knew me, you’d know to keep quiet until Bert’s finished.”

Jimmy kept quiet. Bert played beautifully but the minutes stretched longer and longer. When the song ended, Hopper spoke.

“I don’t have your money,” he said.

“I know,” said Jimmy. “Not what I came here for.”

“My other leg, then? This one here’s all meat and bone, and I ain’t just handing it over like last time.”

“No, of course not,” said Jimmy. “I don’t want it. Or your money. I’ve got your leg with me. I don’t need it.”

“Be grateful.”

“Not what I meant.”

“It’s exactly what I meant.”

“Okay, I get your point,” said Jimmy. “I’m grateful.”

“Like hell.”

“Listen. I’ve got your leg. I don’t want to make a show of bringing it to you. You can come outside, I can give it to you there. Or, I guess, leave it with someone. Maybe, I don’t know, leave it in your truck. I didn’t see it out there, though. How’d you get here?”

“I’m here now,” said Hopper. “So what difference that make?”

“I don’t know, how you getting home? I could give you a lift.”

“Might ought to hang on to that leg, then.”

“I don’t want it,” said Jimmy. “Or the money. Just forget about it. Listen, I’m not working tonight. You can take back your leg and I’ll drive you back to Amboy. Okay?”

“What if I say no?”

“Then I guess you strap on your plastic leg and start walking.”

“Here, now,” said Hopper. “Don’t go throwing your heels at me, son.” He took a long drink and said, “Let’s enjoy the show, head back when we’re done.”

Bert played. Jimmy and Hopper sat in silence. Sometimes Jimmy asked about another round and Hopper would nod. There were no more than two dozen people in Ford’s, most listening to Bert, some not paying attention and occasionally someone talked too loudly or made some manner of disruption that commanded everyone’s attention but Bert’s. Jimmy had seen the rare likes of Bert over the years. Someone who played no differently for an empty room than for two hundred people or an auditorium. Someone who’d made the choice between being a musician instead of a rock star and then never looked back.

Last call loomed. Bert had swapped guitars again. Jimmy bought another round, sent one to Bert who was changing tuning when Molly set the drink at his feet and nodded toward Jimmy. Bert raised the glass to Jimmy and said thank you, then resumed tuning. Ford’s was empty now but for Jimmy, Hopper, Bert, and Molly. Bert slipped the chrome slide over his fret pinkie then paused for another drink.

He gave the guitar a slow strum, gave one last twist to a peg and then smiled at Jimmy and said, “You play?”
DOWN A WIDE STAIRCASE OF MARBLE IS
Nothing but waste. Any sojourn out there (to the stars) will report
Nothing and
Nothing
And nothing. I grab her hair in both hands
It feels good. That we are alone with the
Red & white stars
Her genes & mine

I squint and the city revives. I am suddenly
Bustling. Basket in hand. Among others
“I guess this teaches us a lesson,” Ma says, and we all just kind of look at each other. Ma’s talking about Deak, of course. And I can see that Larry and Dolly already agree with her. Deak’s our only hope, they say. We have to go beg his forgiveness.

Me, I’m not so sure. But I don’t have any better ideas, so I just keep quiet.

Jimmy has an SUV—also known as a “Jimmy”—and since that’s the biggest car, we all pile into it, and load the Thule carrier with jerrycans and bleach bottles filled with the gas we siphoned from our other cars. The kids are supposed to ride in the back, and the adults butt-to-butt on the seats, with Dolly and Mattie both riding shotgun. But we don’t even get out of the Steppes before Ella vomits tuna fish all over the rug, and then little Ida vomits something that looks like pink, custard-style dessert. We stop by the canal and use Ella’s rubberized backpack as a bucket to haul canal water to the back of the Jimmy and flood out the puke.

After that, both kids cram between Larry and Ma in the back seat, and I ride in the back by myself.

“Everybody ready—Eddie?” says Jimmy. He slams his foot on the gas. Gravel shooting off the tires machineguns the car bottom.

The back doesn’t smell like puke anymore, but it does smell like canal water, and canal water smells like shit, so I ask everybody to please keep the windows open, and I don’t look backward.

We’re not the only ones trying to escape, of course. But Jimmy’s smart. He zigzags along towpaths, through cemeteries and across parking lots, and manages to take us east by heading west. We’re out on the open road by lunchtime. But there’s still that weird thing in the air—that sort of vibration that threatens to bust the car into pieces, so we can never go above thirty, even in the ash fields.

“I hope you all learned your lesson,” Ma says, not just once but ten thousand times.

Deak used to be Ma’s boyfriend. When I first found him in the kitchen, I thought he looked like one of those white German sausages: round-shouldered, bald, pudgy from skull to foot-soles. His skin had that greasy sheen.

I got up in the morning, and there he was: sitting at our kitchen table.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi,” I said.

I went to the refrigerator because I didn’t know what else to do.

What I wanted to do was run out of the room, maybe call the police. But I was ten, which meant that, even though I was young enough to be terrified by a tiny-eyed, veal-colored, bald stranger appearing in my kitchen, I was also old enough to know that being so afraid wasn’t exactly cool—especially when that stranger had a bowl of Cheerios in front of him and was holding his spoon in his fist like a baby. If Larry had seen my
fingers trembling as I reached for the milk, he would have laughed at me through his nose. Larry was thirteen.

“Great day,” said Deak, revealing the Cheerios-mush on his tongue.

I glanced at the sink, into which a sunbeam had dropped, sprinkling the dirty dishes with platinum gleams and turning the enamel snowfield-bright. “Yeah,” I said.

“Aren’t you going to ask me who I am?”

“Who are you?” I said.

He told me his name. Then he said, “I met your ma at Cannon’s last night. She invited me over and we had sex. Not bad for a woman who is practically menopausal.”

“Oh,” I said.

“I know that stuff probably makes you nauseous,” Deak said. “But that’s maladaptive.”

“Huh,” I said.

“What I mean is, get over it! Just because you don’t like something, doesn’t mean it isn’t true. There’s no God, but there’s the idea of God. And what does God do? He knows everything. So we’ve got to create ourselves in the image of this idea—you see what I’m saying? Don’t lie to yourself, I mean. The world’s too fucking dangerous.”

“Okay.”

It was lucky for us that Deak was such an asshole, because that meant we could hate him without thinking about the real reason we hated him.

After Ma met Deak, she dyed her hair and started wearing teenager clothes. Instead of looking all sleek and Barbie-like, which is probably how she saw herself, Ma looked like a rag-doll version of Barbie, one that had gotten left out in the rain, and so was all lumpy and funny colored. During Deaktime, whenever she said anything she thought was witty, she’d go still and get this slot grin, like she was waiting for the applause to die down. She’d have that same slot grin when she caught sight of herself in the mirror. Then she’d turn sideways, suck in her belly and run her hand down over it. Sometimes, after she’d slid her hand all the way down, she’d make this long, low, breathy “Oh.” None of us could stand that. It was disgusting to us. Dolly ended up crying in her bed every time Deak came over, and Larry and I’d have
to go sing her lullabies so that she couldn’t hear
the noises.

Then in the morning, there was Deak at
the kitchen table: munching his Cheerios, picking
his nose, rubbing it off on the chair bottom.

Ma wanted Deak to be our dad. Whenever she was putting dinner on the table,
she’d say, “Go tell Dad dinner’s ready.” And every
time Deak came along with us on a family outing—
to Jansen Beach or Blitz Park—there would always
come this moment when she’d smile like a cat
with a mouse in its mouth, and say, “Aren’t we all a
happy family?” And sometimes, when Deak wasn’t
around, she’d tell us in this whispery voice, “You
know, Deak would really love it if you called him
Dad. He adores you all. He really does. He’s just
too shy to show it.”

This went on for years.

Then one day it changed. Or maybe it
was me who changed. And Larry.

I was thirteen. Larry was sixteen. We
were sitting at the table, eating our Cheerios, and
Deak was eating his Cheerios across from us, and
there was this fly banging its head over and over
against the window glass.

“You see that fly?” Deak pointed with his
dripping spoon. “That fly’s a robot. When a piece
of glass gets in its way, it can only do that one thing,
because that’s the way it’s programmed. Do you
want to be a robot like that fly?”

That’s when it happened. I couldn’t
actually believe it at first. My mouth just opened
and out came: “You’re the fucking robot, Deak.”

There was this long moment when the
whole room was humming, and I was waiting for
... I don’t know what: Deak to go meteor-fisted,
the cops to come in with their black guns, billy
clubs and Miranda rights. But when nothing did
happen, I opened my mouth again to see if there
was anything left inside.

“The only thing you know how to do,” I
said, “is talk, talk, talk, even though no one gives
a shit what you say. Don’t you have a fucking off
switch?”

There was another long moment of
nothing happening, except for Deak chewing his
cereal. When he’d finished, he lowered his spoon
into his bowl, lifted a heap of Cheerios until they
were right in front of his nose, and then, without
even looking at me, he said, “Fuck you,” and stuck
the spoon into his mouth.

The whole time this was happening, Larry
was jerking around in his seat, making these little
steam valve squeaks, like he just couldn’t stand it
that I was the first one to tell Deak off. When it
was finally his turn, all he could think to say was,
“Fuck you, Deak!” I was kind of embarrassed for
him—but not really, because I knew that Larry
may not be good with words, but he was really
good at being devious.

And sure enough, about a week later, Larry
pulled off what we came to call “The Milk-Bomb
Incident,” a plot that involved a dog turd, a milk
carton and Deak’s Cheerios. Larry was so devious, in
fact, that he didn’t even tell me about the Incident
until it was already over. We went to breakfast,
and there were Deak’s bowl, the box of Cheerios
and the milk carton all in their usual places. Two
or three Cheerios were also lying in a New Jersey-
shaped puddle of milk next to the bowl, and Deak’s
spoon was facedown on the floor underneath his
chair. Otherwise everything was normal—just no
Deak, no Deak anywhere. Then Larry showed me
what was in the milk carton. We threw it away and
cleaned up Deak’s bowl and spoon before Ma got
up. Then we acted stupid. “Deak? Haven’t seen him.
Thought he was still asleep.”

After that Deak didn’t come around
anymore. And for two or three months, Ma wasn’t
around much either. When she did come home,
usually in the early morning, her hair would be all
flat on one side, wind-twisted on the other, and
she'd have this stuffed expression on her face, the way potatoes look when their eyes happen to grow in the same places as human eyes. We'd all be sitting at the kitchen table.

"What?" she'd say, as soon as she walked in. "Why're you looking at me like that when none of you want to know where I've been?"

Then she'd go upstairs and the pipes would shriek, and the bath would roar, and that's where she'd stay, making little moans and splashes, until we all went off to school.

Then one day she came home and sat down with us at the table. "I've got good news for you," she said. Her face got all crinkly, like paper the second before it bursts into flame. "At least for you it's good news." She went silent. Then she pushed her chair back, and went up to her room. The door slammed.

We never did find out what the good news was. But after that, the baths stopped. So did her slot grins, her glances in the mirror. She grew shorter, and her bottom half got wider, and all the teenager clothes went into a yellow metal box behind the Esso station. The only part she kept from Deaktime was the mean. She became a woman of few words, and, one way or another, almost all of them meant "No."

The day Dolly got her first period, Ma said to her, "If a man ever asks you to take off your panties in a restaurant, don't. That's a big mistake." That's about as close as any of us ever came to finding out what happened between her and Deak.

So, fourteen years passed, and I was working the overnight shift at Damsters. Mostly there was fuck-all to do there except stare at the security screens, or throw corn chips in the fishpond and watch the water go chop-splattery with fins, these vicious little teeth. So I'd get high. Everybody did. That's the only way we could stand it. But, of course, that made it harder to figure out what was happening at first.

For me it started right after I threw two bags of shredded foil into the dumpster. I turned to walk back up the loading dock, and the air went all grindy on me. You know how you see a picture of yourself dancing, and your face is all crooked and your one eye is closed, and your hand is flipping in a way that makes it look like a chicken wing? The air went grindy and it was like my body got crammed into a picture like that, and I couldn't get out of it. I was frozen there, with just my one toe touching the ground. I was only like that for maybe three seconds, but still, when I got back in the shop, there were sweat beads all down my nose and lip, and my eyes were jittery. Serge was doing donuts with the forklift, but he stopped as soon as he saw me. I told him what happened, and all he said was, "Lay off the weed, dude. Lay off the weed."

"I don't know, man," I said. "Maybe that's what it is. But I don't know... ."

A week later, I was driving on the Salt Parkway, the radio on, when suddenly I noticed the announcer had exactly the same voice as the voice inside my head. And, just as I noticed that, he said, "That announcer's got exactly the same voice as the voice inside my head." Then he said, "What the—?" which, of course, was exactly what I was thinking. And then: "Holy fucking shit!" And: "Jesus fucking Christ! Is the FBI tapping my thoughts through my fillings?!" Then it was like this feedback loop got started, where I was thinking what I was hearing and hearing what I was thinking, and it just kept getting faster and faster and louder and louder, inside the car and inside my head, until finally it was like this shriek going off into infinity. My hand shot out, slammed off the radio. "Shit!" I shouted. "What the fuck!" And I was so happy it was only my ordinary voice in the air, and no one repeating it, and also that I
was still tooling down the Salt behind this wheezy, red VW with an “I brake for hamsters” bumper sticker on the back of it, and that I hadn’t crashed into a tree.

I didn’t tell anybody what happened. I couldn’t stand to even think about it. I kept hoping I’d only had an acid flashback, or I just fell asleep at the wheel—but that wasn’t at all how it felt. For a month I was so depressed, I didn’t answer when people talked to me. I walked around with my head down, looking at everybody out of the corner of my eye. And everybody was doing the same thing to me, sideways-spying, not talking—like the whole city had been converted into an isolation ward for psycho-killers. I assumed it was just me being paranoid, of course, and that only made me more depressed. One four-in-the-morning it got so bad, I took my toothbrush out of the bathroom, packed my bag, and walked down to the front door. I had decided to check myself into a mental hospital, but then I realized I didn’t know where the mental hospital was. So I went back upstairs, unpacked my bag and got back into bed.

So then the tornadoes came, and the plague of sparrows. Elvis got off that plane from Venezuela with his passport thirty-five years out of date. Then there was that day when the sunrise was an hour and forty-three minutes late, and chocolate started tasting like vomit. Eventually, all the weird stuff going on in the world made the weird stuff going on inside my brain seem almost normal. So one night, I told Serge about it, and he told me that every time he looked in the mirror, he saw himself in black and white, holding this sign with numbers on it, like he was looking at a mug shot of himself. Then we asked Manuel, and his face went fish-face-blank before he started heaving these orgasm sighs and grinning with his big teeth, because he was so relieved to find out he wasn’t the only crazy person in the world.

That was the start of the Big Confession, of course, and for a while there, everyone was so happy it was like a nonstop street party. Except there were these big-eared people with different-colored eyes, who would gather in the malls at night and sing these incredibly boring, lonely songs. Every time I heard one, the hair on my arms would stand up and I couldn’t talk. To me those songs were like people with terminal illnesses looking up at you from their hospital beds. The big-eared singers were extraterrestrials, Serge told me. They’d given up their human disguises because they were so depressed now that astrology had been revealed as a hard science, and their planets and suns had turned out only to exist so that earthlings could get tips about romance, jobs and the stock market—which I guess really is pretty much of a bummer. Serge also thought that weird vibration thing in the air was because of all the extraterrestrials trying to get in touch with their home planets. I don’t know if that was ever proven.

The thing that really did it for me, though, were those YouTube videos of the Pacific Ocean waterfall, where you could see the whole ocean just pouring off into nothing, and there were those sea serpents with scales like manhole covers twisting through the waves, looking like they couldn’t wait to swallow the next ship that came their way. Larry was the one who showed me the videos. It was Thanksgiving, and we were sitting at the computer on Ma’s desk in the family room. Pretty soon everyone was standing around the computer with these pop-eyed caught-on-the-toilet expressions. After a while, Jimmy said, “Look at this,” and he clicked on the Dispatch website. There was only one headline: WORLD PROVEN FLAT. That was it. No story. No other headlines. What would have been the point? Once you read that headline, what else do you need to know?

Someone said, “Decoherence.” Then we were all saying it: “Decoherence.” “Decoherence.” “Decoherence.”
Decoherence. That’s a Deak word. “Decoherence,” he’d say, as if we were morons for not knowing what it meant. “Haven’t you ever noticed that there is always a gap between one true thing and the next?” he’d say. “That’s why you can never convince anybody of anything. Every true thing is only true all by itself. And they don’t add up. They can’t. Impossible! Mostly we don’t notice because we’re in the habit of thinking that once something is true, it just is—you know? Always was, always will be. But that’s stupidity, because, if that was true, how could we have scientific revolutions? You see what I’m saying? One day it’s plain as the nose on your face that the stars and planets are hanging off these tinkling crystal spheres. Then, whamo! Only morons think that. It’s the same thing with medicinal leeches, heterosexuality, slavery, the shag haircut.

“Here’s the problem, though: When there’s nothing connecting every true thing to every other true thing—well, what does that make the universe? Just a sort of accident. Right? And what are the laws of nature? Mere coincidence. And what does that mean?” At this point he’d tilt his head back and squint over his chubby cheeks, so that he would seem to be looking down on us with his coffee-bean eyes. “That means the shit’s gonna hit the fan,” he’d say. “It’s inevitable. The world can’t go on like this forever. So then what?” He’d lift his chin a little higher. “Dehabituation,” he’d say. “When the shit finally hits the fan, the only way out will be dehabituation. And those who can’t do it—” Deak never bothered to explain what would happen to these people. He’d just snap his fat fingers right in our faces, then do that smile-frown thing people do when they think they’ve clinched an argument. “Do you want that to happen to you?” he’d say. “Not me! I’m ready for it. I’ve been ready for it for years.”

So then my whole family was standing in front of the computer. “Decoherence,” we were saying, “Dehabituation.” “Where’s Deak?”

And that’s when Ma first said, “I guess this teaches us a lesson.”

It turns out that the GPS is no good anymore. It’s always telling you to turn off the edge of cliffs or to drive straight into a lake. And if you ignore it, and just keep going down the road you’re already on, the little screen turns these weird colors, there’s this spinning hypno-disk explosion, and the next thing you know, this cartoon of your car’s on fire, and these little RIP gravestones are sprouting up all over.

Road maps are even worse. Sometimes roads that should take you straight to where you want to go end up going on and on and on, and don’t take you anywhere, except places with weirder and weirder names, until finally you’re in someplace nobody’s ever heard of, and you don’t know how to get out of there, and even the people who live there can’t help you. Other times, you’ll be thinking, “Oh shit, I got off at the wrong exit!” but then there you are, exactly where you want to be. The problem is, it’s totally unpredictable. One minute the maps are so good you can practically look up in the sky and see your finger pointing directly at you, and hear your own voice booming, “This is exactly where we are,” and the next, it’s like you’re reading the map for some fat kid’s fantasy world. You know: Gondomondo. The Vales of Darkpole. Someplace like that.

So, in the end, we throw the maps out the window. The GPS goes in the glove compartment, and Jimmy just does whatever Ma tells him. “Straight ahead,” she says. “Straight ahead.” For days and days that’s all she’s got to say.

Things just get worse. Those pyramids off the back of dollar bills start showing up everywhere.
The ones with the eye on top. Sometimes they’re gigantic—rising so high on the far side of valleys they’ve got clouds on their tops, and these birds that look like pterodactyls flying around their bottoms. Other times, they’re made of cinderblocks and we find them out behind a garage, or next to the port-o-potties at rest stops. But no matter where we find them, their eyes are always looking right at us. We walk around a corner and: boom!—there’s that eye in the floating triangle, staring us down. At night, light beams shoot out of the eyes and sweep back and forth across the sky. They’re sort of beautiful. But I keep waiting for the moment when the air starts to make this wavery, low, duck groan, and they light up rows on rows of enemy bombers. That never happens.

The longer we drive, the fewer people there are on the road with us. Every now and then these antique convertibles shoot past, filled up with guys in tuxedoes and girls in skimpy dresses sipping champagne. Sometimes a couple will be standing up in the backseat, dancing. And almost always there’ll be tens and twenties streaming out of the car, and fluttering down the highway in the convertible’s wake. Mattie has a conversation with some of these people at a Burger King, and they tell her God made them rich because they have been living such good lives. But every time we stop the car to gather up some of their spilled bills, we come back empty-handed. We might spot a bill impaled in a thorn bush, or twitching in a ditch beside the road, and it will be so clear we can practically read its serial number, but then we get over to it, and it’s a dried up leaf, or it’s a shed snake’s skin still stinking of reptile mucus.

“Maybe they’re just illusions,” I say, after yet another fruitless attempt.

“They can’t be,” says Mattie. “What about those people in the Burger King?”

“Maybe they were illusions, too,” I say.

“Oh, ghosts,” says Jimmy.

And sure enough, the next time one of those convertibles passes us, bills flipping and twisting in the air, there’s a couple dancing in the back, but they’re skeletons.

“Straight ahead,” Ma says. So that’s what Jimmy does. And after a couple of days, there’s no more sun in the sky. Nothing but clouds the color of bruises. And we keep passing through these locust swarms, so thick sometimes we can’t drive five minutes without having to stop to scrape locust bodies off the windows. But they’re not just normal locusts. They have long blond hair streaming off the tops of their heads, and these tiny human faces, and they moan as they lie crushed on our windshield, and they scream when we scrape them off. It’s disgusting, but we have to do it. If we don’t, we can’t see a thing.

“Straight ahead,” Ma says. “Straight ahead.”

Then one morning we drive down into this valley that’s like a calendar picture. This grassy field with a stream running through it. Little white houses with red shutters. Pine trees poking up everywhere. Horses galloping up the hillside. And right at the bottom of the valley, there’s this country mailbox with a name scribbled on it in black Sharpie: Deak Sokak.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Ma says. “Didn’t I tell you? None of you believed me, but I knew we would find him!”

Nobody argues, of course. We are all so happy to be there, especially since that valley is so beautiful. But no sooner do we turn up the driveway, than we’re in this dark forest where all the trees are dead and, instead of leaves, they’ve got the veils of Zombie brides hanging in them. Then we’re driving up a mountain made entirely of obsidian and coal. All the trees are evergreens, except they’re black instead of green. And we’re going along this cliff-edge road with no guardrails,
and the road has giant bites taken out of it every couple hundred yards—although actually they’re landslides. Sometimes there’s so little room to get past that our tires roll partly over emptiness, and all we can do is pray that the rest of the road doesn’t decide to slide down the cliff under us.

We come around a corner and there’s this big boulder in the middle of the road. We all pile out, even the kids, and roll the boulder right off the cliff so we can get by. While we’re listening to it bashing and crashing into rocks and trees, we’re looking out on this world that’s nothing but black and purple and gray, except where volcanoes light up little orange circles in the clouds. Giant birds with animal bodies fly back and forth. Some have these red neon eyes. Some look right at us, and slide their long tongues over their razor beaks. When at last the boulder hits bottom and the bashing and crashing stop, noises come up from the valley like someone’s getting his skin peeled off while he’s still alive. Not just shouts, though. Also these screechy tearing sounds.

And then we’re in front of a ski lodge—all dark brown wood with this gigantic roof that makes the house look like a kid in a grownup’s hat. On the front porch there’s this girl sitting on a stool, wearing an old-lady nightgown—lacy around the neck and wrists, and it goes down to her ankles. She doesn’t say a word when we all say hi, just sits there like she’s a statue.

“Where’s Deak?” Ma says, and the girl still doesn’t say anything.

I notice she’s around my age, but it’s not until we’re all up on the porch that I look into her eyes, and see they’re exactly the green of rocks on a lake bottom. “Joni!” I say. “Holy shit! Joni! I can’t believe it!”

That’s when she moves for the first time.

She still looks like she doesn’t recognize me, so I tell her my name. Her lips pull apart and make this tiny “Puh.” Now I can tell she actually sees me. But all she does is shake her head slowly and draw her finger across her throat. “Where’s Deak?” Ma says.

Joni gets up from her stool and walks inside the house. She holds the door open. We follow her.

The first thing Joni ever said to me was, “I’m not like this.” We were in this bar, her face was Santa-Claus-red and shiny, and her head kept falling forward and jerking back up, like she was having mini-blackouts and only waking up just as her cheek was about to smash into the rim of her glass. “I don’t drink,” she said. “Normally, I mean. But tonight I decided to get shitfaced. This guy was supposed to meet me here. He promised he wouldn’t let me down again. But he did. So I decided, you know, to teach him a lesson.” She gave me this crumple-face smile. “Guess that doesn’t make a whole lot of sense.” She picked up her empty glass, rocked her head back and drained the last dribbles, two of which spilled onto her satin shirt, making long splotches.

This was, of course, your basic escort-the-beautiful-drunken-girl-home-and-see-what-happens type of situation, so I went with it. We got to her building. I helped her stick her key into the front door lock. The door opened. “You sure you’ll be all right?” I said.

“Yeah. Thanks.”

“Okay then,” I said, but I didn’t do anything. Just stood there looking at her.

“Thanks,” she said.

“See you,” I said, but I still didn’t do anything.

“See you.”
Then I took a step like I was going to go, but she stuck her finger inside my belt loop and pulled me back. “What?” I said.

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“Don’t have to what?”

“Go,” she said.

I kissed her, but her lips were all rubbery and pressed together, so it was more like our mouths only bumped accidentally.

I decided to go up with her anyway. We had to climb five flights, and she wanted to curl up and sleep on every landing. As soon as she opened her front door, she walked straight into her bedroom and fell face first onto her bed. That was it. Nothing I said or did after that made any difference.

Her bedroom had three tall windows and no curtains. Outside, the lights of tug boats and ocean liners made crinkly smears on the harbor. Helicopters flew by. Eventually I figured there was no point in my being there, but I’d already been lying on her bed so long my head was too heavy to lift. I thought if I just closed my eyes a little, maybe I’d be reenergized. So, of course, the next thing I knew, the sky’d gone all gold outside her windows, the smell of bacon was drifting in from a neighbor’s apartment, and I was hearing tiny little radio voices. I looked over, and there she was: sleep-faced on the pillow, making this whispery snore like a cricket with laryngitis. I just lay there looking at her puffy cheeks, her makeup-smeary eyes, that drool shine in the corner of her mouth, her hair like a mess of wire. I don’t know why, but there’s nothing I love more than seeing a girl looking the way she’d look if I wasn’t there to see her. To me, that’s always seemed just about the most intimate you can get with a girl, more intimate than sex even.

