Humors

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Abstract

During my four years at HMS, I wrote, edited, and iterated a fairly steady stream of fiction. Mostly I write short stories, but I have made a few attempts at novels, and, recently, a novella about an old state hospital in northern Maine. I occasionally write nonfiction. In general my work is realistic, literary fiction. Sometimes it includes elements of magical realism. It is often, though not always, about people whose lives are touched in different ways by disease, medicine, illness, and healing.

I write about hospitals, first, I believe, because as a writer I am something of a magpie. I borrow from my own experience and the world of anecdote around me all nature of moving or funny or shining things. Second, I write about hospitals—about the intersection of care and capitalism—medical debt, cadaveric donation—about belief systems that abut, support, or undermine the narrative of progress and science—histories of humors and faith healing—about the psychology of striving and control and total lack of control that feels, sometimes, like a molten core of medical training—in some part to process my own experience of professional becoming. Thus creative writing serves a self-care or therapeutic function.

But I also write (usually) with an eye toward publication. I believe that fiction is a kind of inter-subjective experiment, that it can shed light in dark places, can help us understand in new ways some of the systems—systems of power, of language, of money, of expectation and belief—within which we operate.

I will argue, and believe, that reading and writing fiction makes me a more curious, compassionate human, a more flexible thinker, and a more effective physician-in-training. I will not, however, argue for any kind of general prescription. What is enriching and enlivening for me may not work for somebody else (and vice versa). Play with language and narrative is only one of the many ways that we have of making sense of complexity. I will argue that we, as physicians and as humans, need

to keep open the roads, the highways and byways, whatever they might be, by which we access our creative, critical, and emotional lives. Neither writing nor physicianhood is privileged in this frame; I will argue a general case for play.

Introduction

I have found many ways to contrast medicine and fiction. Medicine is about facts; fiction is about past counterfactual, future hypothetical, and everything that swirls about the edges of that which is solid and real. Fiction unfolds in a world of language and absence; medicine takes place on the plane of urgently present bodies. Medicine is about doing, fiction—to adulterate a line from Auden—does nothing.[1] And yet, like warp and weft, the orthogonal practices are intertwined.

It seems to me that both fiction and medicine turn on empathic curiosity. Though there are important differences between the structure of entertainment and the structure of healing (which involves both imagining *and responding to* real and present suffering), the one provides practice for, relief from, and grounding in the other.

Contemporary voices within medicine calling for more educational experiences in the medical humanities for physicians in training often frame their arguments in instrumental and quantitative terms. Rita Charon at Columbia has been a leader in bringing attention to the role of narrative in clinical practice and in arguing for the integration of close reading into medical training on the grounds that narrative training deepens attention to and affiliation with patients, colleagues, and the self. (Charon et al 2016) Others have argued that the clinical situation is both rational and interpretive, involves partial certainty but also fundamental uncertainty, and that interpretive disciplines should, therefore, be integrated into medical training. (Chiavoroli 2017) Efforts to study impact on clinical performance include mixed methods assessment on the effect of reading fiction and nonfiction on clinical reasoning, and on the effect of creative writing on communication, collaboration,

[1] Poetry makes nothing happen. It survives/ In the valley of its making where executives/ Would never want to tamper, flows on south/ From ranches of isolation and the busy griefs/ Raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives/ A way of happening, a mouth. From "In Memory of WB Yeats."

and professionalism. (Kiran et al 2016; Arntfield SL et al 2013) Sample sizes are small, and outcomes are arguably vague, but participants from the studies cited seem at least to rate these literary interventions as valuable to their own growth as clinicians.

These arguments call to mind Elaine Scarry's more general and more philosophical defense of the value of beauty. Scarry, in *On Beauty and Being Just,* argues that perceiving and imitating beauty (perception and imitation being different phases of the same moon, the one action following from and leading to the other) renders us more empathic and more just. The perception of beauty (her examples of beautiful objects include gardens, persons, arguments, and the sky) renders us more attuned to something shared across individuals democratically (for others, too must perceive this beauty in the sky) but which elevates us all. This consciousness of a shared better nature makes us more ethical actors in the world. (Scarry 1999)

I would frame these conversations about the instrumental value of art within a larger, historical discourse about the relationship between work and play. Work and play might be said to participate in a dialectic; the two concepts are opposed, in tension, and are defined by the exclusion of the other, thus presuppose and depend on the other for meaning. [2] And the one is constantly erupting into the field of the opposite. For Karl Marx, the essential modern theorist of work, work is arena in which we express our creative potential. He dreamt of a future in which "It's possible…to hunt in the morning, to fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner." (Marx 1845) What is interesting is that work is not drudgery: it is intrinsically pleasurable, and it varies. Johan Huizinga, the Dutch cultural historian and philosopher of play, observes in play five characteristics: play is free; play is not "ordinary" or "real" life; play is apart from "real" life in time and space; play creates order; and play is connected to no material interest, no profit or gain. The final characteristic is essentially the condition of non-work. And yet Huizinga

[2] The presocratic philosophers called this the unity of opposites (Heraclitis); the neoplatanists called it coincidentia oppositorum.

goes on, in his wonderful book on play in culture, *Homo Ludens,* to find elements of play in the courtroom, on the battlefield, and in politics (as well as in philosophy, music, and verbal arts). (Huizinga 1938) What of the hospital? I cannot help but wonder. In medicine, too, we engage with acts of theater and cultural making. In both Marx's vision of work and Huizinga's vision of play the plodding and the soaring, the banal and the beautiful are fundamentally interdependent. And the good life, to circle back to an older philosophy, involves a measure of each.

I have argued that work and play are conceptually interdependent. I will now posit that they are functionally interdependent as well; I will argue that play serves work just as work serves play. First, survival is a condition of all other activities; therefore work provides food for play—literally. Second, much cultural making takes as its material that which we encounter in "real life," and takes as its means techniques and exigencies borrowed from the world of work that bounds the world of play. So a bus driver might paint portraits of his passengers or highways, and a secretary of state might apply the disciplines (desperation?) of work to her piano playing.[3] Thus work provides food for play also in a figurative way. Play serves work in ways that we remember from our school days (the irritability of children before recess) and intuit from our productive, grown up Mondays. Our bus driver might take more pleasure in his job if his creative life drives along next to him, in a parallel lane. He might take more interest in his passengers if they are also subjects, might have more patience for their foibles and eccentricities. He might have more attention for the road if he has practiced seeing through painting. This is essentially Charon's argument about medical students and writing. I would argue, further, that if work and play are both essential to our nature, both are necessary but neither sufficient for stepping into our full selves.

For me, fiction is an escape from medical learning and practice. At the same time, reading and writing fiction remind me why I choose medicine, and why I continue to

[3] Condoleezza Rice is an accomplished pianist

choose it each day. It is a root system, a point of access (the most direct that I have discovered, though it certainly need not be so for everyone) to my deepest commitments, to my belief in my own and other's humanity. It is something like Elaine Scarry's sky. And although fiction and medicine involve different ends and different means, there are important common themes—the work of stringing together of details into narrative, an openness to receiving stories, to refining and revising them, an attempt to make sense of suffering, and a special place for empathy—and in each there is brightness where they overlap.

Contents

Student Role

I wrote fiction. Sometimes I sent friends, mentors, and colleagues pieces to read. I am lucky to have an informal circle of people with whom I have participated in writing workshops in the past who continue to exchange stories and feedback, and I am lucky to have enjoyed the generous mentorship of Bret Johnston in the English Department as well as Andrea Schwartz and Rafael Campo on the medical side.

Methods

I do a lot of editing. Sometimes I work on one piece intensely, iteratively for a time. Sometimes I put things aside for months or years and come back to them later. Sometimes I submit pieces to journals or magazines. (Admittedly, I would like to try to do more of this). One piece in this collection, "Blood," was previously published in *Hello Mr.*

Results

A sample of my work is appended. I am submitting a group of stories that I am most pleased with, as well as the first chapter of a novella, and one essay.

In the first two years of medical school, a lot of the fiction I wrote was about medicine within the commodity system. The commodity system is the system of making things the same, fungible, perfectly replaceable, infinitely replaced. One dollar is the same as another dollar. An iphone can be exchanged. There is, between and across people, a uniformity that makes medicine possible (my insulin works pretty much like anyone else's insulin), but also exceptions, common and uncommon variants, and the profound and irreducible uniqueness of the inner lives of private human beings. There is a way in which healthcare and art-making both fit uncomfortably within, or just at the edges of capitalism (the modern means of organizing commodities, and, arguably, the apotheosis of commodity systems), the

one because it is so necessary and the other because it is so unnecessary. Medicine is resistant to capitalism because we feel, intuitively, that there is some sense in which it is a right; that it cannot be bought because it is fundamentally owed. We enact this intuition in Good Samaritan laws and Emergency Medical Treatment and Active Labor rules. Art is resistant to capitalism because its use value so questionable, so pale, so brittle, as evidence by the plaintive tone of some of the above summarized arguments.[4]

My SIM project, which I completed the summer after my first year, was titled Circulation. It was a collection of short stories about the flow of persons and objects around a clinic and a city (based loosely on a clinic where I worked in Milwaukee)—about the exchange, the anonymity, and the intimacy in medicine. I was trying, I think, to sort out something about caring and caregiving, about the knowing of humans (inside and out) and about the imagining.