Eventually her eyes opened and her face went all oh-fuck, and who-the-fuck-are-you. Only the fact that we were both completely dressed let her believe me that nothing had actually happened. “Sorry,” she said. Then she gave me this little smile that showed me she was starting to like me. “Would you like some coffee?”

So then we were laughing at the breakfast table because we realized we didn’t even know each other’s names. She made oatmeal for me. She sprinkled raisins onto it with her pencil-skinny fingers, and gave the tips of her thumb and index finger a little lick. The whole time we were eating, we kept glancing at each other across our bowls and coffee cups. Every time our eyes met, we smiled. And sometimes we’d laugh, until we got too embarrassed, and looked down at our food again. Finally she rolled her head around and said, “Man, do I have a headache!”

“Want me to give you a massage?” I said.

I guess I don’t have to tell you what that turned into.

But I do have to tell you I never fell in love with a girl as fast as I did with Joni. We had exactly the same sense of humor. And even that first time we made love, there weren’t any of those uh-oh moments, when you find yourself looking into each other’s eyes and one of you says, “That’s all right. Don’t worry about it.” It was all just, “Oooh that feels so good!” and “Oh! Oh! Oh!” and “Don’t you love it in the morning!”

After that, for three weeks, we couldn’t stand to be apart. Joni didn’t have a job, so she’d be waiting for me outside of Damsters every morning, and we’d walk back to her place as the sky went pink, then orange, and sometimes we wouldn’t come out until it was night again, and she would walk me back to work. It was like we were living in a dream. Everything we found out about each other seemed like it was just exactly the thing we liked most in the world, as if we’d each been specially designed to make the other happy. “How lucky!” we would say over and over. “How lucky we met!”

The only thing is, Joni turned out to be a liar. Like what she said about not drinking,
for example. First time we went back to that bar where we met, the bartender called out, “Hey, Joni Island,” and put a pink Geronimo in front of her without even having to ask for it. Another time, I asked her why she didn’t have a job. “I come from money,” she said. “My father invented WaxFirst. My mother’s aunt was a duchess. But everybody’s dead. My whole family is dead. Except for me. I’m an orphan.” Not two seconds later, her cell rang and it was her mother. Joni gave me this little red-faced glance when she saw I knew who she was talking to. But after that she just pretended she’d never said anything about being an orphan. I didn’t care, though. Why should I? She was so much fun to be with, and she had those green eyes, and she would make this little gurgle in her throat when she was happy.

For a liar, though, she was pretty gullible. Like one day we met this guy in the park who had on nothing but gym shorts and two different colored sneakers, one way bigger than the other. “I can bend steel with my brain waves,” he said. We just kept walking, but then Joni said, “I wonder if he can only bend forks and spoons. Or do you think he could bend a girder in a skyscraper?” I thought it was funny how she believed everything, so sometimes I would say ridiculous things just to see what she would do. Once, I told her my grandfather was a leprechaun, and this open-mouth baby smile came onto her face. “That is so totally cool!” she said.

I suppose her being so gullible might have gotten on my nerves after a while, but when we were together it was just part of what made her so perfect. She just wanted to like everyone, was how I saw it, and so she lived in a world of nonstop wonder. I thought that made her better than me.

But then one day, she said, “I think it’s fate that you and I met each other.”

“Maybe,” I said.

Her eyebrows turned into angry checkmarks. “How can you say that!”

“What?”

“You don’t believe in anything!” she said.

“What are you talking about?” A second ago she’d lifted up the sleeve of my t-shirt, kissed me on the shoulder, smiled, and given me this horny stare with her algae-green eyes. How could her mood have changed so quickly?

“You are just so closed-minded and judgmental!”

“Because I said, ‘Maybe’? As in ‘Maybe you’re right? That’s judgmental?’

“I don’t know how you can live like that!”

We were at the bar again, so I figured this was just alcohol talking. Forget about it, I told myself. No big deal. But, a little later, in the middle of a kiss on her doorstep, she pushed me away. “Maybe it would be good for us to spend a night apart,” she said. When she saw the look on my face, she gave me another one of her horny smiles, and whispered, “Just one night,” like she was making a promise about all the stuff we would do the next night. And she sealed the promise with a tender kiss and a bit of tongue-action.

A couple of days later, she said, “I don’t know if we’re going to have any kind of future together. We’re just too different.”

“What do you mean, too different?”

“If I have to explain that to you,” she said, “then there’s no point even talking about it.”

I’d never been angry at her before. But now my heart was pumping in the middle of my brain, and my shoulders were getting all gorilla hunched. I figured she was talking about her being so rich and me being just normal, but I didn’t see what that should matter so much all of a sudden. Probably just her period coming, I told myself. It’ll blow over.

A week later, she said, “I think we need a trial separation. You know, just as an experiment.”


Truth is, I felt like I was disintegrating right there in front of her, like I was turning into moth-
wing dust. I didn’t want her to see that though. I thought that if I acted like I was ready to walk away, she’d come running after me. I did walk away, in fact, as slowly as I could manage without actually walking backwards. I waited to hear her cry out my name. I waited to hear the sound of her footsteps running up the sidewalk. Nothing. Just the usual city grumble. A banging door. A shriek.

Two days into our “separation” she sent me a text: “I think we’ll both be happier if we go our separate ways. I love you. Bye.” That was it. After that she wouldn’t take my calls. Didn’t answer my e-mails or texts. Next thing I knew, I was “un-friended” on Facebook. Whoa! I told myself. That girl is so fucked up! Get as far away from her as you can! I told myself lots of stuff like that. But none of it made any difference.

There are no lights on in the ski lodge. Just smears of gray leaking under doors, some of which seem lined up on either side of a hallway, others of which seem on the far side of rooms as large as a basketball court. I try to follow the whispery skin pats of Joni’s bare feet on what feels like a stone floor, but there is so much clomping, coughing and sneaker squeaking from the rest of us that I sometimes worry we are just following each other around in the dark house. Finally a door opens and, in the greenish-purplish-brownish light that spills through it, I see Joni with this expression on her face like a nun in one of those paintings they hang on the wall in Catholic schools.

The door opens into a bare concrete room with nothing on its far side but a railing like they have on luxury cruise ships, honey-colored wood on top and shiny cables underneath. Deak is standing at the railing, looking out over a valley with a steaming lake at its bottom, and ringed all around with smoldering volcanoes, but as soon as he hears the opening door, he turns around and shouts, “Hey, hey, hey!” and holds his arms out like a variety show host stepping into the spotlight.

It’s been a long time since I’ve seen Deak, but it looks like it’s been much longer for him. He’s all bent over, like he’s balancing a rock on his neck. And there’s this bloody, moon-shape gash just above his right eye, like he had a collision with the end of a pipe. Also, his bald head’s doing that giant freckle thing old men get, and all he’s got for hair are a couple of cobwebs sticking to the skin over his ears. No hair on the back of his head. No hair on his neck. No eyebrows even.

“Sit down, sit down!” he says, and points at a couple of folding metal chairs. There are six of us, however, not counting Ida and Ella, and no other furniture in sight. “Make yourself at home,” he says, sweeping his hand like he’s in a warehouse of couches. “Sit down, please.”

Nobody sits.

“Joni,” he says. “Get these good people something to drink.”

Joni pinches the sides of her nightgown, ducks her head, and sticks one heel up behind her. Then she goes back into the house.

“Please, please,” says Deak. “Please sit. You must all be tired from your drive.”

So finally, Larry walks Ma over to one of the chairs and she sits down in it. Then Ella and Ida fight over the other chair. Ida wins, but Ella sits on her lap. The rest of us sit down on the concrete, because it seems like Deak’s feelings will be hurt if we don’t.

“Thank you all for coming,” he tells us. “That is so kind of you. I hardly ever get visitors. And actually,” he says, “you’re lucky you came today, because the owners arrive tomorrow, and I have to move into my place in town, which isn’t nearly as nice as this.”

“What are you talking about, Deak?” says Ma.

“Didn’t I tell you?” Deak cups his fingers
right in front of the gash on his forehead, as if he’s doing some sort of secret society salute. “Maybe I didn’t. It’s hard to keep track. Things have been so... you know. Hectic.” He lowers his hand and looks at his fingertips, checking for blood, maybe. “I’m in real estate, now. This is one of my properties. Vacation condos. Six units. I just sold the last one yesterday to this Russian couple from Leningrad—St. Petersburg, I mean. Actually, five out of the six units have gone to Russians. They love this part of the world for some reason. The beaches, I guess. And the golfing, of course.”

Just as he’s saying this, one of those giant birds with an animal body goes by—a leopard body, I think—and it’s got this fat naked guy clipped in its beak, dangling by one shoulder. Probably he’s still alive, but he’s gone all limp, his legs just bicycling in the air a little bit, like baby legs. He’s got this big tattoo on one arm, but he goes by so fast I can’t see what it is.

“Anyhow,” says Deak. “They’re arriving with a van full of furniture tomorrow. So it’s very lucky you came to see me today.”

“Deak,” says Ma.

This diarrhea-squint takes over Deak’s whole face like he knows exactly what she’s going to say. And when she says it, it’s not like a diarrhea-squint anymore; it’s like he shit his pants and he’s hoping no one will notice.

“You gotta help us,” is what Ma says.

His fingertips go back up to his gash. “I know,” he says. “I’m working on it.”

“We came here to tell you we’re sorry,” says Ma. “The kids, I mean. Because now they know—now we all know—what you were really talking about. Before, I mean. Back then. And now we all want—”

“I know,” he says. When he brings his hand down this time, his fingertips are shiny red, like cherries. He looks at them, but not like he actually sees them, then wipes them on his pants. Exactly as he does that, a trickle of blood runs down between his eyebrows and into his eye.

“Hold on a second,” he says. “I’ll be right back.”

He runs back through the door we just came out of, his hand cupped up in front of his forehead again, like he’s worried about another collision.

We just sit there for a while, looking at each other, trying to figure out: Does any of this make sense? Should we just keep on sitting here, or what?

This horrible scream comes from around the side of the house. None of us can see what it is, but we all know it’s the fat man.

And now Joni’s standing in the middle of the room, holding a tray with a huge potbelly pitcher of milk on it, and maybe twenty juice glasses. The tray is so heavy, her arms are shivering, and the glasses ring as they touch their trembly rims.

So, it’s night—though nobody can really tell the difference between night and day anymore, and maybe, in fact, there isn’t any. I didn’t notice it before, but there’s a giant dollar bill pyramid sticking up out of the lake at the bottom of the valley, and its beam is constantly sweeping the underside of the clouds. Everybody’s trying to sleep in the big room with the cruise-ship railing, but I’m too restless. Also, I want to find Joni. She did this little curtsey thing again, after she put down that tray with the milk and glasses. Then she turned and ran back out the door, just like Deak.

“Hey, Joni!” I shouted, but she just kept running. Then she was gone.

I’m wandering down a huge hallway, which seems to have had its front and back ends knocked out of it. Greenish-purplish-brownish light shines through twisted fringes of rebar at
either end. Every now and then a beam from the pyramid eye shines down the whole length of the hall, turning the walls moon-white and craterly. At first I think a whole bunch of homeless guys are sleeping on the floor on either side of the hall, but then I realize they are garbage bags, filling the air with their stinky steam. Rats have nibbled holes in the bottoms of most of them, and bits of eggshell, coffee grounds, and limp lettuce trail across the floor. I open and close doors, but not all of the rooms I look into seem completely finished. Some have no ceilings. Others have walls made out of red dirt, which has usually avalanched down onto the floorboards. Muddy red footsteps track up and down the hall.

Somebody calls out my name.

Joni is walking toward me down the hallway, looking like a ghost in that old lady nightgown of hers—except that the light from the pyramid eye is hitting her from behind, so it is pretty obvious that she’s no kind of ghost or old lady—at least not on the inside of her nightgown.

“What a surprise that you turned up here!” she says. “I had no idea you and Deak were friends.”

“What’s going on?” I say.

“Hunh?” she says.

“How come all of a sudden you’re talking to me?”

She laughs. “Oh, that was my vow of silence! I’ve been doing it for a week, but I just finished five minutes ago. You should try it sometime. It’s very cleansing.” She gives me this spider touch on my arm with both sets of fingertips. “How you doing?” she says in this sad, whispery voice.

I don’t even know how to begin to answer that question, so instead I say, “What are you doing here?”

“I’m with Deak.”

“With?”

“Yeah.” She looks down at the floor, and talks in a low voice without looking at me. “He’s my husband.”

“Your husband!”

“Yeah.”

“You married him!” I say.

Still not looking at me, she walks away with her head down, and I can see the eye-beam shining through her nightgown again. When she walks back, her voice is loud, and she’s looking me right in the eye. “You haven’t changed a bit,” she says.

“What do you mean?” I say.

“You’re still so judgmental!”

“Oh, come on, Joni!”

“You think you know everything, so you never see what’s right in front of your eyes.”

I can’t believe we’re already having this old argument. “I see plenty,” I say.

“You don’t see anything!”

“I see that you’re with this ugly old lunatic, half your size and three times your age, and—if you don’t mind my saying so—that doesn’t make any sense!”

“You don’t know anything about Deak.”

“I know Deak much better than you think.”

“You have no idea how much he’s suffering, or how hard he’s working.”

“Working at what? Building vacation condos in the middle of the fucking End-of-Days?”

“If you knew what Deak was really doing, you’d be ashamed of yourself.”

“What? What is he doing? We drove like three weeks to get here because my ma thinks Deak’s some combination of Rambo and Einstein. But as far as I can see, he’s just as much of a loser as he ever was.”

For a long time Joni only looks at me,
two ideas running back and forth between her eyes and she can’t decide which one to go with. Finally she says, “Come with me.”

She leads me down the hall into this 1940s kitchen, with a round-cornered refrigerator and stove. Then she stamps up some stairs, and we’re in this wood-paneled exercise room, with sideshow strongman dumbbells and medicine balls all over the floor. Finally we climb a ladder up through a hatch in the ceiling, and we’re on the roof of this castle tower, with a waist-high wall going up-and-down, up-and-down like jack-o’-lantern teeth. Deak is looking right at us, an aluminum colander dangling from his right hand.

The wind is blowing so hard I have to crouch so I don’t get blown off the roof. Joni’s nightgown is pressed flat against her one side, and flapping out on the other. Her hair is flapping too. But otherwise the wind doesn’t seem to bother her.

“I’m sorry,” she shouts at Deak.

“I don’t have time!” he shouts back.

She gives me this half-proud, half-pitying look. Then she says to Deak, “Just tell him what you’re doing.”

“It’s too late!” he says. He lifts the colander with both hands and looks into it. But then he turns to me. “This shouldn’t be happening.”

“What?” I say.

“There’s too much truth,” he shouts.

“What?”

“Perpendicular! Not parallel!”

I have no idea what he’s talking about, and maybe he figures that out because he shouts again, “The universes! They shouldn’t be perpendicular.”

“Oh,” I say.

“It’s all my fault,” he shouts. “I’m the only one who can stop it.”

With that, he puts the colander on his head, grips both handles and pulls down so hard his arms start shaking. A low rumble, like a dog growl, is building in his throat.

“What’s he doing?” I ask Joni.

“You’ll see.”

Just at that moment, one of the volcanoes goes off, sending rocks and fire into the purple clouds. A second later another one goes off.

“He’s going to do it this time,” Joni says.

“I know it.” She laces her fingers between mine, and gives my hand a squeeze. “Just wait,” she says.

The shaking in Deak’s arms goes into his body, from his shoulders down to his feet, which twitch around on the floor like the base of a washer on spin cycle with an uneven load. But gradually the shaking goes back up his body and gets stronger and stronger, until his head is jerking back and forth, left and right, and in circles, so violently it is impossible to tell if he is still pulling down on the colander, or trying to tear it off. The low growl in his voice gets higher and more stretched out until finally it sounds like the wail of someone falling off a very high cliff. Blood begins to run in tiny rivers down his forearms and cheeks. It splatters on the floor.

I can’t stand watching him anymore. But when I step forward to try to do something, Joni yanks me back. “No!” she says. “Wait. Give him time.”
Elimination

Two equal teams take the field, although just what is meant by equal remains ever out of conclusive reach. Each group forms a circle or a square, except that one individual from each team, armed with a fly swatter, takes up her place within the area of the surrounding opponents. Evoking the melancholy of missed chances and forgotten infatuations, a muted trumpet blows to signal each of these two players to begin to chase and swat opponents. Some of the hunted will seek deliverance from danger by declaiming their belief in the essential harmony of all life; others will spit and kick wildly at their pursuers. And there will be those who take sides against themselves, their dividedness rendering them paralyzed on the field, unable to cry out or flee. They look about at others like
themselves, immobilized, but feel no kinship, only the piercing sense of their own debilitation, as well as the smell of fresh dirt raised by so many shoes tearing at the grass. As soon as a player is swatted he leaves the game. Among those on the sidelines, humiliation gives way to enigmatic longing. Undeterred, the swatters continue until one of them eliminates an entire team and thus scores a point for her squad. Honor is rendered; winners enjoy water ices and shiny ribbons. Teams form again, and the process is repeated until everyone has a chance with the swatter.

**Compared to What**

While one player is out of the room, others choose some object in plain sight. The odd player enters and approaches the others in turn, saying to each one, “Compare it to me.” The respondent must, by truth or fancy, indicate some similarity. Answers may be farfetched but not pointless. Answers may be eloquent but not verbose. Answers may be hurtful but not assaultive. Some players will be clever; others not so much. Distinctions based on upbringing, social class, and taste in home decor will take on unexpected prominence. Some players will feel as if they’ve been sucker punched. Others will revel in their assumed superiority. Player A may choose a letter opener because they believe that Player B is smooth and hard as metal. Or they believe she is closed to the world, yet awaiting an intrusion upon her privacy. Players will likely deem such comparisons facile, carrying the damply introspective air of high school literary clubs. Eyes are rolled; certain assumptions about public schooling are confirmed. The room grows tense; all ironic regard drains away from among the participants. They are left with, figuratively, the clothes they wear on laundry day: frayed, soiled, and inexcusably reeking of themselves.

**Pure Laugh**

All players sit in a circle. One player calls “Ha,” then the one at his left calls “Ha, Ha,” the next one “Ha, Ha, Ha,” and so on. Everyone maintains a straight face. There is nothing funny about these “hahahas.” “Ha” is the sound you might make if you were frightened or surprised or trying to stop an escapee from climbing over the prison wall and it was very cold and you could only get out the first part of “halt” before the icy air seized up your throat. “Ha” isn’t funny, nor is “hahahahaha” even one iota more merry. In fact, if anyone laughs or smiles or fails to produce the proper number of “ha’s” in accordance with the sequence, a point will be scored against them. If you accumulate ten points you must leave the room for an adjacent room. There you conjure memories of recent sexual activities and picture them staged as floats in a parade. The sun is high and relentless. You pay close, very close, attention to the many imperfections of lived-in skin. Through the wall you hear “Ha” and feel as if everyone has just discovered something secret about you.
Dear Mom and Dad,

In the future when I can’t come to terms with my object status, when I can’t stop the past from cunting up on me, when I become the pain artist whose limbs hurt, when I go forward with a chest full of cherry-picked daggers, lace/laced in, when the digital fails to reproduce the analog and so fails gender, fails heartthrobbing, when television rains down and washes us starry and clear, when the face of television can be scanned over all our scars, when I can’t tell if my beard is visible, when it is my job to shuttle forth comfort, when I conduct myself like an adult across the asbestos plateau—

Then, fuckers, I’ll get it wrong again. Don’t think this is all barreling toward redemption. Don’t imagine for one second the girl will purify our culture for us or that the illiterate moment will yield. In trenches, you lose it all over again. Never edifying, ever yours,

Your Ugly Little,
Scab
I am trying to understand U-turns. My first morning living in Salt Lake City, I stand at a crosswalk terrified to step into the wide street, watching as car after car accelerates into the intersection only to spin around like a remote-controlled toy. Brigham Young designed 132-foot-wide streets for precisely that purpose: so oxen teams could turn around with ease. Except he had an ulterior motive: He wanted drivers to turn without resorting to profanity. It was not freedom; it was social control. Or freedom as social control.

In 2000, my husband and I stopped to rest in Salt Lake City during a self-imposed exile from Iowa to Oregon. The mountains made me feel trapped, walled-in, watched: Wasatch and Oquirrh ranges to the east and west, and in the south, the Traverse Mountains securing the valley like a gate. I could not believe those mountains were natural. Atmospheric perspective flattened them into theatrical backdrops, as phony and one-dimensional as cardboard props. The nearest ridges loomed like cobalt shadows; faraway ones dissolved into the same pale hue as the sky, obliterating the boundary between heaven and earth.

I vowed I would never return.

Now, watching the cars spin, I wonder if the grid makes drivers do it, if the city by its very design provokes just this: the desire to return from where you came.

In the foothills overlooking downtown, Utah’s state capitol dome appears to lord over the Salt Lake Temple, but do not let the juxtaposition fool you. In 1847, Brigham Young hiked 1,080 feet to the summit of Ensign Peak and confirmed: This is the place. He meant the place the murdered Joseph Smith revealed to him in a divine vision. Due south from that gumdrop-shaped hill, he laid the cornerstone for the temple, and it became meridian zero, the center from which all of Zion radiated. The capitol is not high above the city because of its power; it is there because the temple forced it into the hills.

Salt Lake City makes me a pilgrim against my will. Street addresses never let me forget how far I have strayed from Temple Square, the holy heart of the City of Zion, meridian zero. Every downtown address is expressed in latitude and longitude, placing me inside the crosshairs of Temple Square:

200 S 700 E
or
100 E 700 S

“200 S 700 E” translates to two blocks south and seven blocks east of the square. If I reverse direction and walk seven blocks west and two blocks north, I transform into a pilgrim again.

I linger at street corners long after the walk signal has changed, studying street signs and attempting to locate myself inside the grid. If I do this long enough, I imagine, the novelty
of Salt Lake City will fade, and coordinates will transform into addresses. Instead, I confuse the first and second cardinal directions. *Am I seven blocks south or seven blocks east?* There is no way to escape the reference point of Temple Square. Now, a pilgrim in the City of Zion, I am forced to cultivate an inner compass or use the one Zion gives me.

In the basement of the Salt Lake Temple, Mormons baptize the dead. Living people stand in as proxies for the deceased, hoping to summon lost spirits by getting dunked on their behalf in a 500-gallon elliptical tub. The tub balances on the backs of twelve life-sized oxen statues sculpted of cast iron and arranged in a circle, horns outward, representing the twelve tribes of Israel. The ritual takes place in the basement to symbolize a tomb; the proxies reach out grave to grave.

The Apostle Paul set the precedent in 1 Corinthians 15:29 when he asked, “Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then baptized for the dead?” Mormons also base the practice, in part, on 1 Peter 3:19, in which Jesus “preached unto the spirits in prison.” If Jesus ministered to spirits, it follows spirits can still benefit from the gospel, that even the dead can continue to develop moral character, maybe even convert.

The only obstacle standing in the way of salvation: no physical body for a proper baptism; hence, the proxies. Proxy baptisms also drive the Mormon obsession with genealogy: the church needs addresses, as it were, for those spirit telegraphs.

More than once, I have walked past the temple and wondered if anyone was down inside the baptistry, submerged under the water in the giant tub. I have wondered what it would be like to do that for someone—to believe you could do that for someone. I wished I believed in it—not the religious doctrine, just the part about transmitting a telegram to the heavens, showing a lost loved one he is wanted back. If I could convert to just that one idea, I might. I might even convert for it: the ultimate second chance.

**Salt Lake City street tags:**

```
oxen oxen oxen
lamb of god + metric
capitalism is a ponzi scheme
we are not canaries in the coalmine f ck cars
will you be my valentine? oxen
while you're asleep, we're exploring rooftops
while you're at work, we're staying true to our desires
```

I used to take heart in these signs. I thought they came straight from the Salt Lake City underground, secret code for “You are not alone.” *While you sleep, we wage an invisible insurrection. While you sleep, we are turning Zion into Salt Lake City.* New signs appear every morning within a one- or two-block perimeter of my home, but in the daylight hours, in Zion’s omniscient sun, the vandals disband, hide. Very few of their messages survive the city’s roving paint crews. A city clean and in order, Brigham Young decreed. *Nothing happened here.*

When *oxen oxen oxen* appeared, I took it as a salvo against the push and pull of this grid, the stranglehold of the Latter Day Saints on this city: *You are their oxen, their beasts of burden.* Now, I believe the vandal is an *agent provocateur.* He has been pointing me to the twelve oxen in the temple basement all along, like a Mad Libs parable in which I have to fill in the blanks between tags on crosswalk poles.

I begin to circumnavigate Temple Square from a one-block radius, sometimes for hours, just close enough to feel its gravity, to feel my resistance. Just close enough to make it feel me resist.

When I first saw Salt Lake City’s stark, stern grid, I knew it could quell any rebellion. I blame it on
the 132-foot-wide streets and the 660-foot-long blocks. There is no way for protesters to fill them, no way to shut them down. And then there is that tractor beam, the tug-of-rope with Temple Square. The grid, like a tautology, is impervious to logic: You are a pilgrim or not. You believe or do not. You are with us or against us.

In Portland, Oregon, where I lived for nine years, the short, 200-foot blocks and narrow streets leave the city vulnerable to skirmishes and insurrections. Sometimes I think the grid provokes them. Anarchists and protesters clog downtown arteries, shutting down traffic and public transportation for as long as they can hold out against police.

It could not happen like that in Zion. Protests are relatively rare and polite. Nobody dares shut down a street. Here, cars rule the city, pushing pedestrians to the fringes. Many downtown streets are so hostile the crosswalk poles offer hazard flags for pedestrians to wave as they cross, like bullfighters marching into a ring. I call them Orange Flags of Surrender, and I refuse to carry them.

I never learned to drive because of my epilepsy, so I have no choice but to submit to this grid, to play on this game board, to let it test me. Sometimes, I wonder if the ghost of Brigham Young is watching from the other side of the traffic cameras, logging my coordinates, subtracting merit points, readying the Destroying Angels, his secret police, waiting to see if I will pick up a flag, surrender.

My first sign I live in the city of children: a toddler popping out of the elevator like a spirit baby stowaway on the cosmic dumbwaiter, sneaking down to Earth before he got assigned a family. He shackles my shins with his chubby arms and cries, “Mommy!”

The First Presidency and the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles issue proclamations, warning every married couple to heed God’s commandment to Adam and Eve: Be fruitful, multiply. Church elders admonish college students: Do not wait, for babies are shields against Satan’s attack on the family.

God wants—God commands—you to have babies.

Families are God’s plan.

Families teach you how to get into heaven.

In every city I have ever lived, a river divides the downtown, and I cannot understand a city without one—a city like Zion. I miss bridges. I miss the sense of expanding possibility, of ambiguity, of risk. When President George W. Bush declared war on Iraq in 2003, Portland protesters marched onto the Burnside Bridge, sat down, and declared the bridge liberated territory. They named this new country Burnside FreeState. Political geography had been obliterated. The passage between had become the territory between.

Here, the nearest river lies beyond the interstate, outside any strategic protest zone. Sometimes, I think Brigham Young must have known the power of river bridges, because according to his design, the Zion grid stopped at the bank of the Jordan River, the only boundary of the city that wasn’t political—except that it was.

Where in Zion can I liberate a space when every pocket is locked in the crosshairs of Temple Square?

When LDS missionaries Andrew Propst and Travis Tuttle were kidnapped and held for $300,000 ransom in Russia in 1998, their captors taped their eyes and mouths closed, handcuffed
them so tight one suffered nerve damage, locked them together in a cramped room, and slid an unloaded gun into their hands like a threat printed in Braille: *Touch the trigger. Know how your execution will feel.* They wanted to force the missionaries to hold their own helplessness in their hands.

When the kidnappers took back the gun, the transfer of power was complete, just not in the direction they believed: The missionaries handed them helplessness, and they accepted. The captors were helpless now, in the face of surrender. What power could they possibly wield against willing captives?

They set the captives free after five days, and fifteen years later, the missionaries delivered this moral via the local news: *Once we submitted our will to the Lord’s, it really brightened our day.*

**First time inside Temple Square:**

I walk with my arms crossed, shielding myself against missionaries, but they never appear. The whole square radiates recent abandonment, as though I have stumbled into a game of hide-and-seek.

Up close, the temple seems so compact, so vertical, like an icicle dripping down from a cloud or a rocket ready for launch. The battlements make it look like a plastic game piece, light enough to lift by the cornerstone to have a peek at the secret rituals inside.

Its quartz monzonite masonry radiates white, so bright I have to squint to look up at it: Emerald City in white. But the longer I stare, the less white it seems. It reminds me of Malevich’s *White on White*, how if I stare at the white square in that painting long enough, hundreds of shades of ivory begin to flicker beneath the surface, and the square presses against its edges, suggesting infinity.

At first, I do not even realize that I am walking toward it; it is as though I am hypnotized. I stop when I reach the carving of Ursa Major on the west central tower. I do not realize I am playing right into the temple’s hands: The saints carved this constellation for lost souls. It has me exactly where it wants me.

The relentless city grid disappears.

I find relief standing on the zero meridian: nowhere, no place.

Outside the fifteen-foot walls, I am a ward. Inside, I escape surveillance by placing myself right under the nose of the watchtower.

I escape the tractor beam by submitting to its will of my own free accord.

I surrender.

But freedom is fleeting, a word on the tip of my tongue. True meridian zero lies behind the temple doors, and without a temple recommend, I am forbidden entry. As long as I live in Zion, the only way to escape the grid is to convert.

The temple is a time machine. Beginning on the fifth buttress of the north temple wall, a clockwise lunar sequence charts one year of phases: birth, life, death, and resurrection. One lap around the temple, and a whole year unfolds, the moon in time-lapse. Forty laps, forty years: the time between Brigham Young laying the cornerstone on April 6, 1853, to President Wilford Woodruff dedicating the temple on April 6, 1893.

Inside, temple ordinances erase time. Bride and groom kneel at the altar, and they do not say “till death do us part,” because that vow—the one I took with my husband—starts the *tick, tick, tick* of the stopwatch. Temple marriage is not marriage at all, but a *sealing*, a cosmic envelope mailed straight to the dead-letter office in the sky, never for fingers to slit open.

Children are sealed to parents.

Siblings to siblings.

Living to dead.

Families stay together forever. Families are timeless.

By the time I moved to Salt Lake City, I had not seen my mother in seven years, my sister
in ten, and my father in fifteen. Before my oldest brother, Greg, died, eighteen years had passed since I last laid eyes on his red hair.

We are timeless, too.

I begin to visit the temple almost daily, circumnavigating it in the wrong direction, counterclockwise, winding the clock backward: death to life to birth. The temple is a time machine. Inside, it takes time away. Out here, it gives it back.

What I am saying is: Can a city by its very design make you long for family?

My brother Jimmy is buried beneath the Town & Country Shopping Center in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, in a fully operational underground bowling alley. When the alley closed in 1997, the owners sealed over the stairwell hole with concrete, like a tomb, abandoning every last piece of equipment: pinsetters, ball returns, rental shoes, vending machines fully loaded with potato chips and candy, the soda fountains with the ice chips that always melted too fast. Everything is perfectly preserved like some kind of Midwestern Pompeii, even the sticky handprints on the daycare window overlooking the lanes like a watchtower. You can break in through the service entrance, flip a switch, and the machines will whir back to life.

At least, that is the urban legend I choose to believe. If archaeologists dig up that bowling alley one hundred years from now, the only clues they might find to its previous incarnation are the scraps of wallpaper left behind from closing night, when patrons stripped souvenirs straight off the walls. As for the rest, the owner gutted it.

To me, though, the alley will always be sacred ground, the place where I met Jimmy for the first and last time: one handshake, the sum total of all our time as siblings. I did not yet know he was my brother, not until I caught my father clipping his obituary a few days later. “That’s your brother, Jimmy,” he said. And it was the last time he ever uttered his name.

Jimmy Higgins, my brother, self-inflicted gunshot wound to the chest.

Sometimes, I picture him down there, pressing his face to the glass of the daycare window, guarding the empty lanes.

When murderer Ronnie Lee Gardner faced his firing squad at the Utah State Prison in 2010, his executioners strapped him to a metal chair, stuck a target on his heart, and blinded him with a black hood. Five marksmen counted down, aimed their .30-caliber Winchester rifles through the gun port in a brick wall, and fired.

To outsiders, the execution proved what they already believed: Utah is an archaic, barbaric outpost of the Wild West. Never mind Utah outlawed firing squads for capital cases after 2004, or that Gardner’s case got grandfathered, or that Utah is not the Wild West. Here in Zion, the question was not retribution; it was redemption.

Even though the modern-day LDS would rather forget the bloody justice once wielded by Brigham Young’s ruthless Danites—aka the Destroying Angels—Gardner’s execution raised its historical specter, resurrecting a debate about an old, officially disavowed Mormon doctrine still alive and well in the Beehive State: blood atonement, the belief that some offenses fall so far outside the pale, even Jesus’ crucifixion cannot wipe your slate clean. Your only way back into the Heavenly Father’s good graces, your only way back into the fold, is a blood sacrifice. You have to become your own savior, your own Jesus.

Hanging will not atone.
Lethal injection will not atone.
The electric chair will not atone.
Only a bullet piercing the unholy chambers of your heart.
In less than a minute: heart death.
Quicker and less painful than lethal injection.
You who stay the execution, who declare
firing squads inhumane, who label bullets brutal, are the only ones cruel enough to cast stones. Zion condemns for one short minute; you condemn for eternity. That is why when you undergo voir dire for a capital case in Utah, the ghost of Brigham Young will ask: Will you love that man or woman well enough to shed his blood?

The Great Salt Lake is a terminal basin, meaning once water flows in, it never flows out. Evaporation is the only escape. Water has to change state from liquid to gas; it has to stop being water at all. That is what makes the lake so salty. When water vanishes, it leaves salt crystals behind, like fossils.

Sometimes I wonder if Zion is my terminal city. The mountains are a blackout curtain across my horizon; I have not seen the vanishing point in years. And anyway, in which direction would I vanish—east or west, Iowa or Oregon? When I left Iowa twelve years ago, I swore I would never return, but, now, I am not so sure.

What if, like the water in the lake, I am undergoing a fundamental state change? What if the vanishing point is me?

If you cannot navigate your way by the North Star, the temple will navigate for you. Ursa Major carved onto the west center tower points the way to true north, a proxy constellation for people who cannot find the real one, for lost souls. In this way, the temple is a missionary, except instead of coming to you, you come to it. At night, the temple lights up, so you have no choice: The night sky disappears, and the proxy Ursa Major is all you have. You have to hitch your wagon to a phony star.

Inside the front cover of every Book of Mormon, eleven eyewitness testimonies appear like a holy appraisal certificate: I saw the golden plates with my own eyes—meaning the ones from which Joseph Smith translated the scriptures. Three witnesses received a divine visit from the Angel Moroni, who laid the plates before them; eight others—all from the Whitmer or Smith clans—claim Joseph Smith showed them the golden Bible and let them touch it. Perhaps because the Book of Mormon is so recent, skeptics expect more than eyewitnesses; they expect archaeological evidence. They expect forensics as clear and conclusive as fingerprints in the margins. Smith, however, surrendered the plates to the Angel Moroni, and they never surfaced again.

In 2006, the Museum of Church History and Art succeeded where archaeology failed: It manufactured the missing artifact. Historians and volunteers worked like forensic artists, transforming testimonies into hard evidence. They dipped copper plates in acid-resistant paint, scratched Egyptian characters into the surface, and soaked them in acid solution to dissolve the exposed metal of the letters. Then, they stripped all evidence of the paint with a kerosene bath, washed off the kerosene, electroplated the plates with silver-and-gold alloy, and bound them with oversized D-shaped rings. The end result: a holy three-ring binder.

The only hard evidence I have of Jimmy’s existence is a black-and-white studio portrait taken with my other two brothers sometime between 1968 and 1970. Jimmy sits to the right of the frame, the smallest of all three boys, maybe six or seven, a living ventriloquist doll with a stiff smile and oversized plaid jacket. On the border of the frame
just below him, Jimmy Higgins is written in ballpoint pen. By now, I know my father adopted Jimmy with a previous wife, but that doesn’t make sense. Of all my brothers, I look the most like him.

Mark Hofmann’s first noted Mormon forgery betrayed his ambition to toy with the church he had forsaken: He stole the identity of the prophet himself, penning a fake page of Egyptian characters supposedly transcribed straight from the golden plates. It was the Anthon Transcript, a document Smith created in 1828 so classics professor Charles Anthon could authenticate the Egyptian characters—hence, the name.

Hofmann dreamed up and executed his con within days after discovering that the transcript on file in the Reorganized LDS library did not match Professor Anthon’s description: Anthon described vertical columns and a circular figure, but the RLDS copy featured horizontal lines and no circular figure. He surmised a source document must exist. I probably can’t be lucky enough to find it. So why can’t I make it?

He drew the Egyptian characters in homebrewed iron gallotannic ink on legit 1830ish paper razor-bladed out of a biblical history book in the Institute Library at Utah State, performing forensic analysis in reverse: adding flourishes to make it look like a predecessor to the RLDS copy—a trick he learned from reading studies tracing transcription errors in Shakespearean manuscripts. Then, he soaked the paper in hydrogen peroxide to age the ink and adhered the transcript to a Bible page with a mixture of charcoal, wheat paste, and drops of Elmer’s glue—ordinary white gloop from the kindergarten crafts bottle with the orange cap: anachronistic glue binding anachronistic documents.

It was his own kind of sealing ceremony, binding his lie to that Bible and to Mormon history forever. On the back of the transcript, he went so far as to declare it the fulfillment of the Isaiah 29:11 prophecy, in which the words of a book are delivered to a learned man, and he cannot read it, for it is sealed.

Hofmann’s real magic, though, was not homebrewed ink aged by hydrogen peroxide, but the provenance he conjured from thin air. To make his lie unassailable, he duped two people into becoming unwitting alibis: First, he made sure his wife stood by his side when he discovered the sticky Bible page. Second, he took the Bible to Jeff Simmons, archivist at the Utah State University library, and asked for his help unsticking the glue. We saw it stuck in that Bible with our own eyes. It mimicked and mocked the very Mormon foundational story: Joseph Smith translating from golden plates that nobody except a few eyewitnesses could authenticate.

When Hofmann’s “discovery” hit the headlines in the Deseret News in May 1980, he was photographed with church counselors, apostles, and President Spencer W. Kimball, who leaned over the Anthon Transcript with a magnifying glass, but even he, Prophet, Seer, and Revelator, could not divine the truth. Isaiah 29:11 had come true: Hofmann, too, had taken words to learned men, and their secret remained sealed.

In one of my few memories with my brother Greg, he was fumbling with the buttons on my pajamas and sliding his hands inside the fabric, even though I kept pushing them away. I was delirious with fever, in and out like a satellite signal in a storm. He had come to live with us between jobs, and when the doctor gave the order for an ice bath, he was the one who stripped off my pajamas and carried me naked to the bathtub.

I did not want him to see me. The truth is, I had a little-girl crush. Ever since he arrived at our front door, he seemed like a miracle: the brother I always wanted, someone who could appreciate my bicycle wheelies or the bug cemetery I dug under a bush on the front lawn. I went out of my way to harass and tease him, provoking him into
roughhousing me on the living room floor.

My feelings about the ice bath change depending on when the memory creeps up on me: In daytime, it takes on a sweet quality, my brother taking care of me in a vulnerable moment. At night, I wake up trying to wriggle out from under him.

Not long after the ice bath, my brother was banished from my life for good.

By the time he died in 2008, stricken down at the age of 51 by an unexpected heart attack, I had not seen him in 18 years, as many years as he was older than me. When the Cedar Rapids Gazette published his obituary, the author left my name off the list of surviving siblings; two days later, a corrected obituary wrote me back into the family line.

Am I Greg’s sister forever or not?

Zion is not a city. It is an earthly docking station for the heavenly Zion when it descends at end-of-times. As a nonbeliever, I have no visual reference, so I imagine Zion hovering like the mother ship in Close Encounters of the Third Kind, a glittering, saucer-shaped city in the sky, skyscrapers sprouting out the top, twinkling lights arranged around a center iris, trumpeting to the Angel Moroni statue atop the temple’s east central spire.

But Joseph Smith designed the Zion Plat as an Earthly utopia, too, clenching every urban planning trick tight in the church’s theocratic grip. Within the one square-mile plat, he divided the city into ten-acre blocks and within those blocks half-acre lots, all identical: one family per lot; a house of brick or stone; room for an orchard and garden. No two houses ever faced one another: privacy and community in one. No dark alleys for prostitution and crime, no inequalities, and no conflict: Smith understood grid is destiny.

Smith also envisioned an urban growth boundary long before anyone coined the term. When Zion’s population expanded beyond 15,000-20,000, the grid would not budge beyond a green belt. Instead, a new Zion would spring up in exactly the same form, spreading over the surface of the Earth like a circuit board, programming the world for its demise.

Brigham Young never built the original Zion Plat: He adapted it to suit Utah’s topography and his own vision, altering blocks, and widening the streets. Zion might have survived minor alterations, though, were it not for rabid anti-Mormonism and the automobile. In 1887, the Edmunds-Tucker Act punished polygamy with prison sentences and authorized federal marshals to seize all church properties valued over $50,000, unfurling the LDS fist-grip on urban development. Add to that the influx of non-Mormons via the railroad, and piece-by-piece, private interests laid siege to the holy city. Alleys ate through blocks like termites, and prostitutes lurked in the shadows. Later, Brigham Young’s polite, U-turn-friendly streets proved all too seductive for automobiles. Suburbs spread, and the greenbelt disappeared.

Brigham Young, it turns out, was an agent provocateur, too.

For once the general detestation and hatred pervading the whole country against the Mormons is given legal countenance and direction, a crusade will start against Utah which will crush out this beast of heresy forever.

A black cloud of grasshoppers eclipses the sun. Exoskeletons click click click, stripping tree trunks of their bark like skin grafts in reverse. In Zion’s streets: pop, pop, popping like popcorn kernels bursting open under the wagon wheels. Crops: nibbled to nothing. You pray for the flock of seagulls, the same miracle that saved the Mormon pioneers in 1848. But the birds never come. This time, God has forsaken you.

Brigham Young knows why the seagulls
do not come. Brigham Young knows miracles only swoop down when they are hungry, not you. Miracles, by their very nature, are predators. If your neighbor wishes salvation, spill his blood. Love him enough—love Zion enough—to let him atone. Let the sinners sacrifice their blood. Let the sinners who brought this plague be our saviors when Jesus refuses.

When emigrants roll into Mountain Meadows in 1857, you are still hungry for blood and miracles. Any Arkansas wagon team is as good as guilty for the murder of apostle Parley Pratt in Arkansas just a few weeks before: If these emigrants are not killers, let them be proxies for the killers. Let them pay for the murder of Joseph Smith at Carthage. Let them atone.

Surround the wagons.
Wave white flags of surrender.
Promise to lead them to safety.
Make the men walk single file.
Attack.
Club brains with the butt of your gun.
Aim bullets straight to mothers’ foreheads.
No child over the age of seven survives.
Feed to the Gentiles the same bread they fed to you.

It is September 11, 1857. In four days President Young will forbid all armed forces from entering Utah. In four days you will be free. There is your miracle.

Any President of the United States who lifts his finger against these people shall die an untimely death and go to hell.

What would Brigham Young say now, as the great-great-grandson of Parley Pratt stands at the podium of the Republican National Convention, surrendering to the very nation that would send its army into the Promised Land?

During winter in Salt Lake City, heaven and earth turn upside down: air near the earth cools; air high above warms up. Meteorologists call it a surface temperature inversion, blaming it on long winter nights, the sun sinking low on the horizon, and high-pressure fronts. Inversions settle in for days and weeks, warm air sealing the cold valley like a Tupperware lid.

The mountains conspire to trap the soupy air, too, like the rims of a giant bowl. Automobile exhaust builds up as if the city is a sealed garage. Sometimes, I mistake the blue air and the burning at the back of my throat for the aftermath of an insurrection: tear gas lingering after all the rebel forces have been rounded up. A city clean and in order.

Inversion air tastes like sucking on a filthy penny, and it leaves a film on my tongue and teeth, the oily texture of rainbows on puddles. My voice turns throaty. I am dizzy. Sleepy. Street and security lights glow like flying saucers. The mountains and sun disappear for days. Sometimes, even buildings across the street vanish. Cars and pedestrians glide out of the fog like ships on water. It feels like Blade Runner. It feels like end times. Sky, city, mountains: I accept they will never come back. During these times, I wonder if Zion has landed, if this is what happens when the holy grids no longer line up.

I am a covert missionary, a secret agent of the grid. I have to choose Zion. Many of the streets I walk every day have more than one name:

400 S/4th South/University Boulevard
500 S/5th South/Cesar E. Chavez Boulevard

“4th South” obliterates the reference to Temple Square, but I resist the translation. In that sense, the city is not converting me; I am converting myself.

For his grandest Mormon forgery, Mark Hofmann came full circle: This time, instead of conjuring false eyewitnesses, he became one. Assuming the identity of Martin Harris, one of the witnesses in the Book of Mormon’s holy appraisal certificate, he preyed on the worst fear of the LDS: that Joseph Smith was a money-digging, glass-looker con
artist out to make a quick buck helping victims track treasure with magic seeing stones. Evidence does suggest Smith faced trial for money digging, so Hofmann penned the Salamander Letter to make it official church history. He also exposed hypocrisy: To translate the plates, Smith relied on a seer stone and a set of silver spectacles with Biblical Urim and Thummim lenses. This magic, however, was sanctioned by heaven.

In the letter, a white salamander guards the golden plates, not the Angel Moroni; hence the name Salamander Letter. Perhaps to plant a clue to his deception, Hofmann lifted the idea from a classic anti-Mormon book, E.D. Howe’s *Mormonism Unvailed*. As with the Anthon Transcript, he conjured up a shady provenance—a ruse that, to Hofmann, boosted the letter’s authenticity. *Only lies come with a clean paper trail, an airtight alibi.*

When the church accepted the authenticity of the letter, it played right into Hofmann’s hands: legitimizing anti-Mormon propaganda and undercutting the testimony printed inside its own holy book. However, as it had in the past when confronted with evidence to the contrary, the church never turned its back on its foundational myth. It also proved Hofmann right, for just as he later proclaimed in his confession, it did not matter if Joseph Smith had the first vision or received the plates from the Angel Moroni, as long as people believe it.

In the end, the forger and the faithful shared the same core conviction: Belief, real belief, requires no forensics, no provenance at all.

*The truth is the most important thing.*

**James Dean Darrah:** That was Jimmy’s legal name the day he died. He was no longer my brother, at least not in name. Twenty-nine years after his death, I unearthed his obituary so I could finally, finally hold the proof in my hands, and now I am left with nothing.

**Jimmy Higgins.** Adoption rescinded before I was born. Not my brother. Never was.

But twenty-nine years ago, I saw the obituary, the one with his name in black-and-white: *Jimmy Higgins.* Where is that obituary now, the one that made him my brother?

On the tallest spire of the temple, a golden Angel Moroni raises his trumpet, but he is not just an angel; he is a lightning rod, with cables connecting him to the temple’s grounding system. The same angel that trumpets the end of the world channels wrath from the heavens straight into the holy epicenter, saving the proxy moons and stars from the real ones.

I write *Jimmy Higgins* and *Greg Higgins* on a slip of ordinary notebook paper, fold it in half, and carry it in my palm to Temple Square.

I keep my head down as I pass through the gate, my way of bringing myself under its jurisdiction, of confessing.

Under the fifth buttress of the north temple wall, where the lunar sequence begins, I commence my usual counterclockwise walk, backward through the lunar phases: lightness to dark, death to birth, and stop at the west facade, just below Ursa Major. This, right here, is the place. In the basement, on this side, is the baptistry. It makes sense: sending spirit telegraphs from a tomb beneath Ursa Major, the compass for lost souls.

I climb the steps to the wooden doors on the right. Nobody stops me. I am inches from the portal. I touch the beehive engraved on the doorknob, the symbol of industry, of doing God’s work. In a semicircle atop the beehive, an engraving reads: *Holiness to the Lord.* The very act of turning this knob, opening this door, would be doing God’s work, unless of course, you have no right to be here.

On the escutcheon: the seashell, symbol of water and baptism. This spot, right here, is as close as I will ever get. I kiss the slip of paper and, just for a second, consider sticking it through the keyhole. But I cannot force them into the temple. I have taken my request to the highest authority, and now it is up to the temple to telegraph my heretical plea. It is up to my brothers to accept it. This stairwell, this door, this meridian—nowhere, no place, like home.
April 21, 2011

There’s no real reason to mark today as the beginning of a diary of the 2012 presidential election. So far, in 2011, no one has declared his or her candidacy, the closest being those who have formed exploratory committees, among them former Minnesota governor Tim Pawlenty and former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich. As yet there are no legitimate Republican candidates. That is, there is no candidate who has declared himself who is now undergoing the attendant scrutiny and is therefore obligated to declare positions on issues of the day. Instead there is muscle flexing on the Republican side—of such a spectacle and pitch that it becomes hard not to jot down a few lines.

And so: Let me say that Wisconsin representative and congressional budget wonk Paul Ryan, who proposes ending Medicare as we know it, is one of the most successful creations of Republican public relations in the post-Reagan era. The article about him today in the *New York Times* (“Making Case for G. O. P. Budget Plan, and Fending Off Talk of Higher Office”) is the first I have read that doesn’t mention how much Ryan works out at the congressional gym or how he leads weightlifting classes for others in Congress. It also doesn’t mention that he likes Led Zeppelin (or, perhaps, that someone on his staff thought it would be a good idea to say he likes Led Zeppelin), nor his hair, and so I am left to do that job for you. (Paul Ryan’s hair is bizarre—it is combed in a way that is sort of rococo, like the filigrees of a Bavarian church interior, and it is combed resolutely forward, the effect suggesting there is in the distant background a punctilious mother who still holds veto power over outfits.) Ryan’s weightlifting regimen, and its relentless citations in the press, summon all the most garish and unpleasant aspects of exaggerated masculinity. You can imagine Ryan, in his workouts, fighting off some inner scrawny kid who was made fun of by the mooks of his home state. You can imagine Ryan, in the congressional gym, counting out another hundred reps so that they can never call him fag again, meanwhile scouring the premises to make sure that there’s not anyone effeminate within sight, this despite the fact that no self-respecting gay man would want to be seen with a guy whose coiffure has the bulge of a partially extruded hernia.

The Republican Party always establishes its oligarchical principles by demonizing and excluding, and while they recognize that they have lost the fight on marriage equality (it’s only a matter of time), homophobia still works wonders among the rank and file of their base. A budget spokesmodel, therefore, who “works out regularly” and speaks in the wooden and affect-free manner that many psychiatrists refer to as *facial masking* is therefore destined to be favored...
by the party’s base. He is a good guy to have out
front on the budget because he’s like a talking
 Cinder block. Ryan has spent a lot of time recently
declaring about how the president’s budget
proposals are mere politics, or electioneering, and
naturally he fails to acknowledge the role that
politics play in his own formulations. Ryan’s
proposal, which would add to the national debt
rather than alleviating it because of its high
military budget and tax cuts for the most affluent,
manages to pass muster in the press. Although
Ryan is great with PowerPoint presentations and
graphs that look serious and have titles like “The
Path to Prosperity” (it has alliteration!), he fails
to mention that it is the Republican presidents in
the last thirty years who have run up the biggest
deficits. Ryan is the number-cruncher when
Speaker of the House John Boehner and House
Majority Leader Eric Cantor need one; he has no
other purpose. His purpose is to make cutting
Medicare seem inevitable.

You have to admire Ryan in one respect.
He’s not running for president. No politician
who does not have an outsized compulsion for
the trappings of the Oval Office is running in
2012. Ryan is sitting it out this year because he’s
young and thinks that if he plays budget hack long
enough, the party will give him a shot. Maybe
in 2016 when Joe Biden is older and even less
disciplined. Maybe later still. Ryan is forty-one
years old. He has lots of time. The hair may only
improve. Only the particularly stupid intend
to run in 2012: Welcome to Mike Huckabee,
End Times theorist; Tim Pawlenty, birther by
expedience; Haley Barbour, racial separatist;
Michele Bachmann, Biblical literalist; Newt
Gingrich, serial adulterer; Mitt Romney, can’t
think of anything else to do; and, at least for the
moment, Donald Trump.