Some of these themes remained present for me as I proceeded through medical school, but I increasingly found myself writing about meaning or lack of meaning in the body. In previous generations, in both Eastern and Greek medical traditions, systems of correspondence governed the way that people understood the body within the universe, with seasons, elements, and organs all folded into analogy with one another. We still, I think, depend on certain systems of correspondence, some vestiges of these other sciences, some artifacts of language and intuition. The heart, for example, remains a multivalent organ. The body is not washed clean of meaning in biomedicine. How we talk about obesity has something to do with how we think

[4] Art is also resistant to capitalism because of the complex tension with which it pulls against commodity; the ways in which the work of art is understood as singular and "invaluable." For a more sophisticated treatment of this idea, see, for example, Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

about sloth and sin. How we think about breastfeeding has something to do with how we regulate women's roles in the workforce and the home.[5]

In third and fourth year, immersed in the world of the hospital, I increasingly found myself writing about people going through or reflecting on medical training. Having decided to apply in psychiatry, I also found myself writing more about that tradition, its tensions and fault lines. In the fall of my fourth year, I spent a month working with a family doctor at a homeless shelter in Bangor, Maine. I lived in a kind of boarding house that month, in the shadow of an almost empty state hospital. It was clear to me that many of the people I met in the shelter, people who had met big foot, people who believed they were big foot, people who had spent decades camping in the Maine woods, who had carried heavy traumas across generations, forced into geographical and social margins, people struggling with addiction, people who were just plain tired, dispossessed and defeated, others who believed they were on special missions from God, might a half century before have occupied the empty hospital on the hill. Neither model (commitment or general vulnerability to homelessness and incarceration) is unobjectionable, but processing the experience of working in the shelter and researching the history of that hospital (the past is a land of familiarity and stunning strangeness) I unearthed material that turned into a short novel in my fourth year.

[5] For a fuller theoretical treatment of these concepts, see for example, Shigehisa Kuriyama's *The Expressiveness of the Body* or Anne Herrington's *Mind Body Medicine*.

Discussion

Reading and writing fiction has been valuable for me as a developing physician in all of the ways I described above. Fiction is a space for sorting experience, for grounding me in my commitments, for honing certain kinds of attention, for connecting with my patients, and for holding joy.

I am limited by my own horizons of talent, work ethic, and time. I am a little bit shy about finishing pieces—really finishing them—and trying to get them published in journals or magazines. In terms of direction for future work, I hope to make more concerted efforts at publication in the coming months and years. I think that I have room to grow in terms of standing by my stories and trying to launch them into the world.

In conclusion, I have found it well worth protecting the time and vulnerability necessary to maintain a practice of fiction writing alongside of medical education. I hope to continue to write in one form or another in residency and future phases of my career. I would also like to support others who write, paint, dance, imagine, and otherwise play alongside the hard work of trying to make positive change in the world.

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I. Blood

From *Circulation*

Benny started in November. He did outreach at the bars, a little testing down in the HIV basement, and, when Jose was gone, a little education. No one did education like Jose—wagging his finger and hips, insisting that people try the watermelon flavored lube. We had these stacked bins of condoms, big ones, little ones, ribbed ones, etc., and the highest bin was full of lube, which no one took. The WIC ladies were especially embarrassed about it. Giggling in pairs or groups of three, they would come downstairs on Friday afternoons, pretending they were sneaking away to buy candy bars from the vending machines, and drop free condoms into their bags. If Jose caught them he would insist everyone try a new flavor condom and slip lube into their purses too.

The WIC ladies were always trying to loose weight. They came in all shapes and sizes, but young, mostly, and good-natured. At lunch they would change into yoga pants and do Zumba in the vaults. Our building used to be a bank, when the neighborhood was different, and the WIC waiting room was the old lobby, with high ceilings and elaborate plaster. One time a robber tried to hold them up, and they said, sorry, we only have food stamps.

Sometimes a baby would get loose and find his way to the basement, and I would have to walk him back to the lobby calling in Spanish and English, Carlos' mother, is Carlos' mother here? To be on WIC you had to either be pregnant or have little kids, so the lobby was full of tiny babies in basinets, and wild toddlers, and mamas with bellies like basketballs, easing themselves in and out of the metal folding chairs.

The whole point was to give women more food so they could have more babies, or healthier babies, anyway. There was something wonderfully subversive, I always thought, about the ladies who worked there sneaking down to the basement to

collect free contraception. Even though they weren't really our target demographic we thought they were fun.

It turned out that Benny was pretty good with the WIC ladies. He was tall and broad shouldered and not clearly gay. Is Benny around? They would ask. Except for the one-armed security guard, Castro, there were not a lot of men around. Do you think he's…you know, they would ask me. I would shrug. Is he Native American, they would say? He has those cheekbones.

I was living with my mother then, in the house where I grew up, just a few blocks from the old bank. We had several cats and a pit bull, Jane, who was afraid of the cats, and some gold fish, a seagull, and a Venus fly trap. I kept telling my mother that the seagull, which she had found injured in a nearby park, carried disease, but she refused to free it back into the light industrial landscape that was its natural home. (Seagulls love one story warehouses and machine parts factories and old railroad beds.) The bird just lived in one of the bedrooms and pooped all over the carpet. We kept the door closed.

My job was the needle exchange. I wrote the grants for it, and I sat in the half-door and traded paper bags full of clean needles for paper bags full of dirty ones on Monday and Tuesday afternoons. We had one of those old fashioned doors that you could open just the top of. We used to let people into the office area, with the testing rooms and counseling rooms, and a hallway where the maintenance people had sinks, and farther on some bathrooms and the vaults, but then we had people shooting up all over the basement. So we started using the half-door, which worked, except that sometimes people would come in, get clean needles, and then climb up on top of the vending machines in the stairwell and use that space, not actually hidden, but more or less out of view, to tie off and shoot up.

The WIC ladies didn't like to come downstairs on Mondays and Tuesdays, which were the only days when needle exchange was technically allowed. They made

Castro walk them down to the vending machines to buy their chocolate bars, just in case there was someone on top of them.

That winter someone had started giving needles out to people on other days of the week. I thought it was Benny. I understood the impulse—if they walk through our doors isn't it better to give them clean needles when you can?—but it was a mouse & cookie problem. Even if you told people only this once, they came back, Thursday, Friday, Saturday when the whole building was closed. Because the junkies scared the WIC ladies and liked to shoot up in their cars, Castro didn't like the needle exchange. And because they didn't like drugs, the police didn't like us either. So lots of people were mad that we had accidentally expanded the program to all the days.

I knew most of the people who came in by name, though some preferred to remain anonymous, understandably. I saw them often, and I had visited some of the places where they lived. I pleaded with them to stop coming on Thursday mornings. Thursday mornings were breastfeeding classes upstairs. Everyone's nursing bra was in a bundle. But they didn't listen to me. I guess I was glad they weren't using dirty needles, and I understood—when you need a hit you need a hit, but I was mad at the new guy, whom I blamed.

Because the building used to be a bank, there were vaults in the basement, metal rooms with heavy, three-foot thick doors. Some of these vaults we used for storage—boxes full of testing materials and multicolored condoms and fake didactic boobs (velveteen like teddy bears—the boobs also came in all colors) for the WIC ladies upstairs. Some of them we used for conference rooms. When you started work in the building, the HR people gave a stern warning about the vaults. Never, never, never close the door. They were unheated and poorly ventilated, and walls were three feet thick so you couldn't get cell phone reception or the internet. The concern was that someone who locked himself in a vault on Friday afternoon might shiver there alone until Monday.

One afternoon in early December, the day after a big snowstorm, where all the snow had melted and refrozen, shinny and solid, overnight, Benny asked me to meet with him in the front vault. He had an idea about needle exchange. Why don't we just do it every day? He asked. We can't afford a security guard every day of the week. Hmm, he said. I'm going to give blood tonight. Do you want to come?

This was a weird proposition. In most contexts I don't think people can immediately tell I am gay. My voice and posture are neutral. Though, I guess it is difficult to gauge these things about yourself. Plenty of girls seem to like me. More girls than boys, actually, this has been a problem for me all my life. We tried not to talk about our personal lives at work, mostly because the world was small, and it would be uncomfortable if we mapped too explicitly the degrees of separation. I assumed that they were few. I also assumed that here, in the HIV basement, it would be more or less apparent to my colleagues that I slept with men.

The thing about giving blood is that you aren't supposed to do it if you sleep with men. The rule doesn't make a lot of sense. There is a higher prevalence of disease, as they say, but some people are careful and some people are not, some people get tested and some people do not. I personally got tested more often than I had sex. I loved getting tested. I did it all the time. Pretty much ever Wednesday afternoon, after I finished cleaning up and documenting all the needle exchange action from the day before, I would go to Pedro and ask for another cheek swab. I know it wasn't a great use of resources, but that was what we were here to do: offer free anonymous testing to anyone who wanted it, as often as they wanted it. Why exclude ourselves? I didn't worry much anymore about the results. I hadn't had sex in—at that point—nine months, my last lover having kicked me once in the side and landed me back at my mother's house again. But I liked getting the results back on Thursday morning. It was calming.

Anyway, the ban on gay men donating blood was obviously an artifact of another era, more fearful and less well informed. But I believe it was still a question on the

registration, and if you answered yes you were put on some kind of master list with a lifetime ban.

So maybe Benny was trying to tell me that he didn't have sex with men. I mostly think you have to take people at their word about these things, good faith and all that, but I found it hard to believe he was straight.