May 13, 2011

Already Donald Trump is a thing of the past!
Once President Obama released his birth
certificate (again), there wasn’t much for
Trump to do, as his single-issue candidacy had
been reduced to a zero-issue candidacy. Trump
demonstrates the way that entertainment and, in
particular, cable television and its niche marketing
dominate the election cycle. The leading
candidates, if by leading you mean best known and
most discussed, are all well-known television
personalities: Trump, Huckabee, Gingrich, Sarah
Palin and, to a lesser extent, Bachmann.

The problem with television
personalities is that, on the one hand, they do
not seem presidential and, on the other, they get
overexposed. I don’t think Palin’s politics are
substantively worse than the most unpleasant
of the current field of candidates—for example
Rick Santorum, who mercifully got run out of the
Senate after the 2006 election but is unwilling
to give up. Palin is just more overexposed.
Bachmann has been tolerated recently because
she doesn’t have a regular talk show, or a reality
show about her enormous family, but as the
bright lights of the election season turn upon
her, the contempt of the general public will
come to the surface. Trying to capitalize on the
gray area between politics and entertainment—
as Gingrich had done by becoming a novelist,
as Huckabee has done by authoring a dieting
book, as Palin has done by just about every
means possible—necessarily implies a trail of
embarrassing public utterances, and the voting
public ultimately, or at the very least the opposing
party’s press operatives, will eventually unearth
every embarrassing thing you have said and hold
it up for public scrutiny. Trump is Exhibit A.
It only takes a little bit of digging to get to his
alleged mob ties or his dubious record on racial
issues, and you can locate this stuff (as the New
York Times has done) without even starting on his
television show. The television show is so much like Paddy Chayefsky’s *Network*—indeed the entire Republican field is so much like *Network*—that it is arresting. Trump and his bizarre tan and fake hair, and his illustrious parade of shrewd and lobotomized consorts, seems to have stepped out of the second act of *Network*, and it’s for that reason that he ultimately becomes somewhat pleasant to watch.

The recent Republican debate, which offered none of the major names from the field excepting Pawlenty, was mostly, it seems to me, about libertarianism, which used to be considered an outlandish set of beliefs and might now be orthodox Republican dogma, as represented by Texas Congressman and perennial presidential candidate Ron Paul. But the secret weapon of the Republican debate, and the popular winner of the Fox News polling after the fact, was pizza magnate Herman Cain. “What the American people want...” is how most every political speech begins these days, and Cain’s positions are no exception: he doesn’t really articulate positions so much as Styrofoam-encased bromides, spoken in a language that the regular Fox News viewers can really get behind. The language of solemism. Cain also is lucky in the following way: He has no voting record. He has no longstanding affiliation with the Republican Party apparatus. It’s hard to imagine that he is going to get out of the primary season at all. But stranger things have happened, I suppose. Right now the field seems to be waiting around for Mitch Daniels or Jon Huntsman, candidates who have a little genuine political gravitas. But that’s what people said about Fred Thompson in 2008. And remember one-time frontrunner Rudy Giuliani? The early favorites are never the late leaders, and the most abbreviated leaders of all are the ones from the world of infotainment.

This reminds me: Aaron Schock, a Republican congressman from Illinois, elected to parade himself on the cover of *Men’s Health* this month, sporting some six-pack abs. Part of what the Republican Party wants to restore us to with “traditional values” is systematic gender stereotyping, and this means *sculpting summer abs*, and all you ladies should have tighter glutes, and we all of us could use a little time watching infomercials about Botox and Viagra in the gym where, inevitably, we also will come to see that we have a personal savior who is against sodomy and who obviates the need for government. I wonder if they Photoshopped Schock.

June 3, 2011

God has confirmed for Michele Bachmann that she should run for president! This is thrilling to me, because my own conversations with God are mostly noteworthy for God’s silence. In fact, the silence of the Divine is something I can rely on, and I have come to feel that this silence is a sublime thing, a thing that transcends worldly institutions and which I can therefore trust as a resource despite the apparent non-involvement of God in human affairs. God never has told me, one way or another, how to proceed, and my attempts to induce God to do so, or to answer specific requests, have met not only with failure but with dark, lonely thoughts of failure, and I have mostly watched the people over whom I have occasionally prayed suffer despite my prayers. Prayers to God, conversations with God, these are to contextualize the essential loneliness of our time here, and the sense, ideally, that we are loved despite the hideousness of our lot here. Therefore God probably told Bachmann, if in fact God told her anything, that she was going to lose big. She will have the character-building experience of losing big in a presidential election, but she may be able to parlay that into speaking engagements and book deals after the fact, if not a paying gig as a pundit on the Fox News network.

God apparently told Mitt Romney to
run, too, because yesterday he too announced his candidacy. Having thought a lot about Romney in 2008, having watched him closely then, I think Romney might be the only legitimate candidate the Republicans are able to field, and I think, in fact, that he would be a genuine challenge to Obama, because he has seen fit to occupy positions that are not quite as dogmatic. While I don’t admire the rhetorical positions he has staked out lately so as to appear legitimate in the upcoming primary season, he was a merely fleetingly horrible single-term governor in Massachusetts. The hatred for Romney among Tea Party-types is hard not to enjoy. Pawlenty is a more effective politician than Romney, but no one seems to be taking Pawlent seriously.

Mitch Daniels’s wife interests me. Governor Daniels of Indiana and his wife parted for something like three years, and then they reconciled. They have steadfastly refused to discuss what happened and how they managed to reconcile, and by most accounts Daniels’s refusal to run for president is owing to his wife’s disinclination to weather the media circus that might ensue. I have no idea what the couple went through, of course, and it’s really ridiculous, in the end, to conjecture about other people’s marriages. Marriage is an arrangement that is different in every single case. But Mitch Daniels’s wife probably has something on him. Or: Mitch Daniels’s wife, whom I find admirable in every possible way, took three years off to explore her lesbianism. I want to stress that I have no idea whether this is true or not. But let’s say that Daniels or his wife briefly fell in love with the gay soccer coach of one of the couple’s children (I don’t even know if they have children), and followed this to its inevitable conclusion, the conclusion in which Daniels (or his wife) had to consummate a love for the soccer coach, who then logically inquired as to whether they might explore the love, might see what was in store for them, and so the two set up house, whichever two. Perhaps Mitch Daniels’s wife heard from God in a way that Michele Bachmann never will, and his wife followed the sweet melody of God’s voice, and found that though it led into certain single-sex coves in Northern California, and that these places were sweet and quiet, she missed her family too much, missed her kids, and so went back. Nothing could be more human, and nothing about what is human is free from sadness, regret and longing, and so while I am sure that my version of this story is imaginary, I feel that Mitch Daniels’s wife’s diehard refusal to campaign or to appear in a political setting at her husband’s side makes her a person of genuine character, and so I would like to advise the Republican Party to draft Daniels’s wife. Daniels’s wife will have something legitimate to say about what is sweet and good about human consciousness, and how we might create a politics in this country that reflects and supports life as actually lived.

August 14, 2011

It’s the morning after the Iowa straw polls, at which Mitt Romney was victorious back in 2007. It’s a little bit hilarious that Michele Bachmann is the winner, really. It’s bizarre and hilarious. Since most thinking people, even of the Republican persuasion, don’t buy the image makeover that has been concocted in an effort to repurpose Bachmann from End Times hysteric into presidential nominee, the results in Iowa make clear that the party faithful have moved so far right that Richard Nixon himself would have seemed a “socialist” of the Obama variety. This is fine. Bachmann is unelectable, especially as long as her social conservative obsessions are the purpose of her candidacy. Meanwhile Rick Perry, a guy with purely Machiavellian political instincts and, as far as I can tell, no intellectual heft of any kind, also announced his candidacy yesterday in South Carolina. Obviously he announced in SC
because it’s the first primary that will favor a guy with his credentials, which are mainly that he too thinks it’s just about time for the Rapture.

In each case, Bachmann and Perry, we have gay-themed rumors circulating. With Bachmann the gay rumors have to do with her husband, whose business has offered to counsel-into-straightness a few wayward gay men, and who is in this cause allied with some stridently anti-homosexual whackos. In the case of Perry, the rumors are about Perry himself. In neither case would this gayness make any difference as to the candidate’s fitness for office, especially in Bachmann’s case (her alleged migraine-level headaches are perhaps more relevant to her ability to govern, and even this is a wild stretch); what’s more compelling is how the gay rumor is so consistently a feature of Republican party politics. In fact, what with its love of men in uniform, congressmen without shirts, and desire to strew about its commercials a lot of proto-fascist imagery, the Republican Party does seem to have a lot in common with the gay underground, particularly the really butch examples thereof. This *wide stance* version of the Republican Party emerges from the shadows via former United States Senator Larry Craig’s arrest for soliciting sex in a bathroom in Minneapolis, though in recent history there also is one-time Representative Mark Foley and the congressional pages; evangelical pastor Ted Haggard and the crystal meth and the male prostitutes; Bob Allen’s attempted offer to give a cop a blow job in a public park; and then Glenn Murphy, the Indiana Republican operative who got drunk with a friend and then attempted to give the friend a blow job when this friend had passed out. Best of all is Alan David Berlin, aide to a Republican state senator from Pennsylvania, who was not only wont to solicit underage boys but also into *furry costumes*. He liked to have sex, or at least to affect to have sex, while dressed as a panda.

*Wide Stance!* It’s not just a line you use to attempt to exonerate yourself, it’s a world view, and the world view is: You’ll say anything, and come up with spurious Biblical support, in order to seem like a patriotic American, while at the same time attempting to do exactly what you most publicly revile. *Wide Stance!* It’s like the “big tent” of the Republican party during the Reagan years except with anal beads and lube. I’m not saying, of course, that the Democratic Party (*Respect the package!) is immune to sex scandals. Nor am I saying that all Democratic sex scandals are straight ones (former New Jersey Governor McGreevey comes to mind). But I am saying that the Democratic Party does not have a whole countervailing set of principles that make the hypocrisy that much more aggravated. Democrats fuck around and mess up but do it in ways that are stupidly self-destructive more than baldly hypocritical. To Eliot Spitzer, you want to say: *Are you that fucking stupid?* While acknowledging that you are sometimes exactly that stupid yourself.

The level of Republican mendacity is more inconceivable...

Unless we were to say that *Wide Stance* is somehow integral to what the party is, unless *Wide Stance* is somehow what it means to be Republican, so that a whiff of hardcore gay sex hovers around everything Republican, wherein the words of Dick Cheney are always a little obscene, wherein George W. Bush throwing out the first pitch looks a little bit like it comes from a porn film, wherein *Bedtime for Bonzo* starring future president Ronald Reagan seems clearly to have a gay subtext to it, wherein Eric Cantor is clearly gay, and John Boehner is clearly gay (tanning salon!), wherein Rand Paul is gay and Paul Ryan (works out every day!) is gay, and John Kyl is gay and Jim DeMint is gay (sure looks gay to me), unless Sarah Palin is gay (and what woman from Alaska doesn’t seem a little bit gay?). In fact, in this view, all of the Republican myth of rugged individualism and self-reliance feels a little bit gay, and you can imagine, in this *Wide Stance* view...
of the world, that all of the original settlers, and most of the Mormons on their trip across the nation unto Utah, and all of the homesteaders and continental explorers, when they weren’t fucking indigenous Americans or trying to exploit their own steers, were jumping into one another’s beds for a little tide-me-over until the women could show up, whereupon they would button up their union suits and get back to piety and god-fearing. The Republican Party is a Wide Stance party, a party of elective enemas, and ketamine, and musical theater, and panda costumes, and intergenerational sex. And they make it all that much more titillating by denying that this is the case at every turn. Their safe word is tax increase, which is why they’re always saying it so much.

It doesn’t matter if Rick Perry is gay, at all, and it would probably make him more fit, in my view, if he were to come out and admit to being gay, and speak honestly about the tremendous emotional cost that he suffered by trying to hide this from his party operatives for decades, and it doesn’t matter if Michele Bachmann’s husband is gay, or if she has migraines. What matters is pretending that the human character is other than it is. Because neither Bachmann nor Perry is liable to begin confessing the truth anytime soon. You can count on their campaigns being long on bullshit and evangelical rhetoric. Which means they can never be elected. Neither of them will ever be elected. Which means that the frontrunner is the guy who didn’t even bother to participate in the Iowa straw polls: Mitt Romney.

September 17, 2011

Every time I catch up on the current events, I am so discouraged by what I’m reading that I am paralyzed, mute in horror. Nevertheless it is time to open my mouth, and say on. So: Michele Bachmann’s candidacy is basically dead, now, because when it comes right down to it, conservatives are inherently sexist, and despite the fact that Bachmann is a go-getter, they’re bound to throw her under the bus as soon as there is a comparable, or even slightly-less-than-comparable, male. Which turns out to be that marvel of nature, that Carcharodon carcharias, Texas Governor Rick Perry, who apparently has to campaign, or die, though as with the Carcharodon carcharias it may be possible to subdue him by gently petting him on the nose. Perry apparently has no instinct that is not a political instinct and will do anything to expedite the electoral triumph that he apparently believes is his inevitably, and because he will say anything, his first couple weeks, after announcing, were hilarious for the scale of his demagoguery—Social Security is a Ponzi scheme, Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke is treasonous, global warming is a scientific hoax, and so on. Because Perry first wanted to be a veterinarian (but didn’t have the grades) and grew up rural, he is a home run for guys who basically hate women, who couldn’t really wait for Bachmann’s candidacy to sour a bit before they leaped off the wagon.

Never having been vetted by the national press corps, Perry now is getting a taste of the kind of clusterfuck that awaits him if he spends the next six months catering to hemorrhoidal gun fetishists in South Carolina with shrunken skulls in their attics. A nasty surprise awaits. Given his good old boy smile, and his makes-Goldwater-look-like-a-choirboy pronouncements, nothing could be more satisfying than watching him go down in flames. He’s got a lot of growing to do, and a really abysmal record as a governor for which he has to atone in public, and when he’s on the defensive he gets a kind of nasty look on his face, like a boar that’s been cornered. Who the fuck you think you are, boy? And that’s not going to go over well with anyone, not even the diehards.

My presumption is that we are living through the worst, most dire economic circumstances of the recollectable past, and
that everything we’re being told is sort of like the government of Japan saying to residents around the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant that everything is going to be fine. What is being proposed in our country by John Boehner and Eric Cantor benefits the top one percent of earners; the Republican field, who count on this one percent for donations, is not about to do anything but try to spin this deregulatory, anti-tax platform so that it somehow philosophically, mystically, narratively, seems More American. I think Barack Obama, besides not being able to govern lately, is heading into a very unstable electoral season. Almost no one has survived a re-election campaign with unemployment this high. One had best prepare for the worst, and preparing for the worst, today, is preparing for President Rick Perry. It’s hard to overstate how bad this could be. We only can hope that he really is gay and the scandal emerges.

This week I’m in Marfa, Texas—Perry’s home state. Marfa has a bustling real estate market now that it’s been discovered by art tourists and kids from Austin and Williamsburg, but the Marfa that I first encountered in 2004 when I was last here is still here, which is to say a very, very, very poor Marfa, one that mostly lives in trailers and double-wides, and so on, at the edge of town, ringed entirely by non-producing ranchlands that are in the tens of thousands of acres. Some of these ranchlands are federally subsidized, notwithstanding the hatred in these parts for handouts from the federal government, because the drought in West Texas has been so many years long. Marfa, if not for art tourism, has almost nothing going for it, and even with art tourism it is a frankly desolate place. That’s what’s gorgeous about it. I went to the farmers market this morning, which turned out to be five or six vendors standing under a “pavilion,” a sun shade in an empty lot, and most of these vendors were just people who had baked a few loaves of bread or made homemade salsa that they were selling at prices that might pass muster with the touristic classes, of which I am one. I bought a three-dollar burrito from a very polite, quiet cowboy in his sixties who had a cooler full of them. I could not help feeling that this wasn’t the profession this cowboy had thought lay ahead of him. It was, perhaps, a retirement profession in extremely bad economic times. I was happy to buy his burrito and happy to pay for it, and it was a really great burrito. But if everybody is hustling in this way to keep body and soul together, we are facing a dicey future.

November 7, 2011

While I have said already that there is not a chance in hell that Herman Cain will be nominated, and that the prospect of a Herman Cain nomination makes me very happy, because it’s awful enough to light a bonfire of joy in my heart, I do have some queasy feelings about the witch-huntery on the sexual harassment allegations. I feel, that is, that lodging sexual harassment allegations against a black man does in fact give one a little shiver of recognition as regards some historical treatment of black men that we might feel extremely dubious about. I say this while feeling certain that Clarence Thomas did in fact harass Anita Hill, and that he is a low example of a political animal who has got himself a job for life because he’s stubborn and mean-spirited, and it doesn’t matter if he has no original ideas because people who have contempt for him are willing to provide him with ideas. Moreover I have no doubt that Herman Cain did commit the harassment of which he is accused. Though he may not believe it himself. When the number gets to five accusers, you have something more like a trend than an isolated incident. Still, there’s something unsettling about the whole takedown, and the vehemence with which it is happening, now, and the employment of celebrity lawyers,
and denials, and the accusations of lying and fraud, and the dragging the accusers through the mud. All very ugly.

However: Though I have trouble saying that a black man sounds like a fucking moron, because I don’t want to be disrespectful, it’s true that Herman Cain—especially when he talks about himself in the third person and says stuff about wanting to be on Mount Rushmore—sounds like a moron. It’s as if the only residual brain activity taking place in him is in the part of the brain responsible for self-promotion. The bursting into song, the borrowing of tax proposals from SimCity, the absolute ignorance of parts of the world crucial to American foreign policy: These all reveal Cain to be utterly uninformed about the affairs of the day, and it’s hard not to conclude that the people who allegedly support his candidacy do so only because it’s contrary to the status quo. My argument, as with Rick Perry, has been that Herman Cain would eventually be vetted by the American press corps, and in particular he would be vetted by the Department of Dirty Tricks in the same way that Bill Clinton was, in the same way John Kerry was, in the same way Barack Obama was. This is Herman Cain’s time. He wants to pin it on the “Democrat machine,” though it’s more likely that he should pin it on Perry and/or Romney. In a way, the idea that Romney’s people are behind the sudden appearance of the Cain story is reassuring, because one goes on feeling that Romney is just too pleasant to do what is necessary to be president, except that he would cut off a lot of people who are justifiably on food stamps and/or unemployment. I appreciate the Republican Dirty Tricks approach, because I expect the Republican Dirty Tricks approach, and once you have run that gauntlet, you are stronger for not having been killed.

Which raises the question: Why didn’t Cain expect this? If he did settle with not one but two women in the Nineties to make the harassment allegations go away, why didn’t he expect that this stuff would all come out during the campaign? Because he is so hugely egotistical that he just thought the charges wouldn’t stick? This always happens, this Dirty Tricks stuff. Going back to Michael Dukakis in ’88. And before! So why didn’t Cain expect it? My guess, thinking about it as a novelist might, is that Cain just honestly forgets about anything that doesn’t reveal him in a somewhat imperial and untouchable light (as in the revelation in the New York Times that people sharing a car with Cain on the campaign trail were directed not to talk to the candidate unless he talked to them first), and so he didn’t see fit to inform anyone about these allegations because he doesn’t believe these allegations. After all, he made them go away.

I felt waves of sympathy for his wife when there was one accuser and even two, but now that the number seems to be five I don’t feel so badly anymore, except that watching the piling on, and watching how people wait for someone else to stick the knife in before they’re willing to do it themselves, it occurs to me that this process does not display the political animal, much less the human being, in a terribly pleasant light. I suspect, if it drags on a couple more weeks, that Cain will be seriously injured as a candidate. He may say he’s not dropping out because of this, but he will drop out if he can’t get any traction in the early primaries, and perhaps this will enable him to say he’s dropping out for some other reason.

Which will leave us, again, with Mitt Romney.

Or, if not with Romney, the robotronic candidate, the one who will not and cannot die, now running third: Newt Gingrich.

November 9, 2011

I have in-laws in Ohio and have spent some time in Ohio in the last twenty years. I can verify that
Ohio, in intention and fact, is a swing state, just as you might suppose, a place situated almost exactly between the knee-jerk rugged individualism of the West and the progressive politics of the Northeast, with a big hunk behaving like the Deep South, since it shares a border with Kentucky, the land that begat Rand. And the way residents of Ohio talk about things, you really can get an idea about how independent voters are going to vote, and since independent voters decide the general election, you therefore get an idea about how the general election will go from watching Ohio. My inner circle of Ohio tipsters felt like George Bush was a good guy and then turned right around to vote for Obama in 2008, and they really did flip-flop right back to being against progressive politics and really do appear to blame Obama for the bailouts, etc.

That said, it is rather cheering that Ohio was the state to vote down the union-bashing stuff. And I am not even terribly concerned, for today, about their symbolically voting down the health-care reform act at the same time. For today, all the news is good. For today Russell Pearce, the dog who came up with the “papers, please” law in Arizona, is recalled, and the “personhood” law in Mississippi went down in flames, and even if the fact that mostly hard-right Republican legislation failed yesterday is coincidental, it still enables the spin machinery to paint the day as a good one for progressive politics, and that is a good thing for the last big election before November 2012.

In this light, it’s worth asking why any of these candidates is running against Barack Obama. Some of the candidates, like Jon Huntsman, who actually seems reasonable in many ways, can’t possibly believe this is going to be an easy road to the White House. It must be that Huntsman has his eyes on 2016. Newt Gingrich is probably too old to wait another four years, and Ron Paul has some kind of perennial campaign going on that only fitfully appears like an actual desire to serve in the role of president. Mitt Romney is wealthy enough to finance endless campaigns, until he becomes president because everyone gets bored of looking at him. Rick Perry just can’t think of anything else to do with himself and doesn’t want to go back to veterinarian school. Michele Bachmann’s decisions are made by God. Not one can honestly believe this is going to be an easy victory next year, and therefore it’s only hubris that sustains them through this ever longer and more dispiriting campaign season. They believe in themselves to a delusional degree. Perhaps this is a lesson on character. The masses of humanity just don’t know what they are doing a lot of the time.

November 25, 2011

It may be because of my circumstances—the circumstances of a relatively new father (my daughter is two-and-a-half years old as I write these lines)—but it’s really hard for me not to think of Newt Gingrich in diapers. Everything about Gingrich seems infantilized. In day care he would have been the kind of kid who always stole your stuff and then claimed, when you tried to take it back, that it was his all along, and his ability to manufacture realistic cries of outrage would serve him well. There would be teachers, open-hearted but slightly distracted by the seriousness of their responsibility not to mention the dire wage received, who would believe Newt. For one, his name is Newt. Newts have those tiny little fingers that make them seem almost mammalian, though they’re more lizardish than mammalian. The day care worker would imagine that Newt was somehow attractive because of his bright and artificial smile, and his helmet of hair that even as a child he likely combed forward. This day care worker will overlook that Newt not only steals things from other kids but
repeatedly bites them on the playground. Newt’s mom (if Newt wasn’t simply spontaneously generated) claims that the dental patterns of the bite marks on the calves and asses of his friends from the playground are nothing like Newt’s dental patterns, which are robust and feature additional molars that link Newt to earlier subspecies of humankind. Newt would boast about his dental relation to the Australopithecus until realizing that this is to believe in evolution, and he can’t do that on the campaign trail. Newt will not make that mistake, or at least he tries not to make that mistake, though his natural propensity for invention trips him up here. Wait, I am not yet ready to leave behind the day care version of Newt. Newt’s mom insists that Newt already has been potty trained and therefore no longer requires diapers, nor the intermediate variety of diapers known as Pull-Ups that are for bigger kids. No, Newt wears around a saggy pair of briefs over which he pulls on baby khakis, and despite the fact that it is impossible, because Newt’s alleged mom says he is already potty trained, he occasionally works up a Newt-sized gift, which sags out the legs of his briefs. The day care workers are then consigned to work him over, which requires stripping down, hosing and starting over. But Newt will not agree to return to the general population until his helmet hair has been properly recombed. The other kids refer to him as Dog Stink behind his back.

We can now imagine that Newt’s various lovers (as distinct from his wives) have grown used to his need to wear diapers prior to genital play. Aware that his fetish is not popular in many circles, and in the same way that he waits before telling the base he’s willing to grant a path to legal status for the undocumented, first Newt tells his lovers that everyone loves babies, and that babies are pure and innocent because they’re not constrained by the normative conduct that we expect of adults; they roam freely, beloved of some Catholic god that Newt now proclaims to worship, and their merest whim is an expression of their godliness, and so if they want to run naked we should, for a time, accept their nakedness, at least while indoors—but don’t they look delightful in diapers, too? Newt asks his lovers, and then he specifically mentions cloth diapers, and speaks to how his mother used only cloth diapers, because those were the days of cloth diapers and every day she would fold and even iron those cloth diapers and affix them with a big, easy-to-operate safety pin that had a blue bowtie decorating it, and Newt looks back on those diapers with American pride. If he were going to wear diapers now, Newt says, he would probably wear those kinds of diapers—and this monologue, of course, is taking place over a rather long period, at least ten or twelve dinner dates during some of which he has had to simulate conventional romantic behavior, many of these dates at popular dining establishments in Atlanta and Washington, DC, and his coming clean has therefore been whispered and mumbled and performed with obscure hand gestures—and wouldn’t it be kind of funny, you know, just as a joke, to attempt to wear those cloth diapers? Wouldn’t that be funny? Next date, when Newt and his lover enter the inner sanctum of Gingrich (and I recognize that Newt doesn’t seem to have a lover right now, he just has Callista), Newt takes his new lover to the fainting couch, and on the fainting couch there are laid out a couple of cloth diapers, in adult sizes, and now Newt does not ask about the diapers, the time for the laying of the table is gone, and now Newt commands that she will don the diaper, and though it is not entirely coercive neither is it controvertible, he just states the fact, and the trade-off is clear to the poor misguided lover who thought that Newt had a nice smile and who thought the helmet of hair would look good disarranged. Now she faces a choice, and it is the choice that all the GOP primary voters face: Are you going to put on the diaper? Are you going to allow this man
to command you to wear the diaper? Are you going to listen to a lot of rhetoric that is all about the diaper, the superiority of the diaper, and about how Newt would like to have conventional genital contact, and he recognizes that that would likely be easier, but he is an historian, and as such he has done exhaustive studies of the history of the diaper, and he cannot ignore that august history though it would be easier to do so, and because he loves history, both generally and in this specific case, he is honor-bound to wear the diaper and, in any event, this is how he achieves the necessary state of arousal and, yes, although he understands that the avowals of the goo goo goo variety are a little embarrassing, these would really enable him to have a powerful release, and certainly you would like for him to have a powerful release, would you not, and if you would be willing to do this, then he would reward you not only with some books and CDs about America’s ruthless enemies abroad, but if you prove sufficiently devoted to his cause, which is the cause of Newt Gingrich, and make this possible by contributing at the federally prescribed limit, then he would be willing to leave his wife for you, and if you would not be willing to do these things, then it’s your fault he will not have a powerful release and he would instead like to show you his robust dental functioning by biting you violently, look here are the teeth marks of Newt Gingrich in the ass, the Contract with America, that’s Newt Gingrich’s bitemarks in your ass, and the Bill Clinton impeachment vote in the House of Representatives, launched by a Newt simultaneously unfaithful to his own wife, this is Newt Gingrich’s teeth marks in your ass and now, American voter, you’ve got this guy who wears diapers to get off and who bites his playground friends, and you’re going to give him another chance just because you don’t like some other guy who wears the Mormon underwear? When he has flip-flopped just as many times as that guy? When he is the epitome of the Washington insider? When he has a half-million-dollar charge account at Tiffany? When he never does anything that contradicts a naked and clumsy lust for power at all times and in all places? He’s going to be your frontrunner?

December 15, 2011

It’s just a few weeks until the Iowa caucuses on January 3rd and New Gingrich, the ostensible frontrunner in Iowa, is wearing out his welcome with the same ruthless efficiency that has failed him at every other political position he has occupied. The question is: Will his free-fall be at a slow enough velocity that he can eke out a victory in Iowa, enabling him to build some momentum, or will someone else, in this season of anointments and dizzy plunges, inherit, however briefly, the mantle? I am not alone in feeling that Gingrich would be the most satisfying nominee for the Republican Party, when his self-inflicted wounds are so numerous. But apparently there are those in the Republican establishment who are alert to the significant dislike of Gingrich among the electorate. People just hate that fucker.

So who else is there? If the Republican Party had any sense, it would long ago have anointed Jon Huntsman. Huntsman’s more libertarian positions are hard to like, as far as I’m concerned, but he’s a person of dignity, and a pragmatist, and he has worked with Democrats (including Obama) and he would, presumably, be able to do a little negotiating with the other party. He is a Mormon, from a Mormon family that extends all the way back to the very beginning of the LDS Church, but he also dropped out of high school to play keyboards in a rock and roll band called Wizard. I think dropping out of high school to play keyboards in a rock and roll band is a superb qualification for a presidential candidate, especially because he then got his G.E.D. and later went on to study at the University of Utah. Apparently the dropping out to play keyboards
did not adversely affect his level of smarts, and may have, contrarily, toughened him up a bit. Hard to know if Huntsman’s keyboard playing was a bit of teenage rebellion or if he somehow had the blessing of his billionaire dad. If he didn’t have the blessing of his dad, he was, it seems, rather daring as a teen, but he also recognized when Wizard was not going to make it big and went back to school.

Generically speaking: Huntsman professes to like The Prog. As evidence of this, he attended a Dream Theater gig in 2007. In fact he even declared a Dream Theater Day in Utah, according to legend. Now, what kind of prog is the prog that Huntsman likes? Dream Theater is one of those modern prog, or prog metal, outfits that has a bit of Metallica about it, a bit of Megadeth. Therein are the very tricky ensemble passages in which the low string on the guitar is tuned down to C and the guitar and the bass hammer on a lot in different octaves. And the singer sounds like Ronnie James Dio. Myself, I cannot get down with the Ronnie James Dio faux-operatic thing, exactly, which I guess means that I don’t like the same kinds of prog as Jon Huntsman, but I respect that Huntsman has changed with the times, because he’s a year older than I am and apparently he is still listening to this stuff, when he could be listening to Keith Urban or some of that other Nashville fluff that is the last refuge of scoundrels. He could be getting ZZ Top to jam with him at events. But he is not. Because he likes The Prog.

Like a pragmatist Huntsman believes, or mostly believes, in man-made climate change, and he seems to have no problem with the theory of evolution. He supported a rise in minimum wage and some cap-and-trade legislation. He disdains Donald Trump. All in all he seems like the real thing. He is presently polling third in New Hampshire; I doubt this is good enough. Huntsman would be the Republican nominee if elections made any sense. They don’t. So if it’s not going to be Gingrich, who is there left to make a credible case as the Not-Romney candidate? I think the only conclusion can be that the candidate is Ron Paul. I arrived at this conclusion not because it is pleasing but because, this year, the stupidest outcome seems inevitable somehow. In the last presidential election Paul was the anti-matter Dennis Kucinich; in fact Kucinich and Paul seemed similar in some ways, because the extreme-left world view and the libertarian world view are not always diametrically opposed. (In fact Paul made some noise about including Kucinich in his cabinet.) The thing about each of these candidacies was that, in 2008, they were fanciful, quixotic, slightly ridiculous. Nobody believed that either would win anything at all. Paul has an Eddie Albert-like quality, avuncular and bemused; you can’t imagine that anything politically challenging would come out of his mouth. That would be an erroneous presumption. Paul’s brand of libertarian nonsense is especially heartless, venal, though tricked out in casual Friday garments.

As a writer who came of age in the Sixties, I have noticed that a number of free-love types who were anti-establishment in the counterculture period have migrated to the libertarian position out of some fuzzy allegiance to non-intervention in the affairs of individualists, and though I do not sympathize I can see how they migrated thus. I’m old enough to have witnessed and been slightly contaminated by some of the hands-off-my-stash period of American countercultural politics. I can understand how the Grateful Dead would include libertarians. I can understand, somehow, though it’s extremely depressing, how Arlo Guthrie would support Ron Paul. Hey man, let us do what we want to do. I’m the one that’s gotta die when it’s my time to die. In staking out a position against government interference in drug policy, among other positions, Paul would seem to be the ally of these brain-damaged counterculturalists.
Yet self-evidently, the sinister part of the libertarian position is this: The only constituency that would be empowered by libertarian politics is corporate. The libertarian position degrades government in order to clear the path before the multinationals, who thereby are unregulated in every area, who then can busy themselves about the task of monopolizing and price fixing, gouging, selling you stuff full of poisons and berating you with such excesses of rhetorical bombast and public relations that you’re unlikely ever to know what’s happening to you. You don’t have the financial resources or legal representation to mount a reasonable counterattack, and the market doesn’t give a shit, and thus libertarianism is oligarchy by other means. Because contemporary American politics feel starkly oligarchical—especially in the aftermath of the Supreme Court’s 2010 *Citizens United* decision—it’s only natural that libertarianism would have come in out of the cold, no longer the insane fringe part of Republican politics but now, well, kind of mainstream.

With the election of Ron Paul’s son Rand to the United States Senate last year, we saw plenty of examples of how the libertarian position, bolstered with a little Tea Party hot sauce, falls into rather bizarre pitfalls if given enough rope. The Voting Rights Act of nearly half a century ago was a bad idea. Heroin addiction is the problem of the heroin addict. A fellow who had no health insurance should properly have no help from the government at all, as suggested in this campaign by Rand’s dad. But in these oligarchical times, those rhetorical blind spots apparently are less important than a boundless support for unregulated American corporate power, especially insofar as this is construed as some kind of total resistance to “government,” even if this government is propping up the price of milk, giving you automatic health insurance after sixty-five, and making it possible for your disabled aunt to rent her own apartment, instead of sleeping in the same room with your daughter.

Ron Paul. My prediction is he will finish first in Iowa, actually. This is how I see it now. But I would rather that Iowa was going to end with Jon Huntsman jamming with Dream Theater. Or, let’s say, The Mars Volta.

*January 3, 2012*

I meant at some point in the last week to mention the Ron Paul “racist newsletter” controversy, especially when Paul was polling first in Iowa. But the competition in Iowa, at least according to the polls, has been so fluid that it was hard to believe that Paul would be first for very long, and indeed the last week of the polling seemed to feature a surge by the most ridiculous, the most far out, the most unelectable of Republican candidates, Rick Santorum. You knew he had arrived when there was an entire article in the *New York Times* about his sweater vests. It’s not fair to use only gay imagery to discuss Santorum, but it is fair to say that a pullover sweater vest does seem a little dowdy, like something that your British maiden aunt would wear while working on her book of pressed flowers. Santorum has any number of sweater vests. Doesn’t he come from the same state as Fred Rogers? Ergo he’s not a gay person at all but rather a children’s television personality masquerading as a politician.

As I write these lines, the Iowa caucus is underway and Santorum is ahead of Romney with almost half of the precincts reporting, and this is a little shocking, unless you remember the degree to which evangelicals control the caucuses. Yes, Huckabee won here last time, which surprised me then, but nothing surprises me now. It doesn’t surprise me that a guy who ran out of friends in a state that is very, very conservative
in pockets (Pennsylvania) could wage an election campaign with no money and no party support and somehow lead the field. He seems to have only two positions: 1) gay anything is really really bad; and 2) there are Muslims on every side of you, masquerading as god-fearing Christians, and they should all be rooted out, and we should bomb the fuck out of the Middle East. Except for Israel. Beyond that, there are few cogent Santorum positions. Does he really have seven children? Many of them were home-schooled for some portion of their educations. Santorum’s wife wrote a book about children’s etiquette. There’s a whole story about their son who died two hours after being born and it’s too sad, so I’m going to leave it alone. There is also a daughter, aged three, named Bella, who has Trisomy 18, a genetic condition like in kind to Down Syndrome (which is Trisomy 21) and with very serious developmental effects. It’s sort of amazing that Bella is still alive, and she was on the campaign trail with her dad for a while, but her breathing problems, as I understand it, are severe enough that she was sent home to Virginia to recuperate for a while. As with Sarah Palin, it is never hard to see how naked ambition might result in carrying around a disabled kid on the campaign trail. Down’s children are often relatively stable, without severe heart or pulmonary defects; that Santorum has campaigned with a severely ill child at home is sort of astounding. You have to credit him with living up to his principles, because it’s hard to imagine that he and his wife didn’t know that Bella was going to be disabled (ninety-two percent of diagnoses of Trisomy 18 are in utero). Unless they eschewed the amniocentesis procedure, which is unlikely because of Karen Santorum’s age (median age of the mother for a diagnosis of Trisomy 18 is thirty-two and a half years, after which the risk only increases), the parents would have known and made the decision to carry the child to term, and this after they lost one child already. Bold, what they did, if exceedingly difficult.

It’s worth remarking on the extremely large family size issue in this Republican field, which is a feature almost to a man (woman) throughout the presidential campaign. Santorum, seven children; Huntsman, seven children; Romney, five children; Bachmann, five children (plus the foster children, whose number has been various but at least twenty); Ron Paul, five children. Newt Gingrich, despite three marriages, just has the two children from the first, which goes to show that a diaper fetish (my guess! no proof at all!) puts a damper on procreative abilities. Rick Perry has just the two children. Former Louisiana governor Buddy Roemer has three. Herman Cain has two. Among the frontrunners, it is an advantage to have a lot of kids.

Okay, one brief remark more about Ron Paul. The Paul campaign in Iowa has been surprisingly effective, at least in terms of its field operations. It’s effective despite the fact that the candidate is out of his mind and cannot defend the fact that his newsletters in the Nineties didn’t just feature racist and homophobic remarks but relied on the occasional racist outburst in order to foster credibility with the lunatic fringe. This not only doesn’t register with the Republican base in Iowa, it counts as a positive. That’s the reason people are talking about whether Iowa is a bad first locale for the Republican primaries. Iowa doesn’t necessarily give a clear picture of where the party wants to be.

Enough. This is not the kind of thing I can watch at great length, on television, so it’s off to bed with fifty-two percent of the Iowa caucus reporting, and the top three still Santorum, Romney, Paul.

January 4, 2012

Romney is the winner by eight votes. [The delegates were later awarded to Santorum. RM.] In theory a top-three victory for Romney
was meant to be good enough, but I think he looks weak; in fact he got fewer votes than when he placed second in Iowa in 2008 and didn’t break twenty-five percent of the electoral total, which means that if you total up the top four, the not-Romneys outpolled him nearly three to one. However: Next is New Hampshire where Romney is liable to win by a commanding amount because of its adjacency to Massachusetts. So there will not be much to say about New Hampshire except that it might be the death knell for Huntsman, who has put a lot of energy into campaigning there and is still hovering at nine percent.

Speaking of death knells: Perry is going back to Texas to reflect, according to the headlines this morning. It’s hard not to count his campaign among the very worst I’ve ever witnessed. Really startlingly bad. I mean, it is possible that he was a bad candidate in the first place and was just very adept at disguising his complete ignorance, his lack of interest in the issues and his total inability to debate. Maybe that kind of thing is not an issue in Texas, where Perry’s history of familial racism and good-ole-boy smile can charm a bunch of oil and gas oligarchs, but occasionally there is justice, and in this case justice means it doesn’t play in the rest of the country. Full credit for the failure has to go to Perry himself. When he really needed to do well, to sell himself, he failed with spectacular verve. The other candidate who is liable to drop out now, according to the news this morning, is Michele Bachmann. It’s generous of her to do so, because she and Perry are splitting the evangelical vote with Santorum and that vote will fail to solidify ahead of South Carolina if she remains in the race, which makes things easier for Romney and Paul. The interesting part for me is: God told her to enter the race. God told Bachmann to enter the race—and she is dropping out after a sixth-place showing in Iowa (despite winning the state’s straw poll last year). The theology of all of this is fascinating. If God told Bachmann to run (and lose), did he not tell Santorum to run (is it possible that God has conflicting wishes for the different sects of Christianity?), and didn’t he tell Perry to run?

January 5, 2012

Bachmann drops out.

January 11, 2012

Romney takes New Hampshire with less than forty percent in a state adjacent to the state where he served as governor, and where he’s been well-known for years. Second place: Ron Paul, with twenty-three percent.

In third with seventeen percent: Huntsman!

Because this will be the last of Huntsman, because when the dust settles after South Carolina and Florida he will be roadkill on the superhighway of Republican politics, let us properly salute him. So today we will describe Jon Huntsman as though he were Rick Wakeman’s C-3 organ solo on “Roundabout” by the English prog rock group Yes.

Rick Wakeman, you know, is a political conservative too. He has performed for the Conservative Party in the UK, and (probably incorrectly) according to legend tried to pressure EMI, or was it Virgin, to drop the Sex Pistols back in the mid-Seventies. He wrote pretentious solo pieces about Jules Verne stories and the wives of Henry VIII and what have you, and one of these extravaganzas involved people skating while he played. He lost a lot of money in this way. Most recent music by Wakeman is cloying, excessively pretty and too ornate for its own good. In his dotage Wakeman is a prog rock Liberace. Some of the gold capes he wore at his peak had a real Liberace aspect to them.
Still, there were moments in his life when his keyboard had a spooky, magisterial quality—the piano in Cat Stevens’ “Morning Has Broken” is him—and his obsession with playing very, very fast sometimes was a strength rather than a weakness. Perhaps the best example is his playing on Fragile, the 1971 album by Yes that was his first with the band. Of the songs on that album, none is superior to “Roundabout,” though the others are occasionally interesting as well. “Roundabout” starts with the guitarist Steve Howe’s nylon-stringed prelude, much imitated by guitar players learning the instrument in the decades after; upon the completion of Howe’s little flamenco figure, the song launches into its rather excellent groove, which is heavily syncopated, partly because of the way the one-four-five is played with a lot of thirds and sevenths so that it sounds nearly as jazzish as rockish, at least until the “mountains come out of the sky” part which is crucial and plenty rock and roll. Chris Squire’s bass, eq’d in a way all his own, is the solo instrument for much of the song, and Bill Bruford’s drums, without a hint of reverb on the snare, are all touch—some of the most graceful drumming ever on a rock album.

But the thing that drives the song is Wakeman’s C-3 organ. I have never played one, though I have played a B-3 in the studio with the Leslie cabinet, which is the speaker system paired with the keyboard. The Leslie cabinet involves magnets, and through the use of magnets, the Doppler effect, and in this way a vibrato effect comes to pass. Wakeman uses the organ on the verses and in the bridges of “Roundabout,” playing melody lines with Howe that are elegant and virtuosic. But even this playing, which is so evocative and so faultlessly repeated without ever being looped, as it might be now, is no preparation for the solo.

It starts at 5:49 and it’s really just Wakeman and Bruford, with very minimal bass and guitar, and after a great peal of sound the solo retreats slightly to think more carefully about what it wants to do, as if to say, I have your attention, but now bear with me as I grow to merit it. After about twenty seconds of casual and confident soloing Wakeman cedes the floor to Howe, who seems to rise to the occasion, goaded on by the initial blast of the organ solo, and who therefore mounts a suitable challenge, completely without precedent in the early portions of the song, and this in turn ushers in a second solo by Wakeman, more antic than the first, the I-can-in-fact-do-it-twine solo. The song then returns to its chorus and more bluesy-gospel abandon than Yes ever mustered in any other song they produced.

Jon Huntsman is like Wakeman’s solo. Huntsman is like an eruption of a prog solo that is played incredibly quickly and with pinpoint virtuosity at a time in life when the player is still too stupid to know that virtuosity is unimportant, and with a recognition of the importance of melody and, best of all, a sense of theater. Like Wakeman’s solo on the C-3, Huntsman wants you to know that he is here, that he looks fucking good, and that no one is his equal, but without being so aggressive about it as to embarrass the rest of the band. Huntsman is like Wakeman’s solo because Huntsman is rehearsed but capable of making it all look improvised. Huntsman is like Wakeman’s solo because he has the look of a libertine but is all meat and potatoes. Huntsman is like Wakeman’s solo because he comes out of nowhere and funds his campaign with millions of family money, wasting it like a rock tour that requires skaters, and he will, in the end, return to nowhere, will return to some support position because he is too good, he is too smart, too well informed, too pragmatic, too reasonable. [Later this year in October, Huntsman will criticize Republican nominee Romney for not distancing himself from Indiana Senate candidate Richard Mourdock for his comments about rape. RM.] Ours is the time in which reasonableness must die a lonely death like some amphibian
extinction that no one ever notices. Huntsman is like Wakeman’s solo because this may be the moment in which his virtuosity is perfect and will never be again. Huntsman is like Wakeman’s solo because his daughters are smart and de la mode and they organically understand Twitter, and Huntsman is like Wakeman’s solo because deep inside he knows that the long-form compositions by Yes are kind of embarrassing and that Tales From Topographic Oceans is pretentious nonsense and those Anderson lyrics are ridiculous in the long run, and really the band should just play the hits and take up residence in the stadia of the world and rule like a victorious empire. Like a permanent Republican majority. Huntsman is like Wakeman’s solo because he believes he can win, even though his win, were it to take place, would be fleeting and muted and fraught with peril. But that doesn’t mean, just for a moment, that he was not, is not, great. In the proper world Huntsman would be the nominee. And I would happily vote against him.

January 16, 2012

Huntsman drops out.

January 19, 2012

Perry drops out.

January 22, 2012

Romney is dull, it’s true, and if you are bored about Romney and by Romney, you are probably happy to have last night’s result in South Carolina, because at least Romney is not proceeding unopposed all the way to the convention. It would have been an interminable summer, and it would have been an anxious summer, too, because Romney provides the most serious competition to Obama’s re-election campaign. As it is, Romney didn’t even win Iowa, it now appears, and he got his ass kicked in South Carolina, by a double-digit margin. This is all good. It provokes Romney, and it is satisfying to see a billionaire, or whatever he is, provoked a bit. On the other hand, in order for this loss to take place, you had to watch Gingrich foaming at the mouth on national television.

Okay, so racism is the fodder that drives the cultural engine in the United States of America. America requires racism because it doesn’t have diehard class architecture like Britain or India, or endemic poverty like China or Mexico, in order to ensure a reliable pool of indigent laborers who will withstand deadening work environments in order to try to get by. America needs in place a system of incontrovertible classifications that make sure that certain persons are consigned to serve, and that system is the system of racial classification. This is obvious in a state like South Carolina. South Carolina puts the capital R in racism by flying the Confederate doo-rag above the state house, by claiming it’s all about “states’ rights” when it’s about as much about states’ rights as the lynching rope is about states’ rights. In South Carolina the kids, according to Gingrich, should work as janitors because the state will save money, and the kids will learn to work which is another way of saying that the kids will learn the hopelessness of never being able to do anything but snake a gummed up toilet, and the state won’t have to negotiate with those pesky public sector unions. You have to hand it to Gingrich—his mouth is a perpetual motion machine. He will say that liberals are scared of the space race, he will say that Sharia law is coming to the USA, he will say that man-made climate change isn’t real if only the audience will pay him to do so or there’s a chance for more power. He is a walking manifestation of the desire by the masses of
South Carolinians, in their ignorance, to appear as though they could elect a smart guy.

More importantly, Gingrich stands for the hopelessness of 21st Century capitalism and the fact that most of the jobs that are going to be created now are bootlicking jobs, in which people with nothing are kept where they will never, ever, ever get anything except humiliation, TV, and a mouthful of dust. Gingrich will say anything he will dress anything up in some paragraph of bullshit about how it’s all the fault of the television commentators, the elite of which he himself is one, and never about his insatiable self-promotion, his multiplicities of chins, his disgraceful treatment of his wives, the hatred of him among his own party.

In Florida, Gingrich has a nine point lead. The man will never be elected president. The Republican Party apparatus surely knows this and so they must be uncomfortable. It should be easy to be amused, delighted, at the spectacle of, as Jeb Bush puts it, the circular firing squad of this primary season, but it’s not, because the things that Gingrich says are buried down in the American psyche, where it’s all about squashing the little guy, blaming the little guy for his lack of accomplishment, rubbing his face in it until his face bleeds and then saying that Christ loves him anyhow. Gingrich has about as much idea about Christ as I do about the derivatives market, but he will say anything and so he blathers some nonsense about Christ when what he’s really saying is that capitalism works and it got him all three million of his three million last year and he would like to control the world so he can sell some more DVDs and get back at all the people who ran him out of town in the Nineties.

We’re going to be listening to it for months.

January 31, 2012

I have been wanting for some time now to discuss Restore Our Future, by which name goes Romney’s so-called super PAC. Is it possible, in any practical way, to “restore” a future? The future is a series of hypotheses; for a politician, working at making the present livable would be a fine enough ambition. The insistence on rhetorically engaging the future is a hallmark of political doublespeak, but the “restore” part here is especially bizarre, as if the future were in some condition at a prior moment known to us that we could somehow reclaim. The future prevents its own entrapment in any systemization that begins with the prefix “re-” and it does so because it is the future. Because the future has not yet happened, it cannot happen in some alternate way unless you’re a student of advanced string theory or quantum tunneling or the work of David Lewis, an architect of possibilia. But let’s presume that the very rich people and heads of large corporations, who have largely given over their time and energy to making sure that the plundering of the American consumer class happens at an accelerating rate, do not know about possible world theory and that, therefore, there is some other philosophical position hidden away in this super PAC name.

When I read “restore our future” I keep thinking of the Mormon practice of baptizing the dead. The relevant lines come from 1 Corinthians: “Else what shall they do which are baptized for the dead, if the dead rise not at all? Why are they then baptized for the dead?” There’s a lot of debate on what this scriptural passage means. It would be very like Joseph Smith, the worst writer ever to turn his hand to scriptural literature, to completely miss the boat here, to miss the nuance in which what is being said is something like: “What shall they do who are baptized in preparation for death, if the dead are not, as we believe, resurrected? Why then are
they baptized?” No, Joseph Smith gets the whole thing flummoxed up, in this way bringing about a very unusual Mormon ritual.

The Mormons removed from the canon some sections of Smith’s writing on baptism of the dead but the practice still takes place, and the oddness of its philosophical basis, or perhaps its astonishing antiquity, doesn’t seem to occur to the members of the LDS Church. But, then again, they have many rituals that, from a Judeo-Christian perspective, are unorthodox at the very least. What seems telling, from the perspective of Romney’s super PAC, is that the baptism of the dead has the same philosophical orientation as “restore our future.” The dead person—and it can be any dead person: It could even be a dead person who does not practice Mormonism—is held to be in exile from the Kingdom of Heaven by having failed to be baptized in the LDS Church. The baptism of the dead person as practiced by Mormons ensures that his future will be secure (thus the Mormon preoccupation with genealogy). In this view the idea that Romney is a rank-and-file American who just happens to possess hundreds of millions of dollars appears to be wide of the mark; Romney is an ecstatic heresiarch and his platform does, occasionally, feature the bizarre belief system of the LDS Church (“Verily, thus saith the Lord unto you concerning your dead: When any of you are baptized for your dead, let there be a recorder and let him be eye-witness of your baptisms; let him hear with his ears that he may testify of a truth, saith the Lord”). As Harold Bloom has pointed out in The American Religion, once Mormonism was a great imaginative effort, especially in the period when it still condoned polygamy, but more recently it has gone to great lengths to conceal its idiosyncrasies. Perhaps Mormonism wishes to restore its own future, to restore mystical revelation, subjugation of women, paranoia, martyrdom and bloodshed.

February 8, 2012

Santorum sweeps caucuses in Colorado and Minnesota, and the non-binding primary in Missouri. Romney is third in Minnesota, a state he won four years ago. Gingrich, not on the ballot in Missouri, doesn’t place there, and is distant in the pack elsewhere.

February 16, 2012

I can’t let go by the comments by Dave Mustaine, the lead singer and songwriter of Megadeth: “I’m just hoping that whatever is in the White House next year is a Republican. I can’t bear to watch what’s happened to our great country. Everybody’s got their head in the sand. Everybody in the industry is like, ‘Oh, Obama’s doing such a great job...’ I don’t think so. Not from what I see... . Earlier in the election, I was completely oblivious as to who Rick Santorum was, but when the dude went home to be with his daughter when she was sick, that was very commendable.”