"I can't," I lied, "my grandma died of prion disease."

"Oh," he said, "I'm sorry."

"I can go with you, though. I don't have anything going on," I lied again.

Actually, I was supposed to take my mother to my aunt's house for poker that evening, since it was a Thursday, and my mother didn't like to walk anymore, especially on a day like today, with all the ice. So I was supposed to drive her and a platter if enchiladas and possibly the dog, but I didn't love driving my mother places, or rather, I didn't love thinking of myself as someone who organized his week around the social calendar of his mom, and, if I were being totally honest about it, I would have to admit that I found Benny attractive. He had this long black hair, and a swimmer's body, lean and long armed. I was probably half hoping—though asking a fay man to donate blood with you is an exceedingly weird thing to do—that he was asking me on some kind of date, or at least on a getting to know you field trip. Maybe after we offered up our veins we could stop at a bar and get a drink. Or a hamburger. They say after you give blood you need to replenish your stores of iron.

A couple times a year they have a blood drive at the free clinic down the street. Once I went to a lunch promoting the event because they had free sub sandwiches. They had a man there from the Blood Center, a short kind of man, very tan and muscular, who said he was a former sports announcer. He was explaining to everyone how great it was to donate blood, how in these hard economic times you don't need to

write a check to make a difference in the world, you can offer up your arm and help save a life. I thought the presentation was weird and interesting. First, there is something weird and interesting about blood as the reciprocal of money—money being this sinister and anonymous substance, circulating through healthcare, blood representing a kind of pure crimson altruism. Second, there is something straight up gory about blood donation. It is a violation of the boundaries of the body, too much like a pound of flesh.

After work we drove together in my car to the hospital, past the edges of the Mexican neighborhood, into the shadows of factory shapes, and up out of the valley to a neighborhood of two car garages and toe headed children. The boys and girls were trying to sled on small slopes in a park, but their sleds, those brightly colored disks, kept crashing jerkily through the ice. The roads were slippery too. Benny had a little brother who died of AIDS. He was a hemophiliac, Benny said. So he gave blood as often as he could, which these days was once every six weeks. I still didn't understand what the subtext was, if there was subtext. Or if Benny's story was supposed to be ironic, or if he was maybe just one of those charismatic, pathological liars. Something about him was right up in your face, but so close it was too close to read.

I had called my mother to say something had come up at work, and that one of the aunts would have to give her a ride. I was feeling guilty about that. And, even though I thought the rule about gay men donating blood was hateful, I was basically a rule following guy. I wasn't sure if I liked that I felt like an accomplice, like I was in on Benny's conspiracy.

Benny's little brother was real into soccer, he said, and he was actually good. One of those kids who you think, oh, he is a different kind of athlete. He has the genes. Well, all the genes except the blood clothing genes. But they gave him these transfusions with plasma product, and for a long time he was fine, but then, you know. Evidently his little brother's kind of hemophilia was a rare kind, not like the Ashkenazi kind or

the kind that all the European royalty used to have. Their mom was Native American, and she was a carrier for an unusual recessive thing. We all went to the same high school, but I was ten years older than Benny, who was five years older than his little brother, so I never knew them. Apparently the little brother did fine all the way through high school. He didn't get tested, a far as Benny knew, but they all knew what was going to happen. Star soccer player, he repeated, he just flew around the field. They wanted to get him recruited, until it came out at school, what he probably had, which was probably around the same time that it really sunk in for him, the brother, too. He always had goldfish with him in the hospital, when he was little and then again at the end. People would bring them instead of flowers in little plastic bags. I can't remember why we started doing that, Benny said. The thing is when flowers die they just kind of fade, but goldfish, you know, they really die, belly up and everything. And goldfish die all the time. It was kind of sad. So that's why I wanted to do HIV stuff, I guess, he finished. What about you?

We were getting out in the hospital parking lot. Around the edges the wind was crackling in the iced-over branches of the empty trees—poplar, maybe, I thought. It was hard to tell without any leaves. The answer to Benny's question had to do with a bad stint as a line cook in New York and a failed attempt to return to school. It also a lot to do with a sense of comfort among the haggard users. Their lives were even more fucked up than mine. "I got interested in addiction, I guess," I said.

It's a nice myth, the idea that we choose a job. You wind up doing something, and if you are lucky, you get interested in it. I know how to write the grants, now, and I know how to ask the facilities people to help me fix something, but I didn't choose to take back the dirty needles of the forgotten of the earth, supporting them in one sickness to protect them from something worse. It was something that just happened. I cared about being needed, I think. I cared about the urgency of the junkies, the long-haired men and skinny women who came in and tried to shoot up on top of the vending machines.

I got a little sick while I watched them do it, watched them wash down with orange iodine the crook of Benny's arm and pierce with a long needle his big, middle vein. The needle led to a tube, which led to a clear plastic bag, the size of a softball, or a couple of soda cans. The bag, which filled slowly with Benny's brown-red blood, rested in a kind of mechanical cradle, a machine that rocked it back and forth until it was full.

He didn't want to talk while they did it, so I just sort of sat by his platform-bed, a blue vinyl cushioned thing, reclining, like a too-tall pool chair, so that if you got dizzy they could lower your head, and looked around the room. He kept his eyes closed, which I understood. I wouldn't want to watch the machine retract my own blood.

I was getting more and more light headed while I thought about these things. This, my fear of needles, and my fear of veins (crooks of arms, backs of knees) was one of the reasons I could never do intravenous drugs. Another reason of course being the fear of disease. A third being that I don't like doing drugs much. Not that I have tried so many kinds, but I have tried a few, and it makes me anxious not have control. In the end I had to leave the room.

While I waited for Benny in the hall I thought about how weird work relationships are. How you can spend an enormous volume of time around people but not really know them, or be known, or even like each other much. I wondered what was up with Benny. Why was he here? Really for his little brother? Something about that story seemed too sincere to be real. And what, moreover, was I doing here? Out on a Thursday night on a bizarre errand with an inscrutable coworker. I was annoyed. Benny came back sipping cool aid from a large Styrofoam cup.

I was supposed to drive him home. He said tomorrow he would just walk. Benny also lived near the old bank. He looked a little pale to me, and tired; he closed his eyes and leaned his head back in the car. He said, "Thanks for not blowing my cover," which I took to mean that he really did sleep with men.

It had fallen dark while we were in the hospital, and the temperature had dropped a few more degrees. Three things happened on the way home. First, there was some kind of traffic block on the viaduct, preventing us from accessing, in an easy way, the South Side. Later we learned that what happened was a kid tried to hold up cars at an intersection with a gun, but that there was a clash with the cops and a policeman shot the child, who was perhaps disturbed. So we had to drive up to 35th St. to get across. Second, a car in front of us, a little red cube-shaped thing, spun out. The roads really were icy now. The driver, a woman with a thick braid, or two braids crossed atop her head, got out and pulled out her cell phone. She had run sideways into a snow-bank. Benny and I got out to offer help. She thanked us and said her brother was coming and pulled a pack of cigarettes out of her tight jeans. Third, Benny put his hand on my leg when we were a few blocks away from the bank, but I pretended it wasn't there. We said goodnight politely at his house, and he thanked me again for the ride.

When I got home the house was dark. I warmed up the plate of enchiladas and salad my mom had left for me, the salad getting a little droopy in the microwave. Then I fed all the pets except for the bird, which I thought was unclean, and got ready to take our pit bull, Jane, on her evening walk. Neither Jane nor I liked the cold, but we toughed it out. We walked by the place the hipster drove her car into the snow-bank. Evidently her brother had come, and between the two of them they were able to push it free. The same wet snow that on the streets and sidewalks had settled into ice had attached itself to the roofs of houses and sides of cars. There was something about the glittering stochasticism of the city in winter—people bundled up, windows fogged, cars parked at wide angles to the snow banks—which made me feel close to my fellow man, in all his diverse ways.

The following week they shut us down. For reasons I still don't understand there were two policemen and one heavy-set federal agent involved. They came late on Friday afternoon. I was unfortunately locked in a vault at the time, so Jose interfaced

with the authorities. It turned out that there was a permit we had violated: no distribution without two armed guards. Our one-armed guard, Castro, didn't even carry a gun.

I guess since we started handing out needles all week long things got out of hand. Shooting up all over the parking lot, they said, and now that it was really cold, the users were using the WIC waiting room, the little wind-room of the McDonalds across the street, and the vestibule of the Pentecostal church down the block.

I blamed Benny for pushing things past the line. He never came forward and apologized, but I was sure it was Benny who was distributing brown bags full of clean needles on the off days. I resigned a few months later, after the dust had settled, and once spring arrived. I found another job as a line cook, working for someone whose treatment of me was demeaning, but whom I trusted implicitly, and with whom, outside the kitchen, I got along. I stayed in my mother's house. I had no siblings, and she was increasingly frail. The seagull did have some kind of bird fleas. We took her to the vet (it turned out it was a lady-seagull), and they gave her an astringent smelling spray for the bugs, but her wing never got well. Often I walked by the bank building at dusk with Jane, whose back rippled with muscle, but whose early trauma made her fearful of people and other dogs. Above the front doors was carved in marble "Every man is the architect of his own fortune." I never noticed that when I worked there.

Benny I believe wound up married to one of the WIC ladies, or at least living with her and raising a child. I saw him recently and he told me about the baby. It was a boy, he said, one year old, and healthy, not afflicted with his uncle's disease. It was summer then and just getting dark. Up and down the street people were grilling on their front lawns. Benny invited me up to his porch for a beer, but I demurred. He said mom and baby would be home soon. Jane was pulling against her chain. I had to get going, I said, but I hoped he would give them my best. I had to get home and help my mother minister to an injured bird.

Fairy Tail

When I was a child I had a tail. It was bushy, rather like a squirrel's, and not prehensile. Because it helped me to balance, the tail made me very adept at certain games, like monkey bars and climbing trees. My sister Monica also had a tail, but hers was smaller and more discrete, more like the tail of a cat or a dog. She wagged it when she was especially pleased. Monica was three years older than me, and very wise in the ways of the world. She understood, for example, that our tails were the reason that we were not allowed to go to school like other children, and that, although our mother loved us very much, the whole situation had sent her into a kind of psychic tail spin, so to speak. She insisted that I bunch my tail up in a fake scoliosis brace when we went out in public. Monica she always dressed in large skirts that made her look either like an Am or a Mormon girl, or else like the child of committed hippies. We were homeschooled, so as to avoid the risk of an unintentional tail reveal, at recess or at gym. Mom taught us math in the morning, and in the afternoon we were allowed to read whatever we liked. Mom worked in the afternoons. She was a medical interpreter, and from twelve to six she would sit in her office in the attic, which was very hot in the afternoons, especially in the summer months, because for the sake of quiet she did not use a fan, and over the telephone she would ask people about their rashes and their diet and their sex lives. Mom spoke two dozen living languages, probably, she said. She was something of a savant. At six she taught herself French from a textbook and at ten she was working on Chinese. But it was the dead languages that got her, she used to say, Greek and Latin, of course, but also Wendish and Classical Nathul. Texas, Mom said, either for cosmic reasons or as a matter of utter and bizarre chance, was home to the last speaker of as many as a hundred different tongues. There were the Native American languages, of course, but then there were pockets of Shaudit speakers, two little old men from Southern France who laughed a dry laugh, and played boules in the heat, and there was one speaker of Manx and one reported speaker of Cromary, a strange kind of German spoken by isolated Scotts. Texas was welcoming to cults, and cults,

according to my mother, were good places to keep nearly dead languages, languages that needed intubation and ventilator support, alive.

Ontology recapitulates phylogeny, one doctor explained. When children develop in the womb they all go through a phase where they look like little fish, sporting flippers and tiny gills, and they all go through a phase where they wear little tails. But the womb-tails are tiny and look rather like the butt of a fish; Monica and I had fully developed appendages, not unlike the bird-wings of angels, except that the wings painters place on the shoulders of angels, rich and broad, could not possible support them in flight. The balance is all wrong, and besides, the angels would need obscene, body builder pecs to flap an apparatus like that. Our tails, on the other hand, were fully functional. Through them ran our muscles and our blood and the exaggerated sacral vertebrae of our spines. This was why the doctors didn't want to remove them, at first. Mom would take us shopping for plastic surgeons, first in Huston and later in LA and Boston, men she vetted carefully, revealing surprising personal facts, some true some invented, in a predetermined sequence, from anodyne (concern about vaginitis) to crass (she used to enquire about fecal transplants, until that turned out to be real). It was like a game of chicken, they were supposed to maintain an even facade of non-judgment and concern. If they flinched they lost the game. Mom only actually ever had us reveal our tails to three doctors. The first two, a bearded man in Houston and then another bearded man in LA failed the final test. When we showed them our tails the first recoiled in surprise and the second, as he inspected us, grinned and said, "Wow."

"Your fired," Mom said.

"But wait," the second surgeon said, as she was ushering us out the door, "Surely we can find a way to work with your extraordinary children on some kind of documentation, some kind of case report."

Mom raised her eyebrows at the man. "I dare you to try."

“No one will believe him,” she explained to us later, when we were driving home from the airport in the red minivan. Miranda got to sit in the front seat, and I was allowed to take my back brace and seatbelt off and climb around in the back. “It will be the end of his career.”

Our house was the last house on a long cul du sac. In our suburb all the houses looked the same, except for ours, which, for reasons Mom attributed to our absent father and therefore did not choose to talk about, our house was somewhat crooked. It wasn’t obvious unless it was a very clear day, and you could compare your view of the house’s perpendicular lines, the roof, the corners of the siding and the columns in the front (there were four), with the oilrigs and the desert horizon beyond. Then you could tell that something was not right. Also Mom liked to hang potted plants from the front porch, and if you looked closely you could tell that, compared to the porch, they listed a little to the side.

Mom gave birth to both of us at home, in the slightly off center bathtub. She was a hippie like that. Our father attended her, coaching her to breathe, fishing the two tailed infants up and out of the bubble bath, but evidently he took off shortly after toweling me down. Mom still can’t forgive him for failing to help her clean the tub before he went, which she said after a water birth was disgusting and full of blood. Miranda remembers Dad; though now she says she is not sure her memories (of a tall man, rather severe) are the impressions of real events or impressions of impressions, and then free hand drawings of those. Every time you recall a scene, I have read, that scene is subject to innovation, to additions and erasures, fallacious details, fantastic, mundane, or sublime. Miranda read the same article. It was in one of the Scientific Americans Mom piled around the house as to avoid actually teaching us science.

“Don’t blink,” I told the third doctor, Dr. Deborah in Boston, who was married to an out of work photographer, who said she could remove our tails. I was thirteen then,

and Miranda was sixteen, and Dr. Deborah (she introduced herself by her first name) said she always saw her teenage patients alone.

“I ask them about sex and marijuana,” she explained to Mom, who laughed a derisive little laugh, but put her hand on my shoulder and lead me out of the room.

“Ladies first,” she said.

I went back in after Miranda came out, dressed in her long swirling skirt again, and the doctor made me put on a paper dress.

“So,” she asked, before she even looked at it, “are you sure you want to loose the tail?”

“I’m sure.” I said.

I wasn’t, but I knew that was what I was supposed to say. At that age, at the very cusp of becoming a real person, morally conscious and responsible, able to understand that something familiar was about to pass away, pass into memory, where it would be creased and torn by ungentle recollection, I did not want to loose my tail. Our family unit, its injunctions and prohibitions, its secrets and its stated goals were all built around our vestigial organs, Miranda and mine. We were only allowed to talk to certain neighbors. We were not allowed to participate in team sports. We had no television, but were encouraged to play elaborate games of imagination, like world of warcraft, with strangers on the internet while Mom translated for dying strangers. We ate macaroni with hotdogs in it probably four nights a week.

Miranda, though, she was ready. She fought with Mom about the long skirts she had to wear in public. She lost. Mom had a special face, an I am really angry and disappointed face, and she would put on the face and she would say, “don’t push me

over the edge." Miranda, yelling down the upstairs hallway, yelling that Mom was a freak and only wanted to control us because she didn't have anything else, would accelerate right up the edge, but she always stopped short of pushing anyone over it. Mom would walk up the stairs giving the face and Miranda would slam her bedroom door and generally, if left alone long enough, she would calm down.

Miranda wanted to be normal. She wanted to go to high school and play soccer and go our with boys. She was extremely beautiful, which made it all that much harder for her, I believe. Men paid attention to her—in airport waiting rooms, in public parks, at the homeschooled science fair ages 14-18 Texas western division, which she won. Even in her billowing skirts, which marked her apart, as modest or religious or maybe just a hippy, but which were actually, in their own way, quite sexual, she had to dodge the advances of boys and men. The boys asked her about the strains of spelt she was crossing (it was Miranda's dream to be a part of the next green revolution, a green revolution that combined sustainable agricultural & consumption patterns with a radical redistribution of wealth and lands), and their dads asked her about her commitment to Jesus, but they did it in a come on kind of way. Lots of homeschooled kids come from religious families. The runner up at that science fair believed he had disproven one of Darwin's postulates about finches. The life sciences are generally well represented at these events. It turns out conducting meaningful experiments in physics requires both a great deal of up front expertise and cash. Even chemistry was beyond the reach of most attendees—though one year Deborah extracted a certain psychoactive alkaloid from our back yard cactus and documented its effect on neighborhood cats. She almost won that year, but then the judging committee decided her experiment was unethical and probably against the law.

The mescaline year one boy invited her to a swimming pool party that she almost went to despite what Mom said about protecting herself, and she didn't know what it felt like, to be ostracized, since Mom had always protected her from that, and then

Deborah did her ostrich impression, but she called the boy back and pretended to be high, and that was the end of that.

So it was for Miranda, more than for myself, that I said yes, I want to loose the tail. Miranda wanted to go away to college the year after next, and at college she would probably have to share a dorm room, and it just seemed like it would be easier for everyone if we dealt with the tail situation together, once and for all.

Before we dropped trou and showed our behinds to Dr. Deborah, Mom said, real casually, testing the waters, "You probably haven't seen anything like this before."

Dr. Deborah, who was slight of build and quite old said, "Oh, I would be surprised. We see all kinds of things here."