On this subject Talking Points Memo has made the best crack so far. “Apparently, former Pennsylvania Senator Rick Santorum is the best possible choice for Americans kicked out of Metallica.”

I was not terribly surprised when ZZ Top performed at George W. Bush’s inaugural festivities in 2001, but I have not much listened to them since. How could a guy (Billy Gibbons) who was close friends with Roky Erickson and also recorded with the Revolting Cocks endorse George W. Bush? Did he think he had to? Don’t ZZ Top want their music to be more than just a celebration of oil millions and insider politics? Is it surprising that Johnny Ramone was a right-wing ideologue? Well, not exactly. It was the Ramones; they came from Forest Hills. You can imagine that Joey once dressed gla...
can imagine that Johnny thought Ronald Reagan was cool. The band was the sum of its diversities, a big disorderly mess. Dave Mustaine has made pronouncements on a variety of subjects. In 1988, in response to the British government’s criticism of homosexuality, he said, “More power to them. It says in the Bible that men should not lay with men like they lay with women. I mean I don’t wanna fuck up and not go to heaven.” On border issues: “If I were President of the United States, I’d build a great wall along the Mexican border and not let anybody in... . The beauty is gone when you see Americans sleeping on sidewalks and it makes me sick to think we have assholes in this country letting fucking Mexicans in. Who needs this shit?”

Mustaine is the perfect rock and roll endorsement for Rick Santorum. The only problem is he’s smart enough not to want to be seen endorsing Santorum, at least if today’s remarks on the subject are any guide: “Contrary to how some people have interpreted my words, I have not endorsed any presidential candidate... . What I did say was that I hope to see a Republican in the White House. I’ve seen good qualities in all the candidates but by no means have made my choice yet.” One could write at length on why certain qualities of speed metal make it the perfect musical genre for Republicans, on how excessive virtuosity is anti-expressive and anti-musical, and its lyrical subjects—war, death, hate, apocalypse—are inherently Republican, or perhaps just Jehovah’s Witness-derived, and in this case despite the fact that the musician in question spent a good many years stealing peaches from the orchard. But this line of reasoning is beyond my brief. We are for the moment awaiting the Michigan primary, where Santorum is held to be ahead of Romney or tied with Romney, in the state where Romney has had to claim to be against the bailout of the auto industry in order to appease conservative critics, even though the bailout is exceedingly popular in the state, having saved its core businesses and all the dependent small businesses that orbit the auto industry. I am betting that Santorum is not driving around in his tour bus listening to Peace Sells ... But Who’s Buying?, which is unlistenable, anyhow.

March 5, 2012

Tomorrow is Super Tuesday, and I am just a few weeks short of keeping this diary for a year, and I am guessing by tomorrow the outcome of this particular race will be mostly predictable. As in the Michigan and Arizona contests, in which Romney prevailed (managing to eke out the better part of the delegates). I expect that while Gingrich may get Georgia and while Santorum has a chance in Ohio and Tennessee, the majority of states are going Romney’s way (Massachusetts and Vermont being obvious examples). Romney will not have cleared the necessary number of delegates, but he will manage to return to being the anointed frontrunner, and that will likely be the story up to and into convention time in August.

What has changed in a year? In a way I expected Romney to be the nominee last year, and I still expect that to be the case, although I feared, at various times, Huntsman, Daniels and Perry. If you are a conspiracy theorist, you expect Daniels may yet mount a challenge. But I’m betting no Republican nominee who wants a serious shot is going to try to get into this race this year. They’re assuming that Romney loses in November and then they’ll bet everything they have on 2016.

This inexplicably long primary season has damaged all of these candidates. Romney’s inconstancy is legendary now. He has never met a topic on which he would not vacillate, and his marginally lifelike demeanor seems, upon scrutiny, to have some serious layers of class condescension about it, and this class condescension is not much beloved of centrists and independents. It’s going to be a long summer
for Romney, who is going to have to depend on Barack Obama screwing up on an epic scale, or on some kind of complete collapse in the Eurozone in order to win the presidency.

It’s surprising that there could be a party more unlikable than the Democratic Party. Even Republicans hate the Republican Party; it’s the kind of place where a frontrunner, opposing birth control but perhaps not averse to the insertion of ultrasound devices into pregnant women by force, goes in search of an endorsement from the author of “Wango Tango,” by Romney endorser Ted Nugent:

You take her right ankle out
You take her left ankle out
You get her belly propped down
You get her butt propped up
Yeah lookin’ good now baby

And:
Is my baby alive? (Is my baby alive?)
Is my baby alive? (Is my baby alive?)
Is my baby alive?
She Wango’d to death

It’s true you can’t make this stuff up, and in this instance Ted Nugent’s lyrics do seem to suggest that the death by “Wango Tango,” or non-reproductive penetration, is acceptable collateral damage if the feeling is right and you can get one of the nationally ranked worst guitar solos ever out of the song. This from the man who was once (according to Spin magazine) smitten with an underage girl and had himself declared her guardian in order to spend more time with her (look, I know Courtney Love has occasionally made some outrageous claims—she is not your first source for news—but she does say she performed oral sex on Nugent at, perhaps, age twelve; she isn’t sure about the age, but says she was too young to have breasts), who had three children out of wedlock over the years and who once was sued for non-payment of child support for his unacknowledged children. Family values! And is this not like unto a certain talk show host who said, complaining about a young politically engaged woman who wanted to testify in favor of Obama’s contraceptive coverage law, that he’d be willing to pay for her birth control if only she’d post videos of herself having sex online so he could watch?

Family values!

The face of the Republican Party.

March 15, 2012

Meanwhile it’s budget time in the House of Representatives, and that means it’s a year since I talked about how unappealing Paul Ryan is. Now Ryan is back, indicating again that it’s bold and visionary to zero out Medicare and Medicaid and maybe Social Security too. And he’s just a person who really loves freedom, the old nothing left to lose, which is what most of us will have if the last vestiges of the safety net have been cut by Paul Ryan. Paul Ryan is listening to Rage Against the Machine and going to the gym and coaching a few of his congressional colleagues therein into dropping a few pounds, and he is, perhaps, suggesting a particular fixative for Republican hair, and elsewhere, in Wisconsin, Governor Scott Walker is reading up on Nixon, using the same variety of statesmanship that Nixon employed, the scorched-earth approach, and all things are repeating, except that the language is more hysterical. The debates are all the same, and they come with alarming frequency, the gotcha lines, the pandering and the provocations, in the same spots. Ideas are introduced and they seem as though they’re new because of the barbaric language, but they are not new except that the language is more inflammatory, and everywhere there are the evils of government and the tragedy of unborn children and the homosexual agenda, and it will all be exactly as the last time you checked, viz. the people with the money and power have kept their money and power except that in some measure this money and power are more
concentrated than before, and what will drive you slightly insane is that it will seem as though the times are different and the foaming-at-the-mouth will make them seem different, but they are not different, it’s just the process of things getting worse in a predictable way, people treating other people like they aren’t exactly people, corporations purchasing the allegiance of the people, and there’s nothing we can all agree on and no language with which to agree, and even the words United States of America will no longer refer to any one particular thing, it’s disunited, there’s not even a definition of statehood any longer, not one we can agree on, only these fractious, disputatious siblings, most of them presided over by small guilds of the totally corrupt, because corruption is easier in the localities ....

March 24, 2012
Santorum wins Louisiana.

April 10, 2012
Santorum drops out.

April 25, 2012
Romney sweeps five states including Delaware, where Gingrich has staked everything, or all that remains. Gingrich drops out. Romney is out of the gate on the general election and is beginning already to disclaim remarks about immigration that he made a few months ago. Soon he will begin to try to sound reasonable on contraception. The vice presidential candidates, like Marco Rubio and Paul Ryan and Tim Pawlenty, are from a pool of Republicans who are, perhaps, less stiff, more likeable, and who can at least give off the veneer of working across the aisle: Romney’s intensely negative public image will have to be buffered by someone who is a little less irritating (though Ryan is more irritating), someone more socially adroit. What Romney has is money and the ability to compel people to his view of things. I may have thought George W. Bush was a simpleton and playboy, but he often believed what he said. Romney believes nothing excepting certain Mormon ideas that he is keeping to himself. He is going to marshal the super PACs and have corporations pay for advertising, and he’s going to owe all those people later on.

June 28, 2012
This morning’s headlines are about the Supreme Court affirming the Affordable Care Act. A conservative court found its way to moderation. A court that doomed the individual mandate would have become infamous and Chief Justice John Roberts would have been the man who presided over that court.

    I keep waiting for a moment when those in public service will admit they actually have ideas about working for the country instead of for their party, and I assume there are such thoughts even among the Eric Cantors and John Boehners of the world. But it takes a very dramatic moment, a Category 5 storm, to produce moderation, and today appears to be one such moment. The Chief Justice seems admirable for what he did, though I assume he will now have to produce evidence of his conservative bona fides in order to avoid being pilloried further in the National Review. The effect on the presidential campaign is chiefly what interests me; the ACA (or so-called Obamacare) is the law that Republican voters love to hate in the abstract and support in the privacy of their own homes.

    Notwithstanding that he designed a health-care law in Massachusetts almost identical
to the Affordable Care Act. Mitt Romney is looking to capitalize on the far right’s misery with respect to this Supreme Court decision. My supposition lately has been that Romney has a real chance to win this election and that the grim economic news from Europe is the main reason for this state of affairs. Still, Barack Obama has more lives than a one-eyed tomcat, and whenever he has seemed in political danger, he has wriggled free in some dazzling way; this morning’s announcement from the Supreme Court is a good example. Few would have predicted this outcome and, as with his announcement about immigration recently (in which certain undocumented Americans suddenly were accorded a path to stability if not outright citizenship), the rhetorical advantages seem significant. I think Obama wants to tread water until the convention season and then seduce Romney into the debates where he hopes to gain real ground. It would be hard to imagine but that the debates would tilt heavily in Obama’s favor, though with debates it’s easy to make the mistake of underestimating the opposition.

Romney’s prospective running mate is an important piece of all this. The list of possibilities includes Pawlenty, Paul Ryan, Ohio Senator Rob Portman, Florida Senator Marco Rubio, Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal, South Carolina Governor Nikki Haley, Virginia Governor Bob McDonnell, and former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. If we assume that Romney’s greatest problem is sufficiently coddling the far right wing of his party, the choice has to be someone less moderate, and that would seem to be Ryan or McDonnell. I think McDonnell is a dark horse who has higher aspirations and therefore wouldn’t want the job. Which leaves Ryan. If Romney needs to shore up his moderate credentials, the choice is Pawlenty or Kelly Ayotte, the senator from New Hampshire. If you want the youngest, best-looking party operative, you choose Ryan or Rubio. I think Ryan would take the job because then he gets to campaign on his budget without having to stand by it legislatively. He gets to appear to be a budget cutter without having to cut. Ryan would bring a lot to the ticket that Romney doesn’t have. He’s not soft, he’s not moderate, but he’s young, likes Led Zeppelin, works out every day, has party discipline. Is he controversial? Not in the Republican Party; and for independents, he doesn’t read as a social conservative even if he is one. I’m going to guess that the choice is Ryan, and if not Ryan, then Rubio (for the Hispanics, on which issue Romney has been badly outflanked) or Portman (who has budgetary experience under George W. Bush). And I’m going to say that Obama wins 51%-49% and loses Florida but gets Ohio, Pennsylvania and Arizona. After which, Ryan gets four more years in the House to work on his muscles and his hair. [Editor’s note: The final results were 51%-47%, with the president winning Ohio, Pennsylvania and Florida, and losing Arizona.]

July 13, 2012

The Drudge Report opines that Condoleezza is at the top of the short list for Romney’s vice president, owing to a speech she gave (on “American leadership”) at a Romney retreat in Utah recently. Rice never has run for elected office and though she may have some appeal to Republicans, she was not much beloved in the days of the Bush presidency except insofar as she was not as militant as Dick Cheney.

For about twenty-four hours in 2008, the Palin choice seemed brilliant on McCain’s part and then the baggage began to drag. Romney is not so incautious; he’s not looking for a brilliant choice. He’s looking for a choice that is utterly secure, beyond reproach. Rice is a woman and that makes sense if you’re trying to outflank Obama on women’s issues, or if you have a rotten record of
appealing to women voters, which is certainly the case. But I don’t imagine that what Romney wants in the final hour is a woman noteworthy for being a woman. I haven’t followed Kelly Ayotte closely, but in New Hampshire they think it’s silly for Romney to pick a candidate from a neighboring state where he already has an advantage. Ergo there is not really a woman to pick—Haley has too many problems—especially if you’re trying to make a choice with no baggage of any kind.

The other argument, vis-à-vis Rice, is that she’s a person of color. I do not think that the African-American vote is going to be split so easily, and I imagine the black voter is not to be hoodwinked. Because many voters of color are going to vote despite innumerable impediments—the de facto poll taxes in the form of ID laws erected to prevent them from doing so—they are going to take voting seriously. And I imagine they’re going to vote for the incumbent. To the tune, according to polls, of ninety-six percent or so. There is no splitting that vote. So more likely this Rice business is just one of those pieces of gossip by people who want to distract from Romney’s real problem today, namely that he has been prevaricating about when he left Bain Capital. I think the candidate, who is obsessed with avoiding public pronouncements that might cost him the campaign (as happened with his father, the Governor of Michigan who ran for president in 1968), fibs all the time in ways faint and not so faint. Who cares about when he left Bain, really? It only matters because he can’t seem to come up with a version of the story that’s faintly credible, or which coheres with the facts on paper.

The larger issue: how Romney avoids taxes that you and I are obligated to pay, and how extensive is his avoidance. I don’t think the Obama folks have to overplay this story. Apparently tonight the presumptive Republican nominee is going to try to douse the flames on national television (three networks!), the first time he has addressed so many reporters at once, and I am keen to watch. It is not American to avoid taxes, it’s American to complain about taxes, to regret that the taxes are being used for a cause the taxpayer finds odious (funding foreign wars)—after which one pays taxes anyway because it’s the right thing to do.

Later: Romney announces on national television that he will release no further tax returns. His wife remarks that “we’ve given [you] all that you people need to know.”

July 29, 2012

Romney was in the UK yesterday and probably wishes he stayed home. The trip was a political minefield in any number of ways. One, his wife’s horse was competing in dressage at the Olympics, and nothing says unmitigated aristocracy like dressage. Two, while he was meant to be showcasing his astuteness on foreign policy, Romney was apparently unable to remember the names of foreign dignitaries. Three, he has maligned the city of London’s preparations for the Olympic games. This earned him significant ridicule in the British press and bristling rebukes from David Cameron, the prime minister, likewise the mayor of London.

It’s been a strange week. The grim facts of a mass shooting in a movie theater in Aurora, Colorado, occupied much of the media recently. It was inevitable that this would be politicized, and Obama, who had much to gain from directing attention away from the economy, worked the angle. His trip to Aurora was predictable in this regard, and while it’s obvious that the president was not going to say anything substantive about gun control, he apparently did ad-lib a line about doing something about the “epidemic of violence” in this country. One can only wish for more! Not one to piss off a hard-right constituency, Romney meanwhile kissed some NRA ass by opining that gun rights were the important part of this story.
Here’s the Second Amendment as ratified in 1791: “A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” The version of the amendment prior to ratification, circulated by James Madison, goes like this: “A well regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.”

In this latter case, it is unambiguous that we are talking about a militia, a community mustering, not an individual right. Who was responsible for the ratified version, which not only uses the free-wheeling capitalization of the Eighteenth Century but also abuses commas (twice over) unnecessarily? Madison? In essence, the commas are responsible for all our trouble. Even Justice Antonin Scalia, in a recent interview, indicated that there were and are opportunities for dreaded gun regulation because, for example, automatic weapons didn’t exist in the time of the framers; at ratification, there already were stipulated exceptions to the Second Amendment (and he said this on Fox News!). If you grant that exceptions exist, then you should grant, especially if you are the kind of literalist who pores over the minutiae of legal language, that the commas in the amendment after “militia” and “arms” are superfluous, and that really what we’re speaking about is the right of a “free state” to raise a militia.

The NRA and its supporters (of which, to his eternal shame, Obama is one) have effected mass hysteria through a belief in the ragtag-guerilla-army-of-farmers interpretation of the Second Amendment. They hypothesize a need for gun-toting householders in case of future tyranny. The Republican ethos attempts to support both the need for law and order and the need for the ragtag-farmer-army or, at least, the threat of the ragtag-farmer-army, though these things are in conflict with one another. Of the two, Republicans prefer the law and order stuff, but they also want the cash contributions from the NRA’s headless chickens, so they’ll go along with the need for the ragtag army. That is, the shooter in Aurora could have been stopped if only a few more guys had been shooting up the theater.

You know what really might have stopped the shooter? Effective mental health treatment in the United States of America.

Maybe it’s worth thinking about what the comma looks like. The comma is like a wink, resembles a wink, and thus the rogue expert on punctuation who ruined two centuries of American politics with the interpolation of two commas was actually winking, and thus ironic: Let it be said that this Comma shall change the course of this Free State, making it impossible that any Man may discuss Arms & Armor without that he should fall into a Dispute with Another. We might even, perhaps, take the wink interpretation further, and consider that the rogue comma is a kind of emoticon, a winking emoticon in which the framers, ever on the alert for the development of advanced textual communication in the Twenty-First Century, were alerting us to the possibility of orthographic irony, OMG u kno that would be so LOL or ROFLOL if the 2nd amend weren’t WYSIWYG, but actually, like, so ironic: ; ).

August 4, 2012

In the last couple of days, Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid has been hammering fellow Mormon Mitt Romney on the aforementioned subject of his taxes. Reid claims to have an informed source from Romney’s Bain Capital days who knows that Romney paid no income taxes for ten years and that this is the reason for Romney’s refusal to publish more than the single return—for the year 2010—he thus far has released (Romney’s 2011 return won’t be finished until October). Yesterday a second source came forward to confirm, to some extent, this leak. Or so it was said on the conspiratorially-minded web sites.
I occasionally browse. Jon Stewart, among others, has chastised Reid on *The Daily Show* for the McCarthyesque way he has conducted this particular witch hunt, and to some extent I agree.

However, Romney’s taxes are and should be fair game to anyone who cares about this election. Even the right (the *National Review*, e.g.) has failed to come to his defense, and in the end he will have to release the returns, and even if he did pay taxes for ten years, it will be clear that he pays far less than you or I pay; in fact, you or I probably pay something on the order of two or three times as much. Reid continues to point out that Romney’s own father released his tax returns when he ran for president, and this is a bit of cognitive dissonance that I appreciate: A son runs for president because his father was ineffective in his own run (the history is usually given that Romney’s father publicly opposed the war in Vietnam, and that was his electoral undoing), but is so cautious and peculiar and secretive about his intentions that he ends up repudiating much of what his father stood for. Of such things are novels made.

It bears mentioning in these pages that my own father knows Mitt Romney a bit, and that when my father was an advisor to the Episcopal Church Pension Fund he invested some of the church’s money with Bain Capital. In fact I own a Bain Capital overnight bag, and it’s a pretty durable and good overnight bag (though I don’t often use it). Romney was kind to my father and for that I’m grateful. Yet I can’t wait for him to go down in flames and return to the private sector. It’s nothing personal.

August 12, 2012

Don’t know if I can survive the next couple of days. Don’t know if I can survive the public relations juggernaut, wholly supported by the press, in which newly-minted Republican running mate Paul Ryan is presented to the public, burnished, cosmically enhanced, vacuum-packed, reduced. That he is a heartless functionary, a shill for the one percent, pretending to be an *economist*, should be obvious to all; and yet for the moment we have to hear endlessly about how much he loves and prizes wife and country. During all this I feel the unmistakable stirring of projectile vomit. So let us pause for a moment on Ryan’s celebrated remark: “The reason I got involved in public service, by and large, if I had to credit one thinker, one person, it would be Ayn Rand.”

Ayn Rand, it’s not her real name, which was Alisa Zinov’yevna Rosenbaum. She must have liked “Ayn Rand” because American simpletons could say it (sort of). Ayn Rand, the amphetamine addict. Ayn Rand, the free-love advocate. Ayn Rand, the second-rate screenwriter and movie extra. Ayn Rand, whose contribution to American philosophy was the idea that it was okay to have no feelings for anyone else, when really what she was suggesting was that she personally was incapable of having feelings for anyone else. Ayn Rand, who must have dipped into the posthumous *Will to Power* by Nietzsche—the spurious, inauthentic, master-race Nietzsche—just for a few minutes. Ayn Rand, who liked to say that she was as good as Aristotle, probably because she never bothered to read philosophy *after* Aristotle. Ayn Rand, the pathological narcissist, sociopath, and founder of the libertarian movement. Flannery O’Connor said it best: “The fiction of Ayn Rand is as low as you can get re: fiction. I hope you picked it up off the floor of the subway and threw it in the nearest garbage pail.” Is Rand’s plodding, adverbially-heavy turgidness bad simply because English was not her language, or because she was taking too much speed? Or because she had no ideas at all and thus no language with which to convey them? And can we speak briefly to the very title itself
of Atlas Shrugged? Is it not among the worst, most laughable titles ever composed? The “Atlas” part contains that hallmark of the pretentious—a classical reference—and then this act of literary pretense is conjoined with a seriously ugly word, “shrugged.” Interestingly no one wants to claim “shrug,” etymologically speaking, because it is too preposterous for an English language word, though I have seen it compared to the Danish skrugg, to stoop, or Swedish, skrukka, to crawl, in use since Middle English. It reminds me of some related words, for example stub, which is a truly strange English word, also origin uncertain, and slug, from the Middle English and, prior to that, Scandinavian, sluge, from which we also get sluggard. In all these you can feel the hard, slightly forbidding sound of the Netherlandish. Whenever I think of Atlas Shrugged I think of that classic of children’s literature, which my daughter especially loves, namely William Steig’s Spinky Sulks. What a better title is Spinky Sulks, and what a finer piece of work.

It would seem a peculiarly American story, the story of specious pseudoscience coming from the talentless dabblers in writing, and there are many American examples. My distant relative, Dwight L. Moody, shoe salesman turned popular Biblical exegete, is a good example of this American story, but there is no finer example than L. Ron Hubbard. The story of Hubbard, also-ran from the golden age of science fiction turned psychologist and “church leader,” and then paranoid sea-faring international exile, maps onto the Ayn Rand story. And the followers of Hubbard—Tom Cruise et al.—feature that same starry-eyed brainwashed quality that Randians exhibit. Most powerful here is the ship of fools period of Hubbard’s life when he was being turned away from every Mediterranean port, and sexually harassing every intern or assistant who came near his galley, while his son meanwhile committed suicide out of despair at the proceedings. Of such things is a religion born! Wilhelm Reich made a similar journey into pseudoscience with his cloudbusters, deadly orgone accumulation, air germs, etc., but Reich himself was fleeing from the quintessential example of the pseudo-artist become dangerous pseudo-philosopher, viz. Hitler himself. Like Rand, novelist, Hitler had some meager ability to render, and like Rand he inclined toward cloying romantic material. Is it ever the tendency of the failed artist and pathological narcissist that he or she will become fascist? In the cases of Rand, Hubbard, Hitler, perhaps Charles Manson, the dogged inability to create requires subjugation, total allegiance, cult of personality and, if not mass murder, something not far from it. You could certainly argue that Rand’s romantic-libertarian positions amount to a kind of mass murder of the underclasses, because Rand scoffs at any intervention on their behalf, though government intervention on behalf of American workers, and the labor unions that have also protected their interests, are responsible for the creation of the American middle class.

As when Mitt Romney reversed course and indicated that Hubbard’s Battlefield Earth was not his favorite novel, Paul Ryan lately has taken to talking down his Ayn Rand fixation. He apparently no longer forces his interns to read Atlas Shrugged, and he views Rand as a dangerous atheist, or at least he does so as long as he is trying to be elected to higher office. But what does it say about the Romney-Ryan ticket that in each case they have professed esteem for one of the failed-artist pathological narcissists? It certainly indicates a general drift among conservatives toward a dictatorial model if not a fascist model. And I haven’t even started in about Ryan and the “personhood” movement yet.

August 31, 2012

Few television extravaganzas are more challenging than the Republican National Convention,
that Nuremberg spectacular. I will say, in my view, that there are fascist elements during conventions of the Democratic persuasion as well; there are just fewer of them. The Republican National Convention glorifies nationalism in a way that never quite comes to the surface until the four-year mark arrives and then, as with a geyser, it’s time again. A Romney campaign stop is not a fascist rally, by and large; it’s wishful thinking about fascist rallies. The convention is a different scale of wishful thinking. It gets so close.

You have to think that for the rank and file delegate the whole thing is remarkably dull. It’s just speeches, and a few utterly whitewashed musical performances. It must be so hard to be down there on the convention floor waiting for the applause lines. Even if I liked these guys, I would feel that way. The three or four nights of speeches are a chore, even when Eric Cantor doesn’t appear. But if you only tune in for the highlights, as most of us do, you could be forgiven for mistaking the whole for fascism; the commentators like to shorten this to the phrase red meat, this x-factor that is what the speakers all seem to be after at the RNC. This is a curious phrase if you’re a vegetarian. You know when it’s working, what they want, because of the spontaneous chants of USA, USA, USA. Oh, jackbooted thuggery, how we missed you. If the whole is merely a rhetorical exercise, however, it also appears to be an act of imagination in the way that all propaganda is an exercise of imagination—an attempt to sketch out a vision, a world. And what does this world appear to be like? It speaks liberty when what it wants is allegiance, allegiance to theocracy, class war, a police state, military invincibility and unfettered capital markets. In this world, as Shepard Fairey has pointed out, there is no possibility but to obey. You can have any color you want as long as it’s white. And the rhetorical approach is absolutely in line with the totalizing intent of the party—make for the red meat, try to get those chants of USA, USA, USA. These shall be a sign.

I watched some of the speeches. I watched a great deal of Scott Walker, who is a fine defender of Scott Walker. His behavior is so Nixonian—the ridiculous combover, the regional accent that sounds faintly like a speech impediment, the dark circles under the eyes. I have no basis for saying he is a compulsive masturbator, but he looks to me like a compulsive masturbator. The red-meat crowd appears to like him because he survived his recall election in Wisconsin. I also watched some of Mike Huckabee, who has the crazy like a fox quality that I associate with Biblical literalists; he makes jokes that are not at all funny, because there is nothing funny about a prehistoric world view. I was surprised that Huckabee was able to temper his millenarian Todd Akin-style hectoring for the good of the party and to talk reconciliation with Mormonism. Why wouldn’t there be a meeting of the minds among fundamentalist Christians and Mormons? It’s all about obey as the rudiment of reading and understanding scripture and the world!