Later, when I was older, I would sometimes feel a sharp pain behind my back. I moved to Canada for college, in part to escape my mother and sister, who had grown increasingly hostile, but also increasingly dependent on one another's presence and approval since the removal of our tails. In college I learned to play hockey, and rather excelled at it, walking onto a junior varsity team my first year, and playing on the varsity team each year after that. The combination of exertion and balance and cold air in particular brought on the phantom pains, so that I would have to focus all of my attention on sublimating the experience that was acute and physical but not quite real and "keep my head in the game." Playing through the shadow pains, though, allowed for a kind of transcendence, a kind of zen connection with the ice and the puck, the illusion of total control and speed, which made intermittently brilliant my improbable athletic career.

I stayed on in Toronto after college. I took a job copy editing for a small trade magazine. I read about gold mining, and then later about hernia repair, for many hours of each day. I married once and briefly. After my marriage ended I started coaching children's hockey at the municipal skating rink in the winter and spring.

Miranda later gave birth to an entirely healthy and tail free baby boy, whom she named Joseph, after the boy from the science fair, whom she eventually married. He was a carpenter and a good man.

A strange thing happened to our mother, in her old age. She started loosing her languages, first the dead languages and then the almost dead ones that she didn't have much opportunity to speak. She continued to make her living translating for doctors over the phone, since she mostly translated in Spanish and Tagolog, anyway. But then one day she started to loose her English. On the phone, Miranda told me that on one morning Mom couldn't tell her which kind of juice she wanted with her breakfast, orange or grapefruit, and that the next morning she couldn't read the paper at all. I hurried home to Texas, to the house at the end of the long cul du sac, where I hadn't been in years (not since Miranda revealed to my now deceased ex-wife that I had been born with a tail). I arrived in time to speak with Mom in French, which I had learned a bit of in Toronto, and which she retained beyond her English by some two or three years. But when she lost a language, it was almost immediate, poof, and it was gone from her consciousness, just as quickly as it had appeared. Miranda and I speculated that it was because she used English more than the others; perhaps she had worn it thin. After she lost her French Miranda and I tried to learn classical Natul, and with that we were able to scrape by, saying hello, good morning, which juice would you like? For a few more years.

I moved back into the crooked house, and Miranda, who carried her daughter around with her in a sort of satchel on her back for many years longer than the girl needed to be carried, at least in such a pseudo ethnic, multi-colored baby sack, with her arms and legs akimbo behind her mother's tailless back, came over every day. Miranda, despite her fights with Mom, continued to wear the same kind of tail concealing floor-length skirts straight on into her adulthood. We would sit with Mom at the kitchen table after she stopped being able to talk, and we would take turns pealing citrus fruits, and talking for her, as we could.

Once we brought over a wizened specimen from a Missouri Synod compound some hours further west, out in the desert past the now abandoned oil fields. We brought back a little old man dressed in period costume from the last century, suspenders and plaincloth jacket and straw hat, because he was reported to be one of the last speakers of a kind of Pomerania we hoped she might know.

After she died I moved back to Canada, settling this time in a more remote part of Ontario. With my inheritance, which was larger than Miranda or I would have imagined, I bought myself a piece of land near a Hutterite colony and also near a little pond. I installed solar panels and a windmill for the darker months, and every day I build fires in my little wood-burning stove. Miranda has come to visit me twice. I have learned a bit of Tirolean, and in the winter I teach the Hutterite children how to skate.

I also teach them about evolution, but only secretly. We listen to the calls of the different winter birds, and watch the sluggish possums that live in the foundation of my house and porch. Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny, I teach them. When you were little you had gills.

Once a year I would go back to Boston so that the lady surgeon, Dr. Deborah, who did not seem to age but looked unfailingly spry and maintained a steady state of outdatedness in her hair and clothes. She would inspect the scar on the top of my behind, and press on different parts of my back to make sure that everything was OK with my spine. Every time I asked her, "what is the craziest thing you removed this year?"

"You wish you knew," she would say.

Finally she also died. I received a post card from the big hospital where she was faculty informing me of her death some months after it took place. I have it on my

kitchen table now, with a pile of solicitations and hockey related catalogs. I do not know if it will be a thing I keep, for sentimental purposes—I am not a very sentimental man—or a thing I throw out. Probably I will through it away.

We buried Mom behind the crooked house, even though Miranda said it was illegal. We thought she would like to be laid to rest in the same place where she lived and worked, and where she gave birth to her two tow headed, anomalous kids. We bought her a headstone, and we were going to get it engraved later (Miranda had an idea about a kind of Rosetta stone, or a picture of the flowering cacti that she watered to the end,) but after the little ceremony we held for her in the back yard we decided to leave it blank. We couldn't think of anything to say.

Liver

Once upon a time there lived a woman who was still almost a monkey but upright and tall, who ate the liver of a big cat, and later she died of a terrible internal bleed. You can see where the blood pooled and hardened around the shaft of her femur, which survives, mineralized, to the present. The cat liver, like the liver of all carnivores, contained a huge and poison dose of retinoic acid. She would have died suddenly, perhaps by herself on a plateau, or perhaps gathering tubers and berries in the tall grass with her sisterlings. Why her thighbone alone was preserved as a fossil I do not know.

I once knew a woman who turned tricks for research, and in this way contracted a liver disease. She studied art history, and she made these dioramas that were quite wonderful but strange. They were perfect, mimetic dollhouses of parts of our university campus and our quaint university town, in balsam and acrylics at various scales. She made tiny books with tiny titles on their spines to put on the library shelves. There were no people in her dioramas, which was one reason they were strange.

She rode a bicycle all over campus, an old fashioned women's bicycle with a basket on the handles and a dip in the bar to accommodate large skirts, which she never wore. She wore only very tiny skirts, and in the winter she wore brightly patterned tights. She had a large dog, which was bitten by a bat, and developed fulminant rabies, which she had to put down. She only took one class with me, a survey of handwriting, short hand, long hand, underhand, overhand, the year before, but she came to my office hours after her dog got rabies and cried. One thing led to another, and I poured her a drink, and she told me about how when she was in undergrad she had tried to do ethnography about sex work by doing sex work, but it was too appalling, it made her sad, and then someone at the department told her mother, but by then she already had the liver disease. After her project was shut down she interviewed methadone users instead.

This young woman, by the way, had excellent handwriting.

Shortly, in evolutionary time, before the death of the woman who ate the liver of the large cat, humans learned to control fire, and, at what from this great distance looks like approximately the same moment we started making recognizable tools, little stone hand axes, and hammers, and trawls and that kind of thing. We also started making, in addition to camp fires and sharp rocks, these spheres, about the same size as the giant gumballs of my own youth, that is to say the size of a child's fist, too large to fit in a mouth. Some believe these spheres were ammunition for some kind of giant, primitive slingshot. Perhaps they were products of boredom, chipped idly out of stone the same way a student might idly sketch an image of a flower. They may have been children's toys.

If you concentrate on any one thing long enough, it stands for all other things in turn. The stone balls stood for childhood play and jacks and marbles. They stood for the earth (the opposite of us in that we are quick and stones are not, but also the essential thing from which we are made). They stood for cells and atoms (not to the cavemen, surely, but to me) and they stood for the spherical stars (whence all matter came). Abstractly, they stood for balance—each point on the surface equidistant from the central part. Concretely they stood for concrete, the built environment, cities and highways and the modern age.

An additional layer might include the weight of the boule, out on the grass, at your grandfather's house, near Kiev, where there were special lawns for various lawn games, and long portrait galleries filled with paintings of crazed aristocrats, most of whom suffered from the same delusion that their stomachs were made of glass. You might remember throwing a boule, underhanded, and affecting the air of a French laborer, smoking Galois. You might also make a tactile leap, to the seashore of your earliest childhood, where you collected rounded stones and purple shells.

It is not clear to you whether the makers of these globs of stone, would have used anything like language. And, perhaps more intriguing the question comes; without language would they have been capable of symbolic thought? Would the stones stand for anything—any totally different thing—like souls or fruits or running men—but leading eventually backward to the whole of existence (for that is how metaphor works, if you sit on it long enough)—for those square browed ancestors?

I am not a paleontologist, but I acquired several of these relics (two bolas, one tooth, one finger bone) when I first moved to this country and was living in New York City and earning my living in an unseemly way. My training is in philology, but there is no great demand for secular scholars of Vedic Sanskrit in these United States, so when I first arrived, via Berlin, I became involved in what is sometimes called the laundering of money (we washed it, like the laundresses of Zola's Paris, with a good deal of booze), with a distant cousin of mine, and on the side we traded in stolen art and other goods. It was at that time that these rock baseballs were gifted to me as a kind of tip for my services.

I would say that they came from a rich and intelligent widow, but that was not exactly true. Her husband lived on, in a vegetative state, in a hospital bed with a spectacular view. We visited him once to mark their anniversary. I would like to imagine that this rich and intelligent woman found herself a little bit in love with me, but that is not quite accurate either. She was interested, I believe, in my oddity (she collected odd things) and although she had never had children, she had a protective and, at the same time, quite silly way of interacting with people of the right generation to have been her children. That included me. She took me on outings to young garlic festivals and participatory plays. She died in a boating accident somewhere in the South Seas.

Galen, that brave physician, argued that the liver was the seat of the passions, the heart the seat of emotion, and that thought took place in the brain. This seems to me intuitively sound—more sound, certainly, than the Aristotelian dogma that we think

with our stomachs. Galen came up from the galleys of gladiatorial combat—he learned his trade in the sick bays just off stage. He would, I think, have had an understanding of the passions, those emotions that we experience as overtaking us, like fear and anger, rather than those states we experience as our own handiwork, the products of willful emotional making. Bloodlust would have been familiar and intelligible to him.

Later, the passions converged, in our emotionally circumscribed modernity, on a kind of irritation. The liver stands in for the grumpy. He is ruled by Saturn (saturnine), and filled with bile (gall).

The husband of my drowned friend may have drunk his way into a coma. To me the exact sequence of events remains unclear, but they were separated for a time because of his violent moods, which came on, she said, in a surprisingly old fashioned way, only with the drink. His favorite drink was something called a Manhattan, which involved sweet vermouth. He had roughed her up a few times, and she sent him packing (the money was hers. In another surprise twist she had earned it all through savvy investing) and lived as a divorce for a decade. But then when he became really ill she took him back, his liver by then gnarled and very small, and a few months later he fell into a permanent sleep. It was a miracle that he had been alive so long, now. Five years in a coma when I went gallivanting to garlic festivals with my friend, and ten years more after her demise. They said when he stopped responding, when he first lost the ability to contract his pupils against the light, that it would only be a few days or weeks. It just goes to show doctors don't know everything.

I had gone back to visit him, the silent man, lying lumpily in bed, quite thin now, hands contracted, skin splotchy, a tube in his throat, still looking out over the Hudson and the lower Manhattan skyline.

Rilke, in a letter to somebody or other, wrote that he kept lemons in a bowl on his desk. Especially in the winter months he liked them, he said, for their color and bright scent. He had been staying at a manor house, somewhere in Austria, I think, and walking up and down the portrait gallery of a family who would all later become Nazis, noticing that in the portraits of high colored women and men, some women held lemons. He speculates that this used to be a sign--previously unremarked by our present time--that a figure in a portrait, at the time of the painting was already dead. So a husband might commission a portrait of himself and his first and second wives, and all of their offspring, including the little ones who died of childhood rashes, measles and the once deadly fifth disease. Those already in the grave would be represented with lemons in their hands.

Once I went on a picnic with a mother and her three daughters, and all they brought was pate du compagne and lemonade. There is something about a warm pork terrine, flavored with liver, but not overpoweringly, which I do dearly enjoy. Formerly the father of the family had worked with me at a German university. The mother and daughters escaped to New Jersey, by way of France, having left their mitteleuropaische mother country in the three girls' remotest youth. I encountered the mother, who looked just the same, by accident, in a Seven Eleven on the outskirts of the quaint town in which I now instruct, and she invited me to join her and her three daughters for a picnic in the state park where they had moved, essentially, for the summer months. They had always been outdoorsy people and they had perhaps gotten carried away with American camping. We wash every third day, the mother explained proudly. I completed my purchase, of gasoline and an orange sports drink, and told her I would be delighted to join.

She was remarkably well preserved. The mother and father in this household would have been my own contemporaries or slightly older, and they were, when I knew them in Berlin, still very much in love. They would walk out together in the evenings around Gorlitzer Park, and across to the rose gardens at Marienplatz, where I lived,

and buy themselves two small ice cream cones, and walk back home. The daughters were then quite small.

Camping, the mother and three girls looked like sisters. They had grown up, and she had regressed. She looked like the youngest among them, except she had all of this white hair. It was early summer and very warm, and we all took our shoes and socks off and waded some in a very cold river near their large and accommodating tent. Having absorbed the American truism about not swimming after you eat, we made sure to do this before lunch. While we were wading, a small flock of yellow butterflies converged on our socks and stockings, arrayed on the sandy banks. We thought of Nabokov, and his long exile, and we wondered if the butterflies were not perhaps feeding on the salt from our feet.

The father, who was my colleague, meant to follow his wife and daughters out of Paris, but he was lost to them, they believed somewhere in an old mine in the north of France. He had been a student of Greek tragedy, but never lived a man with fewer tragic flaws. He had long made piece with the importance or relative unimportance of his work, took great pleasure in his daughters' accomplishments, but would have loved them even if they were stupid, and lived always in domestic accord and harmony with his wife. The daughters were very musical. Like the muses, each had her special domain, but it was really together, as a gestalt, that they were most powerfully invoked, at least to my mind. One played cello, I remember, another piano, and a third sang. They were not beautiful girls, being rather roughly formed, heavy in hips and face, but when they performed together in their parents' small apartment they were the picture of loveliness, all mildness and acquiescence, and their skin, even now, after weeks of camping, was milky white.

In the course of our little picnic I disappointed these women, now in their amorphous middle age. I said something mean about a colleague—I forget now even exactly what it was—something about a woman here at Smith, and the four of them realized in unison that I was unlike their husband and dad. They continued to treat

my politely, asking all manner of questions about my mortgage and my new American life and the woman who they remembered from Berlin who had, for a time, been my wife, but their verve was gone. The five of us were drying ourselves on the river bank, eating the warm terrine and drinking lemonade (they never took anything stronger, the cellist said), and all at once the four of them drooped a little and took on a kind of listlessness, even as they continued to make small talk.

In addition to the sock-loving butterflies there were a great many of the drab sparrows that are endemic to these northern woods, chirping in the trees of paradise that grow in these suburban edges, half spandrel, half wild. There was a bridge off to our left, which the sun was setting behind, and we would squint at the drivers and pedestrians, who would sometimes raise a friendly hand.

My friend who gave me the bolas took to the Pacific in search of what she had heard was a floating mountain of trash. As some people become obsessed with the Loch Ness monster or mermen, she became obsessed with this pile of garbage, floating always just at the horizon, receding from the edge of knowability. For her it was like the gorgons that populated the far corners of old maps, half hearsay, half fantasy. Also she was obsessed with trash. Artifacts, she called it, and sometimes the trash she collected really was ancient—material from Clovis trash pits, and her very, very old stone balls—but mostly it was more recent. That was how we met in the first place—she was acquiring stolen artifacts.

I received a letter from her dispatched from the Mariana trench, the deepest cleft in the sea. Regrettably, this woman had very bad handwriting. But she was filled with excitement about her travels. When she was very young, before her family lost all their money and she had earned it back again through savvy investing, she had taken several ocean voyages to and from continental Europe with her parents, and for this occasion, this Pacific voyage, she had packed in the same lace trimmed cabin chest once packed by her childhood maid. She loved the sea. She wore floppy hats, she said, and watched the horizon all day for trash and Somalis, and she was getting

a nice tan. And did I know that there were amebae the size of full-grown men that lived near vents in the dark bottom? She hoped that I was doing fine, and that the girls were being respectful, and not making eyes at me (this was at the very beginning of my tenure at a women's college). She hoped that I was eating enough fruits and vegetables, as she knew that I had, on several occasions in the past, contracted mild winter scurvy. But after that, nothing. She and her crew of seven were neither seen nor heard from again.

I hope that she found the trash mountain before whatever accident befell them—or maybe I don't. She was often obsessed with something, in theory, but in practice, upon its acquisition or upon spotting it, like some hairless marsupials with which she was briefly infatuated, in a zoo she became rather dejected, underwhelmed by the objects of her desire.

After our picnic, I expected the late classicist's family to take me up, as a kind of feckless uncle, or perhaps just a kindred spirit in this new land, but after our repast of lemonade and pork terrine, on which, I was made to understand, they subsisted when camping, I drove away in my small automobile, having left them with my address, so that they could stop by, should they ever need to borrow any of the fruits of civilization that my humble home, the second in a two story wood frame duplex, had to offer—things like refrigeration or bathtubs, which I, perhaps naively, imagined they might sometimes want—and my telephone number, in case they ever wanted to invite me to picnic with them on the shores of our now polluted stream (once navigated by eminent literary men). But they did not, as I half expected them to for the remainder of the summer, appear on my doorstep in need of any feminine accommodations (somehow I imagined that they would be in need of talk or cotton swabs or intimate products for hygiene). Perhaps I should have extended a clearer invitation, to Sunday lunch, or a musical evening. Neither did they call my seldom-used telephone.

It seems to us, sometimes, as though friendships transplanted aught to thrive, aught to take root and bind us together more strongly, and on occasion they do. But loneliness (which haunts us in new lands, but also in the most familiar corridors of our childhood palaces) serves sometimes paradoxically to deepen the moats, make more treacherous and inhospitable the chasms, or the waves, if every man is an island, as Dr. Donne claims. Something within us is used up, or frayed, at least, some resource for the building of bridges or ships. Our passions wane.

Their deceased father and husband (God rest his soul, as he would have said—he was a religious man) once elicited a great deal of warmth from me, elicited more real good humor and patience than I could have mustered spontaneously. Just as they were looking for him in me, I was likely looking in them for him.

His death was gratuitous, I learned not from his family, but from another mutual Berlin friend. This was a woman who sang in the Staatsoper, and often played seamstresses, and, upon her arrival in lower Manhattan became the thing she used to perform. She quite liked it, she said, and she had something of a gift, for the finer art of ladies' tailoring, how to make cloth drape just so across a bosom or shank. Anyway, this prima donna turned tailor (she worked in a very expensive bridal store—she also slept with women exclusively—sometimes prima nocta, like the old aristocrats) bore the sad news that our good-humored professor, having missed the opportune moment for departure hidden himself in an old coal shaft for several months on end had finally, most likely, taken his own life.