I watched a little bit of Ann Romney, who clearly loves her husband, and I watched some of Santorum, who disappointed me thoroughly. I for one am disappointed by a Santorum who does not whip up the anal compulsive variety of his schtick for the convention. If I’m going to watch Santorum, I want him to say that gay people are like dogs, and I want him to say that the world is going to end in fire, and that anyone who doesn’t agree with him should be shipped off to an Afghan village and burned alive. I also watched some of Paul Ryan, who emerges from his speech as the most unvarnished example of a party hack.

The good thing about party hacks is that they get used up and spit out eventually. Bob Dole, party hack. Trent Lott, party hack. Bill Frist, party hack. When you put the party above all, eventually the party defenestrates you and you’re left with
nothing, because you didn’t bother to look out for number one. Even Ryan’s budget is probably the work of a party hack, as in: Eric Cantor says someone has to be the guy who comes up with the budget, so why don’t we get Ryan to do it, because his ears stick out a lot and he’s not as good looking as Rubio but he’s in a red district. Anyway Ryan’s speech, with all the mendacities that we’ve been hearing for a week, indicates the degree to which he will appear to have no conviction for the sake of party gain. He sure has compromised that personhood thing pretty fast!

And then there’s Romney’s speech. By dint of training, Romney managed not to sound like the kind of guy who collects model trains and beats his kids in private, and that is sort of amazing, because it’s my sense that this is exactly who he is. Whoever trained him did an exceedingly fine job. It’s interesting to me that talking about your parents is always enough to humanize you; that is the red meat version of a human being: loves mom. I concede that Romney appears to love his mom and therefore will get the public opinion bump this week, and it will appear for a moment that he is in the lead against Obama and will be until the Democratic National Convention. Still, Romney will eventually have to defend a constitutional ban on gay marriage and support for the Blunt amendment. Eventually, he will have to defend the foreign policy positions sketched out last night, viz. we should be prepared to invade Iran. Eventually, he will have to debate Obama where, once again, he will seem like a guy who collects model trains and beats his kids in secret—that is, not like a president. This is where this thing is going to play out. At the debates. The fact that Romney, when you get down to it, is a rube, is going to play out there.

That said, I am very worried he could win. 

September 17, 2012

Since I wrote the above, Romney failed to get his convention bounce, whereas Obama got quite a bit of a convention bounce, and so the conventional wisdom, if you watch the polls, is that Obama is +5 for the moment, and this despite a steady stream of bad news since the Democratic Convention gathered in non-union Charlotte, NC. The jobs report was horrible last week, and then the ambassador to Libya was murdered. Meanwhile there’s all the gossip about Bob Woodward’s new book concerning the debt-limit debate last year, in which Obama’s inner circle appears to be dysfunctional, arrogant, unable to rise to the occasion and so on (despite all the reporting at the time, which seemed to lay most of the budgetary difficulty at the feet of John Boehner and Eric Cantor). That Obama is up five in the polls seems rather amazing and has prompted a fair amount of grumbling among the pundits of the right. For example, George Will has opined that “if the Republican Party cannot win in this environment, it has to get out of politics and find another business.”

It is relatively satisfying to find George Will performing these contortions. It has to be said that he is right, up to a point; Romney is a weak candidate, it now appears, and it’s hard to imagine how he survived the nominating process. All he has going for him is the imprimatur of the establishment. Why the establishment has been willing to offer him the imprimatur is unfathomable. If Romney loses—though a lot could happen in the next seven weeks—it would seem to suggest that the centrist candidates in the Republican Party do not have much going for them. Can Marco Rubio do more to unite his party and lure independents from the center? One thing the Democratic Convention seemed to dramatize was masterful politics: global vision and partisanship and policy
in one person.

Too bad that person already has served two terms as president.

September 21, 2012

Here’s a recent Romney comment from Meet the Press, upon being asked to firm up some of his policy positions on taxation, etc. “The specifics are these which is those principles I described are the heart of my policy. And I’ve indicated as well that—that contrary to what the Democrats are saying, I’m not going to increase the tax burden on middle-income families. It would be absolutely wrong to do that.” I would like to concentrate on “The specifics are these which is those principles I described are the heart of my policy.” I have pasted this remark in from the transcript so that you can rely on the grammar of the quotation, which constitutes a grammatically complete thought from Mitt Romney. The putative subject of the sentence is “the specifics.” The verb, meanwhile, would seem to be “are,” but which “are” exactly is problematic. The “are” after “specifics” or the “are” after “described?” Should the sentence be “The specifics are those at the heart of my policy?” Specifics that he will not discuss? Or is the sentence, ideally, “The specifics are those which I have described?”

I like that the sentence, grammatically speaking, fuses these two potentially lucid sentences together into a rhetorical Frankendraft: “The specifics are these which is those ... .” In fact, the “these which is those” passage of the sentence is the most creative and imaginative here, nearly genius, since the absolute lack of clarity as regards “these” and “those” is matched by the “is/are” dustup. Is there a third sentence that begins to make itself felt toward the close? “Those principles are at the heart of my policy,” though the heart of his policy is so far unknown, and likely to be unknown indefinitely (as with the contents of his tax returns)? So there are three sentences, perhaps, being fused in some crazy pile-up of verb overuse, like one of those fifty-car wrecks in Marin County fog. “The specifics are those at the heart of my policy” collides with “The specifics are those which I have described” collides with “Those principles are at the heart of my policy,” giving us a tripartite subject, “The specifics are these which is those principles (I described are the heart of my policy)”—which seems to suggest that Romney believes he has specifics and that he believes that there is a “heart” to his policy, but as a practical matter he is neither willing to identify specifics nor principles, and if we are to conjecture as to to a submerged or subliminal motivation, he will do anything to use syntax to further the goal of concealing or failing to indicate the expressions of policy, at least in public. This week someone described Romney as the most secretive candidate since Nixon, and that sounds like punditry to me, but maybe there is something systemic here about Romney refusing to come right out and indicate how he might govern or who he is, at least when dealing with the electorate. The electorate, he seems to be saying again and again, cannot be trusted with the complete story.

The same impulse seems to operate in the Mother Jones video, picked up by the cable networks yesterday (though leaked months ago) and now disseminated widely in its horrid glory, in which Romney speaks off-the-cuff to some top-shelf donors in Florida about how forty-seven percent of the country pays no taxes etc. Leaving aside the madness of the claim and the fact that it is Romney himself who is keenest to avoid paying taxes—when it is obvious that the underclasses are heavily taxed at the payroll and on consumption and at the gasoline pump and so on, and when a great number of Republican voters enjoy government services too—what impresses me about the video is that Romney
appears to be trying to say to the rich folks in Florida exactly what he thinks they want to hear, some semi-digested Rush Limbaugh gruel, rather than what he actually thinks. It kind of leads one to surmise that the Etch A Sketch metaphor advanced some months ago by one of his campaign operatives is actually true, that what Romney stands for—beyond some Mormon goodwill and pull-yourself-up-by-the-boostraps stuff, along with perhaps 10 ccs of venture capital Cialis—is exactly nothing. There is no actual “heart of the policy,” which is why the “heart of the policy” sentence is so tortured. If there were, then there would be something to talk about.

However, I found the grandstanding reaction to the Boca Raton video distasteful. I actually agree that this is not dissimilar to Obama’s hot mic moment in 2008, during his Pennsylvania primary race against Hillary Clinton, about people clinging to guns and religion. My thinking is thus: There are these moments down the stretch of the campaigns when each side tries to catch the other off guard (e.g., Scott Brown attempting to make hay of Elizabeth Warren’s Native American ancestry in the Massachusetts Senate race); this is inevitable. Romney’s point of view in the Boca Raton video is wrong, indisputably, and considerably different from Obama’s Harvard-educated noblesse oblige nonsense about gun-fanatic racists in 2008. If Romney’s unscriptedness is like Obama’s, who cares? Romney is beatable on substance and you don’t need hidden camera moments. He can’t win on the merits because there are no merits, and instead of trying to catch Romney out, we ought to be addressing the policy strengths of the Democratic Party. That’s why Bill Clinton was so good at the convention—because he stood for some things and indicated what these things were.

October 4, 2012

My nephew Dylan is taking a course in computer graphics, and in the course of this class he recently mashed up a photo of Romney with the character called Gollum from Peter Jackson’s film spectacular The Lord of the Rings. The result is a rather terrifyingly appropriate image. I imagine that the images of Romney and Gollum were simply what Dylan had at hand in the course of his class; that is, I haven’t known him to take a strident political position on anything (he’s only fourteen). But I liked the picture so much that it got me thinking about Romney’s first debate performance, and the way in which his debate “victory” seems less “victorious” than we might expect.

As regards the debate, initially my metaphor was Samuel Beckett’s Happy Days, wherein Winnie, buried up to her waist in sand, embarks on her sunny and endless prattle, her relentless cheerfulness, which her husband cannot abide and to which he responds in monosyllables. From the outset of the debate, in which Romney joked about Obama spending his wedding anniversary with him, there was a kind of marital disgruntlement to the proceedings, and perhaps this was because of my casting Romney as Winnie, blathering on and on and on and on and on, interrupting everyone, speaking as though a factual responsibility of any kind were irrelevant. Indeed, at this point it should be obvious that Romney disdains factuality in his approach to campaigning for the simple reason that he will need to modify his policies on the fly. Romney’s pivot to the center in the debate was striking, and one wonders that his lips were not blue from the high speed. He basically sounded exactly like Obama on a number of the policy points but with a folksiness that was so Reaganesque I could almost hear those breathy, slightly senescent pauses that Reagan used to build into his remarks to simulate human warmth. Romney studied up and
we should accord him all respect for bothering to give the debate some effort. His opponent certainly did not. His opponent was hoping to appear presidential, and that was his only plan.

There’s something so easy to hate about Romney, with prolonged scrutiny, and I think my nephew’s Sméagol/Gollum comparison is relevant. Romney tries too hard in just the Sméagol way. (Spoiler alert: In The Two Towers film, Sméagol is trying to trust that Frodo and Sam might give a shit about him despite his fish reek, phlegmy throat-clearing, years underground. Sméagol tries to wheedle his way into their hobbity hearts, to loft himself above suspicion.) Despite his Eagle Scout vision of America, Romney must know that he’s a dissembler, that he has something of the Sméagol wheedling insistence. The rare portions of the debate when he was quiet, watching the president and sporting a condescending smile that he must have practiced with the coaching squad, made him look even more like Sméagol. His pinkish complexion, which I hitherto thought of as undeniably penile, has a sort of piscine Sméagol quality, as if Romney wants too badly to be highly thought-of, despite acting like a self-centered goon. And like Sméagol, who just as quickly reclaims Gollum if he thinks he’s not getting what he wants, Romney ultimately turns on anyone who does not appreciate his lofty status. The way Romney treated moderator Jim Lehrer (who should have known to expect it) was a good example: Romney regarded Lehrer as hired help. He didn’t care about any agreed-upon debate rules; this debate was supposed to build in a freewheeling quality, they say, which Romney exploited like it belonged to him alone. He got the last word on everything and came off like a rich, unappealing bully.

Obama deserved what he got. But that doesn’t mean that Romney doesn’t have the zombie covetousness of Sméagol/Gollum, chasing around the ring of power for a hundred years or so, venturing out of his redoubt only when his covetousness requires him to do so. Romney wants the ring that is on Obama’s finger, and Obama, a bit like Frodo, recognizes what a disastrous thing the ring is (even as he wants to hang onto it a little longer himself). It’s not enough that Romney has made hundreds of millions by firing people and selling off corporations as at a fire sale. It’s not enough that his father was governor of a state and ran a car company. It’s not enough that Romney is an eminent member of his faith. He wants more, because he wants the power.

Obama has a couple of weeks to get the debate business squared away. The polling numbers have narrowed. His normal approach is like the student who only gets around to writing the paper the night before it’s due, which he imagines he can pull off because of talent. Obama just doesn’t recognize a crisis until it’s threatening to singe him, and now he’s singed.

October 12, 2012

Not a train wreck at all, the vice presidential debate! Actually profoundly moving in some ways! Look, the general election phase of all this has been a disappointment. It has been a disappointment because there are no risks; the general election has been a monolithic slab of boredom. The Republican nominee is a tiresome person to watch, like church coffee hour. He’s like vintage wallpaper, an actuarial table or a program in basic accountancy. And there is no incentive for him to risk anything, especially while leading in the polls by a hair, as he is now.

Historically, I have found Joe Biden to be a blowhard. His lack of rhetorical control has not seemed earnest and genuine but reckless and unprincipled. Tonight I thought he was heroic. Bodybuilder Ryan isn’t capable of debating on a national stage and was used as fuel by Biden, who scored many of the points we would have liked
to see Obama score last week. It’s tempting to think of this night as a template for what Obama must do in the next debate; he can’t descend into the underworld as thoroughly as Biden did, with the mockery, the interrupting, the scorched-earth approach. It would be unpresidential. On the other hand Biden did a Biden version of what Romney did last week and made it even more frontally assaultive, and he took the night, whatever that means.

Romney is no more gifted a public speaker than Ryan is. He got by last week the way a Bible salesmen gets by in the first five minutes. It’s all charm offensive, and during the charm offensive you forget that a) you already have a Bible, b) you only like the King James Version, not the Good News Bible, c) you don’t go to church and don’t really need a Bible, d) they have Bibles in church so if you do go, you’ll have all the Bibles you need, e) you don’t allow salespeople into your home. Why are you listening to the Bible salesmen? The one with a dog strapped to the roof of his car.

October 20, 2012

When I last looked, Romney was up by seven according to the somewhat biased Gallup polling organization, and this has prompted on the left some hand-wringing that is the left-leaning equivalent of the outrage we heard a few weeks ago from the right when Romney was slipping further back. It seems obvious that only aggregated polling numbers will actually suggest what’s going on, and relying on one poll is like relying on one newspaper or one television network. Nevertheless a variety of polls continue to give Romney the edge, despite the fact that at the second presidential debate Romney looked like a member of the French aristocracy on the eve of the revolution, all haughty and irritable because things wouldn’t go his way. Romney again attempted to play to the middle by contradicting positions he took while catering to the primary audience, in a way that never would work for a Democratic candidate (think of John Kerry’s legislative vacillations and the central role that these played in the general election demagoguery of 2004). Indeed there has been much commenting this week (on even the right) that Romney’s lack of consistent vision of policy has now been built into the race. No one much cares. You can tell that this is the case because Romney and his surrogates have begun accusing Obama of having no clear agenda. Eventually Romney always accuses his foes of his own weaknesses.

Debate number two was a good night if you’re sympathetic to the Democratic party, though not an open-and-shut case. Obama is bad on the gun question, bad on the environment, timid on marriage equality. Why so quiet? Romney crashed around in the space of the debate like a mammoth, trying to inflict damage but mainly looking clumsy and half-hearted, as though someone tried to train the killer instinct into him but he slept through the lesson. As usual he modified a few positions on the spot (contraception!) that he will go on to unmodify in the coming days, and he made up some facts here and there to get through the night. If he has no policy and he looks like a mid-level French nobleman who just can’t believe that someone would seize his barouche-landau, then why is he up seven points (or four or two, depending on who you believe)? It happens I am in Ohio as I write these lines, was last night south of Cleveland in the so-called heartland, and the signs on the lawns were uniformly Romney-Ryan signs and that’s not to mention the signs for Senate candidate Josh Mandel. (Josh Mandel! This year’s Christine O’Donnell! Not only venal, lying, lazy, militaristic and narcissistic, but also profoundly stupid. The look in his eyes is the total absence of self-consciousness that I associate with a heavily drugged farm animal. We have not
seen the last of him.) As long as Romney imitates Reagan’s speech cadences, the benevolent papa subtext thereof, he is only going to accrue supporters regardless—apparently—of the fact that he is not going to do one thing at all that is actually good for the voters of the heartland. Not one thing. All of the little ranch houses out in rural Ohio I saw last night? Where people are hanging on by a thread? They want this.

Romney is going to begin the elimination of Medicare, he’s going to radically reduce Medicaid, he’s going to increase the budget deficit, he’s going to give tax breaks to corporations and the wealthy, he’s going to endanger America’s reputation abroad by failing to deal with the situation in Israel and Palestine, and he’s going to try to resolve the ensuing difficulties by spending excessive amounts on the military thus driving up the budget deficit, he’s going to gut regulatory programs of every kind that are the only thing between you and unchecked corporate malfeasance, especially in the case of banks and financial institutions, and he’s therefore going to befoul the environment, and while he’s at it he’s going to lay waste to the Supreme Court and institute a bunch of social programs that will make the Pre-Vatican II Catholic Church look mild by comparison, and he’s going to say it’s all about liberty. Under Romney, where you are born is where you’re stuck. You’re stuck working at Walgreens or the overnight shift cleaning offices or roofing or cutting rich people’s lawns. And he’s going to try to sell this as a moderate approach, at least for the next three weeks.

October 22, 2012

The third debate tonight. My feeling throughout is, Please make it stop.

October 31, 2012

A Halloween entry, which means that there’s a lot of death in the air. When I took my daughter down to the pizza emporium on Second Street, as we walked by all the brownstones with their fake spider webbing, and their effigies, their witches, she was badly spooked and said that we needed to look straight down at the sidewalk and not beside her in any way. Just look straight ahead, Papa. The superstorm called Sandy swept past on Monday, swamped the islands, erased the peninsulas, felled the oaks, set a few fires, flattened some houses, then moved on to Pennsylvania and then Ohio, and now the city is cooling its heels waiting for the transit system, waiting for the electrical grid to power. Inland Brooklyn passed without much difficulty (the lights flickered but never went down), and while Prospect Park is shuttered, it’s nothing like what’s happening in New Jersey or even downtown Manhattan.

Let’s not force the storm to serve as a metaphor. It’s tempting on Halloween and I’m sure there are persons of an evangelical persuasion who want to do exactly this: The storm is about the election, or the storm is about American tolerance for gay marriage, or about Obama’s socialism or what have you. But it’s just a storm. And how you respond to it indicates who you are. There have been notable signs of cooperation. New Jersey Governor Chris Christie was graceful about the federal government’s responsiveness, and Governor Cuomo of New York was graceful about county executives in New York State, regardless of party affiliation. This is as it should be. New York has a history of reaching through crisis to spaces where we realize that we are all from New York first. (And often I’ve felt that the events of 9/11 were those that most lastingly put New York City on the road to racial and political reconciliation. Those events were the beginning of the time in which we started thinking of ourselves as people from this
city before we were African, Asian, European, rich and poor.) The television programming from the cable side, where all is partisanship, has been hard to watch after the storm; I’m more interested in how all these pieces of a functioning New York City get put back together. We don’t care right now what political party people belong to.

Storms are one of the few things that absolutely happen to everyone present and alive at the same time. You can go to your particular church, teach your kids however you like, but you still have the same weather that I have, here in the tri-state area. The same hurricane harrows your flat. And all of the personal stories—like the two kids who got out of the car in Staten Island and were swept away—or the people who were at home in the house when the tree crushed the roof, the people of Queens whose homes burned to the ground, all the art careers lost in the rivers of Chelsea, those stories are human.

Which doesn’t mean that the voting isn’t going to be a little dicey on Tuesday. I’m voting upstate and on Monday night I’ll be driving out of town, as soon as I’m able, to get up there and cast my vote (if the power is on upstate, which is not guaranteed). I have considered the storm effects from a couple of angles: i.e., that the Northeast is a Democratic stronghold and therefore a storm-hobbled election is liable to affect Obama’s chances. Or: The Northeast is Democratic no matter what and therefore it makes no difference to the ultimate electoral totals if there are fewer voters in the Northeast, because the only state in the Northeast that is contested is New Hampshire, which has just four delegates in the electoral college, one more than the state of Wyoming.

Obama is out and about in helicopters, and on the phone with various governors, and this plays well at election time. Romney is shipping off canned goods to the Red Cross that the Red Cross does not want. In a way it’s all a relief from the daily poll-gazing and the dread that this election is not going to go how it appears like it’s going to go.

My cousin, who’s about to turn eighty-six, is in his apartment on Ninth Street in Manhattan without phone service and unable to do much for himself in terms of grocery shopping and so on. There are a great many friends of mine downtown in similar circumstances, all living by candlelight, trying to get up above Thirty-Fourth Street when they need food and then venturing back into the twilight of lower Manhattan, the traffic vortex, the gridlocked part of the h. This is civilization, this is things as they are, and it’s a whole lot worse and more complex than who runs the country, though who runs the country is important.

November 6, 2012

The election.

November 7, 2012

Let us consider, for a moment, the money spent on the election by Sheldon Adelson, casino magnate. Adelson gave several infusions to Newt Gingrich during the primary season, in installments of several million dollars each. Some portion of this money was spent on a documentary about Mitt Romney and Bain Capital which, arguably, helped weaken Romney for the general election. When Gingrich’s candidacy came to its end, Adelson donated to Romney. In this cycle his giving, to the tune of tens of millions, was uniformly to candidates who failed to register with the electorate. According to various reports Linda McMahon spent between $60 and $100 million dollars on her two senatorial races in Connecticut, and she did worse, on a percentage basis, in the second race (against Chris Murphy) than in the first.
(against Richard Blumenthal). Americans for Prosperity, controlled by two of the celebrated Koch brothers (David and Charles), gave a relatively modest $8.5 million to various candidates during the early part of 2011; in the general election the foundation announced it was spending $125 million to defeat Obama and Democratic candidates in congressional races. Failing to win the presidency and losing seats in the Senate, Americans for Prosperity heavily bankrolled Tea Party candidates who underperformed in the election. And then there’s Crossroads GPS. Founded by Karl Rove and Ed Gillespie, Crossroads spent between $70 million and $100 million, though if you include a host of related entities with slightly different names, the number is higher. This morning the New York Times estimates Rove’s spending across the board at $400 million. Rove’s explanation for how so much money was spent on such meager results is that otherwise Republicans would have fared even worse.

Each of the two presidential campaigns raised just over a billion dollars—three times the amount raised for the mid-terms in 2010, according to the Times. That’s before the unregulated money poured in, most of which went to advertising, until it was impossible to watch television in a swing state without feeling inundated. (The weekend before the election I was in DC, on the border of key battleground state Virginia, and can attest to this.) The primary beneficiary, therefore, of election spending would seem to be television stations, though I suppose there are collateral beneficiaries like ad agencies and makers of bunting and American flags (probably mostly produced in China), or auditoriums and stadiums who benefited from the space rental. Maybe security firms. We can’t raise money for extra polling stations in Ohio and Florida, but we can spend two billion on the advertising. By comparison, it’s worth noting that the 2011 contribution to public broadcasting in the U.S. was $450 million—so you could fund public broadcasting in this country for four years with the money spent on the campaign. All of this, the end of public funding for elections, the post-Citizens United flood of corporate capital into the election, indicates the degree to which the entire process is now controlled by the funding sources. You don’t think Sheldon Adelson would have required a quid pro quo for his tens of millions? He was pretty obvious about what he wanted (see his remarks on the Palestinian issue). The defeat of the Crossroads/Americans for Prosperity crowd is only temporary, because defeating them requires ramping up Democratic super PACs, not a solution that comforts.

If, like me, you have enjoyed watching the morning-after miseries of Limbaugh (It’s over, our country is over!), Coulter (There is no hope!), Palin (It’s a perplexing time for many of us now), this has to be tempered by the fact that without campaign finance reform, there’s an inevitability to the influence of money in American politics, and the situation is unlikely to change unless the chemistry of the Supreme Court changes, which will likely not happen unless the Democrats manage to elect another president after Barack Obama. Because the two oldest justices (Ginsburg and Breyer) were both nominated by Democratic presidents, and Obama will have his hands full just replacing them.

And the end of this story, for this diarist, goes like this. I was teaching in New Haven on the day of the election, and on the way home from New Haven to my house in Dutchess County, at about eleven o’clock at night, my girlfriend and I realized—when an ominous tone beeped in the car—that we didn’t have much gas in the tank. We’d been listening to the radio intently, to the results, and so we had forgotten about the gas. According to the dashboard, we had about twenty-five miles left in the tank and had just passed through Torrington, Connecticut,
and had about another fifteen or twenty miles to get home; I made a strategic decision to push on instead of turning back for Torrington, though it would have been the most practical thing to do. The GPS in the car indicated there was a filling station eight miles away, off Route 4. We headed through the dense forest of northwest Connecticut for the advertised gas station. (This was all happening, let it be said, in the aftermath of Sandy, when fuel shortages have not been unknown in the Northeast.) We got to the address in Cornwall only to find that, of course, the filling station was closed. We tried to find another on the GPS, but somehow the machine, through our programming negligence, took us back to the shuttered address in Cornwall in a horrible circle. All this while we watched the number on the dash get lower and lower until it said: five miles remaining in the tank. We picked a station in Sharon, got it programmed in the GPS and headed for it, even though it was almost nine miles away—this while the pundits on MSNBC were talking about when they would call the swing states. On the satellite radio. At some point, going over a mountain and putting the car in neutral while coasting, we hit zero on the tank. There is a kind of nobility in that zero! A total hopelessness that is somehow thrilling! Or so it seemed at the time. Now it is true that I drive a Prius and you can, allegedly, drive a Prius for a mile or two just on the hybrid system battery as long as you don’t go more than twelve miles an hour. And I also seemed to remember something about there being a little fuel left in the tank even when the indicator says empty. But that doesn’t mean I wasn’t feeling desperate in the wilds of northwest Connecticut, in the Mohawk State Forest, or the Housatonic State Forest, imagining my girlfriend and me trudging along the shoulder without a flashlight, trying to get to the mini-mart in Sharon which was itself closing at eleven o’clock. I swear to you that we drove with the car on zero for five miles, in the dark, in the forest, didn’t pass another car, coasting down all the hills, listening to Rachel Maddow promise Ohio any minute. At last, in the distance, we could see the mini-mart of Sharon, illuminated, which Laurel, my girlfriend, had been telephoning every few minutes, begging them to stay open even though it was after eleven. Never in my life has a rural, self-serve filling station that advertised ice cream sandwiches in the window seemed like such a welcoming and holy and American place. We gave the youngster with the Van Dyke beard at the register an extra five bucks for our gratitude. We ate ice cream sandwiches. How could we have come to this? How could we have assumed that we could make it home with so little fuel? Why didn’t we go back to Torrington? Why are these moments always in the wilderness?

It was between the mini-mart of Sharon, Connecticut, and home in Amenia, New York, that MSNBC called the results in Ohio.
It was an especially swollen and low-flying moon the night the island came in from out at sea, back in the Conquistador days, sliding along the ocean floor to lie latent under the bay for the first centuries of that coast city’s foul history, until Ken hauled it moaning and slapping through the water’s surface as if he were that strong, and maybe he is. It was the same moon when Ken finally came back to visit William and Ella on something like their honeymoon two decades later, both of them now grown out of their precarious childhoods, naked together for the first time since, in the cabin up on stilts.

Before this, Ken spent his days roaming. He roamed away from the interior, out of the pine forests and steep crags of the star-studded North where he too had been a baby swelling up in some dew-sheathed translucent pod. He left as soon as the dew melted and washed him clean of all that he had torn through in order to be born, a man of thirty, well-muscled and without scruple. He approached the edge where the continent was bounded by water and shredded into islands, ruled by impulses; it wasn’t his battle to oppose these impulses. Other men could stoop over and die inland and never find the one thing that could have made it all otherwise, but Ken was going to find it. In the North he made white fires and looked through them at what was earth today but tomorrow might be ocean and ice; he passed by in big trucks with thick treads, stopping at inns, drinking with Indians, conducting a sort of research no one could ask him about. He slept in straw beds and already dreamed of William who was still too unborn to reciprocate the dreaming, though Ken dreamed that he did.

Ken went down to the caves whenever he was stuck in transit between one town and the next. He used these northern years for practice; he wasn’t omnipotent, it took work to make himself into the man who one day would tear William away from greedy nowhere and own him. Talk to me, he said to the men in the caves on the continent’s northern edges. If you know something about the limits of my power, the terms of my longing, if you’ve seen or smelled it or heard it dripping, tell me. Soon I’ll tower so far above you that it’ll be too late to reach down and take what you have—you’ll have to keep it then, seething at you forever unconsummated.

He sped down the Great Trans-Continental Highway with his face against a cold window past the refineries and pits and the treatment and processing plants, some of them military, others corporate. Among them he caught glimpses of Ella, stumbling barefoot through scrap metal and snow, looking back at him as he passed.

In the South he got out of the last truck and brushed the crumbs from his lap. For a long time the idea he would have a child lay as dormant inside him as a child itself. All he needed now was Ella in the flesh, and the right place.
He had plenty of money, which he put toward plying and casing the continent's southern edge looking for the city of William's birth, with a bay capable of yielding up the island and the right kind of swamp from which Ella would emerge. Although Ken knew the island was waiting for him under the harbor of the city, he liked to think it followed him underwater like a giant idiot shark. When he found the city, he became known on the high terraces that looked out over the sweltering harbor, the lights of black skyscrapers reflecting over the black water and bobbing boats and stretching piers. Casinos, lounges, car lots, they all saw Ken in the decade before William's birth. He waded through long and stagnant days, went to a condo sales meeting, bought one and the wardrobe to go with it; he showered in light and floral evenings, and then took the shivery air-conditioned elevator to the rooftop lounge of the hotel across the street where he sat on the terrace in his usual seat and, ordering a long row of drinks, listened to the strains of whomever was singing in the open-sided indoor lounge. Some nights he stayed in his condo, his shirt unbuttoned and soaked with sweat like an unlit torch. Coiled, he was ready to grab William as he passed through the world.

Ken was sick with anticipation tonight, sad like a bachelor on the verge of marriage with half his life behind him. He pointed the remote control at the condo air-conditioner, then went back to the terrace bar. The singer moved silkenly through her set, most of her audience looking away onto the harbor. The decade was over, passed in waiting.

He sipped his last row of drinks, talking out the side of his mouth like a ventriloquist to another investment man, the other half of his mouth and mind free for the reverent silence this miracle evening required. The man asked how the food was, and Ken ordered two duck sauce glazed mahi-mahi burgers with grilled pineapple. As the two men finished their drinks, having fallen out of one another's attention with the dinner gone, the earth around them swelled and boiled. Into all of this came a glimpse of Ella, skirt held up in her hands, and shoes tied in a bundle around her neck as she hiked through the giant swamp inland from the city: he watches her, sump water up to her knees, bloodsuckers entwined in her toes as she looks to the light of the city through the smoke and the steam, hanged men and horse bones in the sagging trees and bushes. Deep cracks in the ground, cars sunk way in, a house here and there, the second or third floor level with the ground with a door made of windows to prove it. The spine of a train shaggy with bird nests, like a shipwreck down among the shrimp and anemone. Those birds always perched even this far out, watching the wake of mud close in behind Ella's approach.

The waitress comes to offer dessert in the hotel bar, the other man having since retreated to his room. She repeats her offer, and Ken has to let go of the swamp and Ella, whom his mind has been steadily creeping toward, almost into; he had left an unthinking hulk of Ken sitting in his place but now he creeps back, and once again the Ken in the bar can speak. It orders a trough of blackberry mousse, then pays and follows the businessman's path of retreat out of the glass head of the bar and into the hotel's cement shoulders.

Ken ducks into a bathroom on a high floor, into a private place, out of view. Like the caves that fray the edges of the continent, the bathroom is a hole that has nothing inside it but the person in there—so, for now, Ken is gone, no one in the universe knows where he is. Then he emerges from the bathroom soaked, shirt open, his chest streaming with water and soap. He can feel Ella approaching and he shivers: Does she know what I'm going to do to her? He can hardly believe that he cannot tell.

He stalks the hotel's long corridors like a man fresh from a swimming pool, clear-eyed and
purposeful, ears squeaky and popping. He finds a room and smashes his way in; like the caves with their cavemen, the rooms are filled with room-men curled in balls or sprawled out in the corners. Ken tears off the rest of his clothes and charges into the shower, punching the curtain like he expects it to shatter, and he sees William in the water crashing around him.

Out in the bay, the first yawn of bubbles as the island starts to break through.

Here Ken comes close to being a god. He opens his mouth to gargle and flares up with such a surge that he tears the showerhead off the tiled wall and walks naked back into the room carrying it, a torrent shooting through the bathroom door behind him. He falls to his knees in prayer, soaking the carpet. He tears up fistfuls of the green shag.

The moment is here. William has arrived, torn from the bosom of nowhere, licking the membrane and getting his first taste of the outside—like salt and oil, weeds and deodorant. He has made the journey this far inside Ella. She has carried him through the swamp to the coast in the same moment the island heaves through the bay becoming solid ground, drying fast. Crabs scuttle up from the shallows, past the caves onto the beach.

Ken strides out of the hotel lobby in his city clothes again. Out past the taxi rink the streets begin, and Ken hurries toward the appointed place where she’ll be. The streets turn filthy fast. Soon he has forgotten what sort of city this is, if there are rickshaws and elephants or signs pointing toward the convention center and the airport named after some goateed general who stepped in as president until cut down by his own bodyguards. Ken has forgotten if the food stalls, have hurricane-wrecked awnings or brick-shattered glass, if they’re on wheels or cinder blocks, if the language is Spanish or French or some screamed or whispered Creole. At one of those fly-studded yellow, burning-all-night food stalls, Ken ducks in and lands wetly behind a table. A dangling cord bites the wall. A grid of rice and noodle photographs flashes on, and a woman in a smock regards him from behind a podium. She takes up her notepad and walks toward the table, and behind her comes Ella, shoes down from around her neck and back on her feet, squishing with rotten water.

Ken waves the waitress away as he and Ella regard one another for the first time in person. Ken grips the edges of the table, Ella holds William inside. Ken’s hands snag on the staples under the plywood as he fights to keep himself in this moment and nowhere else, and she shudders at his pain; he lays his hands on his thighs under the table, letting his fingertips bleed into his white pants. They lean in to whisper; nothing of what they say escapes. They get up, leaving through the corridor behind the restaurant, ducking and hurrying through the low-hanging cardboard, tripping over nails, a mess of pipes and panes, pieces of gears and saw teeth holding the place together. Sleepers curl all along the way, gobs of men that don’t have rooms or holes in the ground or caves.

By the time they muck across to the outhouse perched out over the water, Ella is half out of her dress. Ken hoists open the wooden door and shoves her in. A sleeper opens one eye, a lone witness; the scene enters the hollow behind that eye and will stay locked in there, itself sleeping, with no way out and no reason to leave. Ken pulls the door shut and jams in a shard of wood to lock it. He can smell the water in Ella’s hair and the weeds that have tangled around her skin and the swamp insects, and the man and woman both can smell the hole in the floor open to the bay beneath, lapping around their toes.

When it’s over, the change has come. Blinking and sore, William extends his tongue into the night, reaching out for milk.
Ken stumbles out and regains his footing, upright again, pulling at his pants and shirt. He spits up little steaming piles by his feet, then he breathes in like he’s sucking the city into his gut, and starts scooping wet handfuls of material from his hair and reaches up his sleeves into his armpits, shucking off more of what clings to him, shaking his fingers to throw it at the ground.

Ella emerges a moment later, shaking. Almost no trace is left of the thing she was when she went in. Stripped of far more than her clothes, she vanishes before she turns a corner. The thoughts that came to her in the swamp come again, and she prays she was not wrong to have thought them. She is almost transparent, her skin and hair and gristle shaved off, leaving only a delicate shred of tissue around bone to mark the place, like a bookmark, where a person has been.

Ken wears her dress and shoes, smells himself to be her and feels his breasts heavy with her milk. He feels the trauma to his womb where the baby had been. He appears at the edge of baby William’s view, and the baby waits for its mother to sing. By the time Ken rocks the baby in his arms, humming two notes back and forth, they’re nestled in a rowboat crossing the bay. Three boatmen have arrived to row them over and back in the morning; culled from the wastes of the caves, heaped together with nothing to do but be here and row, the boatmen know the way to the island without being told, though this is their first trip. They look away while the baby sups and Ken looks back at the city, still ringing with the end of Ella.

In his filthy dress and algae-ringed shoes, he looks like some gypsy mother stealing her baby from the house of a belching husband whom she’s cracked open with a heavy pan, praying for passage across a one-way border. To the boatmen, he looks like nothing.

Disembarkation. The boatmen tip their passengers onto the shore and then row back into the bay where they fish with slack and unbaited lines.

The cabin on the island stands on stilts above the reeds, with a ladder that climbs onto a deck that encircles the interior. The only structure on the island, it was raised whole from underneath with a bed inside, freshly made.

How to cut through to right now, through the crackling nervousness—like lightning in another sky reflecting faintly onto this one—all the way to this actual first night that’s happening? Ken tries and tries, fingertips nearly splitting again with the effort; he wants to be genuinely here and nowhere else, neither before nor after, now that the approach is finished. He holds hard onto William between Ella’s breasts, so hard he almost crushes the child, and then he turns and exhales to purge the taste of fear. With William crushed down to the size of a spider, Ken could live out all that remained to him here in the cabin, feeling the night through the screen walls and listening to the waves, waiting for the stilts to snap at the knee or sink back into the earth. Or he could dig a furrow in his side with a pocketknife and plant William there, gather some thread and sew it into an ornate bow, button his Hawaiian shirt over it and take a taxi to the airport.

But he doesn’t. He lies awake as a bird passes overhead, a winged body with miles of fingers and veiny feet that flew over the landscape one dusty day before the city was here, before any of them were here, dropping from the sky the names William, Ella, Ken into a clearing in the center of the island where they dispersed. Now William sleeps like a drop of wine on his mother’s stomach and ribs, plumped with milk and air. Ken has taken all his clothes off but doesn’t touch or look at himself.

The sun comes up and he wraps the baby in cotton. They sit on the terrace looking at the island’s far side, facing the back of the world.

As long as he is still a baby, William will drink his mother’s milk. Ken will never eat or drink on the island. It’s a place of fasting, of indulgence.
in nothing but pure William. If he could refrain from breathing, he would, but he’s not a god. When morning is over he carries the baby back down the stairs, through the high vegetation and out to the shore where the boatmen wait.

The city comes into view as they round the island, growing as if for the first time. More boats rise from the water and there comes the smell of gasoline and the play of mid-morning sunlight in it. Now they part ways: Ken lives only in William’s nights; after that, William is placed in a basket among curtains with a fan blowing a breeze of lilacs and jasmine in a part of the city where no one will find him. Ken melds back among the mirage shards dividing one cement tower from the next. His day widens until its extent exceeds the horizon, a slop bucket of boredom sloshing over the side; he crosses a gravel park with backhoes and tractors behind a roped-off center, has coffee and eggs at a café with a sandy cement floor and no light but an open window. Some men who spent the night here are here still. Jittering with hunger after the fast, Ken orders plate after plate through the languid breakfast hours. None of you know what I did last night, he thinks.

Back in his condo the day is spent in beer and television, snacks from jars with screw tops, checking email. He thinks of calling Ella, wakes from his nap on the couch. Around five he rubs oil into his hair and goes out to walk the streets, looking for an open-faced bar where he can stand and eat meat on a skewer with cilantro and drink salt and lime, smell the perfume of women and the sweat underneath.

So passes the first decade of William’s life. As he gets bigger, their nights in that bed on stilts close in until nothing in the cabin is left but the bed itself and the two of them in it. Coursing with electricity through the nights in a fanged and winged fit, threatening and haunting himself to hold nothing back, Ken never stops dipping the boy in and out of life like a teabag. The random matter that makes up the boatmen shifts slowly, from day to day they’re not the same. Their heads stay the same size while their faces get smaller. There may come a day when their necks support nothing but a single point in the center of a tan desert, and then they’ll be reset.

William has eyes and an expression now. As he looks over the edge of the boat a hurt hangs from him and flutters in the wind but doesn’t blow away. Ken still has breakfast at the gravel café, with the backhoe and tractor, then he hangs what he’s taken from Ella in his condo closet, dripping unused milk in a dot or two on the floor.

The first ending.

All along there have been others in the city as invisible to Ken among the buildings as he was to them, who, like Ken, aren’t blind or deaf. They can hear and see the same things he can but without the same head start and without the same heart, or they hadn’t the same heart in it at the beginning but now do. A few years of invisibility is all you get, they would have told Ken had he asked.

When they began to swarm in, clambering up the cabin’s stilts, pushing nearer to the decade of nights inside, Ken fell down a chute, landed hard on the bottom. It was worse than if he’d been caught and taken to jail and forced to meet himself there in the body of another man and submit to that man for the rest of his life. None of you know what I did last night, he thinks again, and knows it not to be true.

Milk is on the floor of his condo closet when the police come. The rest of Ella is gone, a green and a purple polo shirt and a few striped ties in her place. Ken imagines what he wore of her walking off on its own feet, thin as stocking soles, past the cruisers idling outside. Broken but alive, he feels William pounding in his heart, eating like a
termite through his ribs; he knows William hasn’t left the city and thinks, He is doing this to me.

Now at the bottom of the place where he’s fallen, Ken lies in a bath of tremendous pain with nothing but a tiny remembered point of light far overhead to mark where he’s fallen from. He orders takeout and has it left outside the door, the money weighted down with a chip of concrete; he thinks back on how the island rose, fell and will rise again into a purged world. Torturing himself he replays the scene of the island’s fall. Fleets of ferries slice the skin of the ocean into feathery rags. The city empties out and fills the other place across the bay. Every morning he pulls his shirt up and checks his sides, praying he really did cut into himself to plant the baby there when he had the chance.

More drippings and cinders fall from the past. I’m too weak to climb out, lulled by the warmth and the past’s rank carnal odor—but I won’t always be. Ken calls back his old ravenous want and forgets everything else. He is once again at the beginning, looking only upward, forward, wanting.

This is the decade of William’s adolescence, ten to twenty. The decade of the surge in tourism when the island fast becomes the centerpiece of the city and the city inks itself onto maps that until now have elided it. Casinos and resorts rise on the island at the speed of thought; visitors come all the way from Asia; work crews dig canals for a theme-Venice and build a handsome colonial cathedral almost overnight. A viral explosion of boats, ferries now with heavy engines driven by simple paid strangers: the boatmen knock around the caves with their penciled-in faces kicking at the fossils of their friends. Their oars lie clattered in corners.

In the early days of this decade, crowds waited at the ferry docks for standby tickets, but even they’re all gone now; those few who remain in the city ride heat waves onto other heat waves. My parents were killed in a boat accident and now I’m an orphan, William reminds himself some afternoons, taking pleasure in half believing it. He walks the city looking for Ella (even if he doesn’t quite know it yet), dragging tatters of Ken behind him or inside, down the central interior like streamers in a doorway through which a constant breeze blows. He sits on the pier and thinks and hums, clicking his ankles in rudimentary rhythm, trying to drum up some spirit in himself now that Ken’s want is not there night after night. He finds a chair on the sidewalk and brings it back to the place among the curtains where he spends his nights; he sits and thinks about what kind of business he might go into, now that he’s almost a man. He tries to learn some calculus just by imagining it and finds strength in the thought that he’s survived something that someone weaker would not have.

He finds a cell phone on a bench, its chip still loaded with minutes, and calls some of the numbers on flyers still strewn around the city, hanging up when the answering machine stops talking. The row of skyscrapers spreads along the coastline. Some nights William thinks of walking out to the airport with pocketfuls of money, but the thing in his past grows into an animal with a raspy bark, calling out to its own kind, the pack it’s been separated from, and soon the pack, out in the northern wild, turns and hears.

Ella isn’t gone either. Something like what she had prayed for in the swamp came true. After all that Ken took from her in the outhouse, she was left no choice but to grow up again; in this way she and William were born on the same night and today are the same age. Ken shaved those years off her like fuzzy mold and now she’s boring her way anew toward life’s soft middle, dusting off skin that she finds lying around, carefully recomposing herself. In this current run of teenage years she’s developed an interest in the Creole they speak on the island; in a mall bookstore she finds a grammar school primer and spends her afternoons on a bench scratching salt mosaics off the pages and underlining the most difficult sentences. She reads them aloud in as wide a range of accents as she can muster, trying to catch in her own voice a hint of how these words actually sound.
In the great absence Ella and William each roam the city. They eat at restaurants that cost almost nothing, with one waitress and one cook and an inked-out crust of a menu. Each shines with bruises, burns and itches; some mornings when she wakes, Ella’s skin hangs askance, soapy water from the bath seeping under and then steaming out of her as the day burns on. The nearly empty restaurants close one by one; seen from above the power grid shuts down, isolating the few illuminated squares toward the center until there’s only one. In the very last restaurant are two meals left, no condiments. Except for the waitress and those skulking down alleyways, wasting away into fish bones and hair, William and Ella are the only two left in the city; they order the last two meals, look at one another, then turn away as Ken rises in their eyes like cataracts.

William breathes steadily, counting back and forth between three and seven, remembering his calculus and holding the edges of his chair, feeling the staples on the underside open his fingertips. Ella orders some sweet milk in a warm jar. When lunch is over they leave the restaurant and, for the moment, the lurking implication of Ken; they’re inside a new thing together, off on a walk through remnants of a park, a churchyard, a cemetery left over from the long ago Inquisition, a garden still flush with lilac and jasmine. They talk lightly, a certain lilt to their step. William keeps his fingertips in his pockets until they scar over, then takes Ella’s hand.

They climb a hill and sit on a rock wall, looking down at the harbor. They see themselves from space, frozen in a photograph, and it may still be their first day together, or else they’ve already done the work of blending together a spate of such days and they’re on their way toward some place further. By early evening they clamber down to the beach, each slipping once and caught by the other. The city’s old casinos and hotels are abandoned, most of their stock boxed up and sent over to the island; the young man and woman break into one and find a few cases of beer and some cigars and matches and pretzels under the bar counter, and haul them down the stairs past a dry fountain out to the beach. Now for a toast, Ella says. She offers, in her chosen accent, the traditional Creole for good health. William flinches, and she promises never to speak this language again. They share their first kiss, speaking just enough, Ella scratching her skin pretending it’s sunburned.

Day by day William works to reseal his body in its finger-split places, hoping that in time the seals will hold. He warns Ella that he may have to leave at the end of the summer to go to college. When they meet after sundown they dismiss the moments when Ken wells up as a necessary sadness. One evening as they sit on their usual part of the beach sharing a box of raisins, the distance begins to approach; at first it looks like a single figure, a stumbling lurker, but as it draws near it splits in three with the crash of a wave. In open shirts the three boatmen come down the beach dragging their boat, oars secured under the seats. Before the lovers, their presence says, Tonight takes place on the island.

Back at sea now, in the hands of the boatmen who can do nothing but row, William lies back on a pile of netting and rope and Ella lies between his legs. No matter what, he’ll insist this is his first time on the island, and she’ll insist the same. Though the journey takes a ferry only an hour, the boat won’t get there until midnight, passing coves and caves, noble slick rocks and panes of fog. William can feel the small circle of his life closing. When he wiggles free from the feeling, away from the low moon over the harbor, with a jolt Ella looks up from where she’s nestled; she kisses his elbow and sees the moon, then turns away as well.

Disembarkation. William and Ella walk toward the path that splits through the underbrush and leads to the ladder that climbs the stilts. They cross the bushes that conceal the cabin
from the beach, pausing at the bottom; either this pause constitutes the ceremony of return, or they've skipped the ceremony. Up the ladder, across the porch, to the door: they're inside and the whole great openness of the bay is closed. The birds whose wings are almost translucent in the moonlight stretch a giant tarp in their beaks taut over the open water. Ella and William settle in, pushing past the smell of recent occupancy. The insects keep their distance, sated with other blood.

They're shy now, side by side. William lights two leftover candles, dust caught in the melted and redried wax. He would have lit more had there been more. He finds a box of condoms with instructions written in the island Creole, a twenty-eight-letter alphabet; back on the bed, lying on the sheets, each moves a few fingers toward the other, touching the other’s shirt or waist of the other’s pants, a flannel of belt. Ella rolls into a shape that fits into a crook in William, and he opens to accept more of her. After an idyll he reaches around and lifts her shirt, and she guides his hand to undo the metal button of her jeans, fits two of his fingers into a shape that can unzip her fly. He exhales into her ear, and it goes through her head and out her mouth. The chamber shrinks around them as they move together; Ella whispers something back in William’s ear, feeling in her the power to turn the moment in any direction. Running her hands over William’s soaked shoulder blades, she feels herself stirring Ken’s great melted pool, clumps of wax cooling on her singed fingers.

Breaking through on giant feet, breathing smoke around chiseled monster teeth, those fingers grafted now onto Ken’s hands stretch out miles ahead of him. Trees rushing under his feet, Ken pulls mist and weed tendrils from his face and throws his fingers into the sky like cracks of lightning. William holds Ella in his arms, running his tongue along the side of her neck and under her ears, choking on old slivers within this new taste of the other person; he tongues the slits where her skin is still loose and fragile and almost remembers the milk he drank in this cabin.

Ken grows close. The island is scraped clean. Old jet-black things pile back up where the casinos and tiki lounges and snorkel lessons had their brief moment. The gondolas from the Venetian canals are sucked off the coast and buried in the ocean floor. William remembers the taste of the milk; it makes him strong. He can choke Ella, turn her upside down and force her head down off the bed onto the floor, and tear an extra hole in her and drain Ken out like a cyst. They almost can’t breathe now so tight is the chamber. Both have sweat in their eyes, the shocking blue, the surge and spark that could close the gap and activate the circuit once and for all. Ken follows the path that loops between them, scrambling through heat and wet, slipping and falling back down, hoisting himself up. William’s fingers flex hard around Ella. Ella’s teeth graze and nick his earlobes and collarbone. “Did you hear something?” she whispers, cooling the moment from its boil, rolling away from William, pushing back the body bag until it hangs slack near the ceiling punctuated with a few dead wasps floating in a vein of condensation.

Now they’re cold and naked, side by side, and there’s another rattle on the door. “Yeah,” whispers William, “that time I heard it.” The condom is greasy and stale; he reaches down to scratch it, and there comes another knock. Ella takes a pillow and covers her breasts. “There’s something I have to tell you,” says one to the other. The knocking continues, mustering their thoughts into a march.

Fluttering, whooshing, humming, like a horde of bats or owls racing toward the roof, and footsteps coming through the trees. All at once Ella starts to giggle so loudly it swallows the knocking, and then she giggles with the sound of having swallowed it, close to choking; she stands on the bed above William naked and shrinks him back to the speck he was when Ken first brought him. Her voice throws itself up the ladder of octaves.
skittering among the notes of an alien scale, Creole hissing out, spiking up into song then down into a roar, words a hundred syllables long and then some so short they drop straight off into grunted breath. She jumps from the bed and charges toward the door, about to burst through and leap over the edge and furiously through the trees, waking the snakes and the lizards and mustering them into the unvisited clearing at the center that was there even when the island was sunken, before Ken, when other people lived here.

She stops. The spirit is gone from her again. She makes a sound in Ken’s voice, something like “Uhh” and collapses on the bed sideways across William, hosing him with her eyes. “I’m so sorry,” she sobs into him, “it almost—”

William lies very still. His body tingles in all its small places, beginning to open up again. He can see the clearing, too, and knows morning won’t come until they go there, whether they leave now or wait in this bed another decade; he wants to look in Ella’s eyes and say, “Remember, it’s the two of us against him.” But he sees nothing but Ken.

“It will never be the two of us against anything. There will be no conflict, William. There will be no quarrel.”

“Don’t ever abandon me,” he begs.

“I won’t ever,” Ken says, reaching out one of Ella’s hands to stroke William’s hair.

RYAN E. YOUNG
Spiraling up into the sky was something we were never good at. Rolling into stupid cocoons, breathing air we were better at but breathing air was boring, still is.

The Unabomber lived in a pimped-out shack in the woods and we could too. And by “we,” I mean me, not you.

A hundred years ago I thought we’d never be greedy. When XY opened the tuna fish can and said you were inside it, hit your heart with the cactus I never thought we’d be selfish. Hands filled with sand and ocean and girls’ names that sound like the sea. I say, “What’s for dessert?” with a shit-eating grin and you say, “something blue.” You think you have to build your life on the exact patch of ground where the stork or the bomb landed you. I know you do.
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