The graduate student who had, she claimed, tried to write a participatory ethnography of commercial sex work, before her professors notified her mother who made her give it up, took to art history because she found certain things beautiful, reliquaries, in particular, and decorative boxes more generally, in a totally apolitical way. It was the study of small pieces of architecture, as she put it, which inspired her to make her elaborate miniatures, which she said did not belong to the category of art, but rather compulsion. I am kind of a one trick pony, she said, when

she showed the dollhouses to people. The third floor of her home was given over to these dioramas. I wanted once to present her with a model train, but I didn't know then how the tone of the gift would strike her—perhaps too tongue in cheek.

After she cried in my office about her rabid dog and I scurried away we were able, unexpectedly, to become friends. I took her to dinner at the faculty club, and we enjoyed a number of Sunday drives, all without funny business. I even met her father and mother on one occasion. The drove up from New York City to take her out to dinner for her birthday, and they invited me to join them for sherry before they left—for some terrible steak house out on the Mass Pike, selected by my young friend who had a taste for rare meat. Her father and mother were well matched, uninhibited and similarly shaped. I couldn't understand why she purported to feel so much closer to the mother when they appeared so essentially the same. She had a longstanding resentment toward her father, which I never came to understand.

I thought this woman was bright and generous and fully, to the hilt, engaged. She was more than a generation my junior, but our rapport was collegial. That is we were both students of the beautiful and the obscure, and we experienced, I believe, a similar kind of bafflement and enthusiasm when we opened our windows up. She liked to sleep with all the windows open in her house. I believe this was how the bat bit her dog.

So I was surprised when she too took her own life. She did it with a massive dose of digitalis, which she acquired from her father when he visited on her birthday. I do not believe it was an accident—that is to say I do not believe she wished to be found and saved. I was not the one to find her, but somehow the details were known in her department, and her advisors, morbidly unable to stop discussing the event, filled me in. They speculated that the pressure of academia had been too great. There is a kind of ascertainment bias, whereby we attribute people's actions and personality traits to the parts of their life that we can see, the small tip of the iceberg visible to us, not to the forgotten architecture of their childhood, the way that footsteps

sounded in the upstairs hallway of their parents' house, or what their dreams are like, or their private habits of flossing or not flossing, washing all the dishes or just rinsing them. And so her teachers thought that her dissertation (which was just completed, but not turned in. I read several chapters at different points in time and thought they were quite brilliant) had caused her to overdose on foxglove.

I imagine the three of them together, sometimes. My friends the widow and the husband and the angry and inspired American girl, eating poached eggs, waiting in the vaporous beyond.

One thing the girl said about her balsam cities, the bulk of which had to be thrown away, was that she was interested in emergence, in the way certain patterns of life emerged from the laws of chemistry and physics, and certain patterns of imaginative thought and physical making emerged from those forms of life, and that out of all this cities came into being, but that to understand them we had to hold them like hazelnuts, in the palm of the hand. From Julian of Norwich, I believe an adulteration.

Hart

My father used to hunt deer and rabbits, but he wouldn't call them by their common names. I got a hare, he would tell my mother, or a hart, or an hind.

He was a schoolteacher, once, but he was fired before I was born. He was a difficult person to work with, diffident and unpredictable, and the termination of his employment, at the high school all of us later attended, bussed a half hour into town, followed from a fight he had with another teacher, a fight involving a bucket of wet paste, the old flour and water kind they used to hang wallpaper and plaster movie posters up outside. How the fight started, and why someone had a bucket of paste in the school hallway, I don't understand, but the other man, a math teacher who later became our principal, wound up with flour paste in his mouth and eyes. Mr. McGregor was the other teacher's name. Pops would ask us how Mr. McGregor was doing on the first day of school every year. He gave the opening assembly. Does he have the same dumb mustache, Pops would ask, and Mother would shush him.

Mother's family had money, which she inherited from her mother and father after they died, and Pop pop's family had a farm, so, despite the fact that they had nine children on no detectable income, we were alright. As children we thought so anyway. We didn't think of ourselves as rich or poor, though we were arguably both; only as odd, which was a fact. Mother came from Vienna, by way of New York. Please, Rodger, she would say with her accent when Pops was getting worked up, sweating and talking fast, and we would all laugh.

In retrospect, it seems possible that sometimes we didn't have any money and that is why Pops hunted and Mother baked all our own bread. She used to by flour in fifty pound bags. There was a steep hill up to our house, and in the winter sometimes they couldn't get the car up, so she would park at the bottom and we would carry her groceries—all grains and potatoes in burlap—up on our backs.

They met, they said, in a cemetery. Father, whose father was a minister, and father's father was a minister, right back to the Winthrops and the City on a Hill, had gone to seminary but decided, like the rest of the nation, that his faith was too weak, too delicate to be put to much use, and he had come back to teach Latin in the high school. Anyway, he was down in New York one weekend, to visit a friend from seminary, right at the beginning of World War II, and the friend had convinced him to enlist. Regretting his decision, later on that gray spring day, he had let himself out of the cleric's apartment and walked far down Manhattan, to the financial district, which was empty because it was a Sunday, but still intimidating, physically, and he sought reprieve from the urban weight (somehow he kept imagining the tall buildings crumpling into the sunless street) in a small cemetery on Fulton Street. It was an old cemetery, old enough that the headstones mostly marked the graves of the very young. Mother was walking there with her great-aunt Ruth and Ruth's little dog.

They would have ignored each other completely, two ships passing in the rain, except that our father put out his back bending over to read the inscription on a child's grave. Mother and her Aunt Ruth, whom none but the eldest ever met, helped him right himself and even offered him an aspirin. He thanked them politely, cringing, backing away hunched in pain. That would have been the end of it, except that, in his haste and graceless bearing, he trod on Aunt Ruth's little dog. Then he felt obligated, he said, to accompany the two women, both quite calm, to the home of a veterinarian on the upper west side.

Despite these inauspicious beginnings, Mother and Pop pop somehow conceived a child before Pop pop went away to the war. They named him Adelbert, after mother's father, who died when she was a girl. Mother's mother died in the Holocaust. Mother and Father spoke openly about their oldest son, whom they imagined as a perpetual infant, still pink and needy, even when the rest of us had grown up, even though they did not get married until much later. Father never met Adelbert, who died of a congenital heart condition before he turned one.

Neither Mother nor Father believed in the afterlife, they said. Mother because she was Jewish, and father because he was a Unitarian. We are the last Puritans, he would say sometimes before dinner to his nine assembled children. We are the apotheosis of the enlightenment tradition. We are the City on the Hill. Unitarianism was a rejection of the trinity, he liked to explain the logical conclusion of the reformation. We believe that Jesus was not the son of God, but a wise man. Well we could have told you that, mother would respond.

Yes, the children would whine (why did we whine about the afterlife?) but what happens when you die. Nothing, father would say. After you die you are dead.

After Father died, though, he became a ghost. He would rattle the windows, and we would say, there goes Pop pop. He would howl in the fireplace and in the chinks between the window frames and our house's brick walls. Sometimes he would clamor around in the cellar, and when we went to look bags of apples would be overturned, but there would be no one there.

He was a noisy ghost. No one ever saw him, but we were sure that when we heard groaning from the outbuildings or footsteps in the attic, it was him. It was fitting that he returned as an auditory specter and not a visual one, as, in life, he had been not much to look at but full of what Mother called the Sound and the Furry. He was always a noisy man.

Pop pop died in a hunting accident. The boys, who were with him carried the story back to the girls, who were at home. It was late winter, the time of year when the ice has started to break up, but the roads are still bad, and one's socks are wet all the time. He got the deer, but his gun, which was old, kept a second bullet unfired in the chamber, and that second bullet got him, later, when Pop pop went to reload, lodging itself in his groin and breaking into the long bone. Three days later, at the little community hospital in the next town after our town, he grew suddenly agitated

and confused. This was in the evening, and only mother was with him in the open hospital ward. Then he became quite rigid, and then he suddenly died. They said that Pop pop too, like little Adelbert, must have had a hole in his heart, allowing the marrow from his hip to cross over from one chamber to the next and poison his brain.

We wanted to burry him in the family plot out past where the potato field—now weeds and small trees—used to be. The farm, since Mother and Pop pop had moved back, had been slowly going to seed. They could have rented the land to other farmers, they always said, but all the old farmers were cashing out or dying, and the young farmers were learning other trades—accounting and electrical engineering—and besides such simple, practical solutions to their money problems always offended our parents. Instead, Pop pop liked to investigate pyramid schemes and Tupperware ventures. He would occasionally invest money—whatever paltry sums he had on hand—in such unlikely projects, leading mother to pull at her hair and curse in French. She had forgotten her German, she said.

Mother was born in Austria, but sent away to France when she was only four, right after her father died. She could remember hardly anything about her parents, she said. She remembered travelling alone from Vienna to Paris by train. She lived from then on, until her marriage to our father, with her aging Aunt Ruth, who was really her father's aunt, and old enough to be her grandmother. They lived first in a garret apartment in the Latin Quarter, and later in what Mother referred to as a hovel in Lower Manhattan, although we visited Aunt Ruth there, the older children, before she died, and it was a rather lavish hovel. When she turned ninety-one Aunt Ruth moved to Israel. She died in Jerusalem.

It was not that she was a Zionist, mother said, or particularly religious, but she never settled in Paris or New York. She missed the Vienna of yore. She had been married to two different men narrowly passed over, Mother said, for the Nobel Prize. The relation of the first husband to the next remained a mystery. Perhaps they were

competitors, and when the investigations of one began to look promising, Aunt Ruth changed sides. She was a hard woman, Mother said, and she did not like children, so when we were with her we were to behave as little adults. We did not visit en mass, of course, but were sent down, in ones or twos, in the summers on the train.

She came up to the country for Pop Pop's funeral, Aunt Ruth and one of her many sequential small dogs. She had liked our father, Mother said, uncommonly. Though one might have expected them, two strong personalities, people with loud voices and decisive shoes, to have stayed separate, like oil and water, Father had somehow won her sympathy.

We did not burry him in his family plot, with all the Stories to die on the farm, going back to the Civil War. The hospital people told us you weren't allowed to do that anymore, so we buried him in a Catholic cemetery in town. Ruth thought this was appalling, that we should have unearthed him and carried his coffin back to rest among the bones of his kin, but Mother said that was only because Ruth herself was such a weary old pilgrim.

The following winter Ruth moved away to the Holey Land. Where did that leave mother, we wondered in later years, stranded in New Bedford with nine children and a ghost and a farm given over to narrow, second growth pines. What her needs might have been in that era we do not know. She abnegated them, or shielded us, at least, from them entirely.

We repapered the walls, after Father died, a yellow paper with small roses, a delicate task for many small hands. Much later, when we finally moved mother out of the farm house and into a nursing home, we went through father's bookshelves, all around the two living rooms, which we had used as additional bedroom for the littlest girls. We had done without a living room, using for the purpose of common space the outdoors and the kitchen. We realized, belatedly, how disappointed he

must have been. He wanted to be a scholar and a statesman. He read Gibbons and Hegel. And all he lived the life of a peasant, as he used to say.

Well, not quite, mother would reply, mollifying and challenging at the same time. What she meant was you have not known peasants. You have not known deprivation. Do not lay claim to suffering, however romantic, that belongs to someone else. It is bad form.

Mother's mother and her father were never married, which is perhaps why Aunt Ruth was not concerned in the winter of 1941, when, unwed, mother grew round and gave birth to a baby boy. Father's parents, however, a rather strict clergyman and his strict wife, were disturbed. Grandma and Grandpa lived two towns over, where the hospital was, gray haired and vigorous. They did not age. They insisted, when father returned from Europe, that he and mother have a church wedding, albeit a small one, in the little white church where father's father preached each Sunday, and where father grew up. They were married quietly, with only Grandma and Grandpa in attendance. Aunt Ruth was ill that summer, and could not make the trip.

Their wedding was a half funeral for the child that did not survive. Grandma and Grandpa wore matching brown suits, and Mother wore a pearl colored jacket and slacks. Father wore a bow tie.

One wonders, in retrospect, why she married this small and difficult man. She and Aunt Ruth had funds, which they were somehow able to carry across the Atlantic, and she was not strongly convention-bound. She had a cleverness about her, an elasticity and easy competence. She cooked and sewed and played piano and split logs. We remember her covered in engine grease, crawling under cars, and rigging the fuse box with bobby pins the first year we had electricity in the house. Her habitual attitude was one of mild exasperation. Your father, no common sense, she would say, and shake her head.

Perhaps he was her straight man. Perhaps Mother was at her most elegant, her most pure and vital when she was displeased with our left-handed Pops.

They could not stop having children. Every spring a new one came. Only children of only children, both, they soon ran out of family names, and started calling their progeny after minor figures from the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps they thought of themselves a the founders of a race, an Abraham and Sarah of these northern latitudes. Pop pop, like his parents, was big on genealogy. This may have had something to do with a sense of diminution, of drying up and shrinking of a family. It also had something to do with aristocracy and the anti-aristocracy. They were yeomen, but they were yeomen kings. At any rate, when the Stories arrived in America, there were not very many Americans, so there was a long period, one had the sense, when the cast was small, and everyone was related to everybody—before the old branches withered back into a kind of senescence or irrelevance with the changing times, the advent of film and television and electricity, and the retreat of dark winter scripture meetings, the puttering out of farms. Father had several noteworthy relatives who had participated, in the last century, in Utopian or Millennial movements of various kinds. Some had become shakers, some transcendentalists. One had founded a large and ultimately unlucky collective dairy farm, where all the brothers and the sisters shared one large, chaste, bed, and studied Attic Greek after their chores.

We too, real brothers and real sisters, shared beds (though we were generally grouped by gender and age, the small boys in one room, the big boys in another, and so on), and we too were made to study dead languages. Pop Pops, who admired Pound, briefly encouraged the study of Chinese. (Father had in him some kindred spirit, some ornery fascism). Mother, who was utterly Godless, laughed kindly at his efforts, in his later years, to make new translations of the psalms. Like Jefferson's Gospels, father's translations included nothing supernatural. But we were not

permitted to laugh. We were made to go to Father in his study and take dictations in turn, on Sunday afternoons.

He would become enamored first of one school of thought about poetry or religion or the body politic, and he would speak only of Marx or of Montaigne, and then he would discard those ideas, like wilted winter greens, and pick up something new. Whatever the ideology of the moment, it was always participatory. He could not enter into anything, work, belief, responsibility alone. He needed us, his soldiers, his citizens. He was our philosopher king.

He would become quite flustered, dealing with people who were not his wife or children. Even dinners with his own parents made him loose his bearing, sometimes; afterward he would need to sit alone for a long time to find, as he said, North.

He was reading Pasternak the winter that he died. He had gone to see Dr. Zhivago in the theater three times. It was a hard winter for father. Even the youngest of us was then too old, too cynical to discuss socialist realism with our dad. The oldest was making plans to go away to New York City, where he hoped to smoke marijuana and become a dentist, ambitions that left Pop pops chilled to the bone. We were not so poor then. Somehow things had changed with mother's money, and what was initially only a small amount of capital, jewelry she sometimes sold and bonds in a suitcase, had, like rabbits or cattle, multiplied and become wealth. There was also capital, evidently, part ownership of certain industrial interests in the country of her parents' birth, that had devolved to her, after long nagging and seeking of legal advice and redress, so that we probably no longer needed to supplement our frugal groceries with fish and game, could have afforded, perhaps, to dress ourselves in some less unstylish clothes, but habit dies hard, and father, whose hair had grown quite wispy of late, and whose jaw was increasingly hard set, continued to go out after the deer with his fathers' fathers' gun.

We did not celebrate Christmas in our house, not in the traditional way. This was one of Mother's few demands. The rest, she said, the English and the in-laws and their church, and the gray country, and the fog, all of this was fine with her, but she was not prepared to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ with a fir tree. They were a pagan symbol, anyway, she said. Instead we had a haphazard kind of Hanukkah, in our brick house, with no menorah, but eight candles impaled on pewter spikes, little saucers with needles and thumb holes, arrayed on the mantle in the kitchen. You would have been able to see them the front door, which lead into the hall, and then through to the kitchen (the boys bedrooms were on either side). Guests would have been invited to bless the candles with us, our private winter ritual, but no guests ever came.

She covered her face when we blessed the candles. We would sing the prayer, a little Hebrew none of us except Pop Pops, who did not entirely approve, understood. And then we would eat our dinner, often something doughy, like biscuits with gravy, or some kind of savory pudding, or potatoes with cheese.

In the winter mother would kill chickens, out back behind the first barn. She would ring their necks and then wind them through the ancient chicken plucker, a rubber wheeled contraption into which we were warned never to allow our hands. But the chickens did not last us all the way until Hanukkah, even when we stretched them into pies and broths and soups, and there would often be a period, in the darkest weeks, or shortly thereafter, early in the new year, when we ate mostly starches at our house, heavily seasoned puddings and turn overs with mushrooms or root vegetables inside.

We were pasty looking children in the winter months, the big ones helping mother in the kitchen, the little ones playing in the sunless afternoon slush and clanging the old pump outside.

Later this was the time of year when father's ghost would make its presence most clearly known, when he became loudest to those of us still here, alive. He too would clang the handle of the pump sometimes before the break of day. We wondered, later, what brought him back, or kept him tied. Was it affinity for this piece of ground? For the gray mornings and the doughy sky? Or was it some work he wished he could have completed, some book not written or theory only begun. Or did he miss us? He may have grown weary of heaven, if it lacked the troops, the company of plaint soldiers, each bearing his imprint, his ears or nose, but unmistakably new, a novel thing, perhaps the only novel thing he ever made, born forth and loved in the soggy winter world.

Or was it Mother, with whom he could not part. Maybe our dead linger closer than we think, even the quiet dead, wanting to breathe in our breath, touch our quick wrists, hear our warm heartbeats. Maybe it was only that our father, always a clambering man, remained a clamberer for our attention, even after death.

There was a horse, Hilde, known only to the older children, and to them also only a dim memory from their earliest youth, who had once carried a doctor to night calls in a different era in a neighboring town. Hilda was a loyal steed. She never got over the death of her rider. She whinnied all the howling night and clanged in the barn. In the end they sent her away to make glue.

And when we were grown? Then where did he go? What happened to Pop Pops after mother sold the house and finally she too died and the rest of us grew old? What happened when we became plumbers and bankers and accordion girls? When we ceased to be a sea of faces, a sea of matching faces, the youth, the next generation, the Good News, the New World. What happened when we too became shabby and old?

We always wore very baggy clothes to school, because everything we owned had belonged first to someone else, if nor a brother or a sister then to Mother or Pops

himself. Mother's gray wedding dress made it's way into many a romper, a ribbon, a trim jacket or a good sash. The summer after Pop pops died we cut up all of his suits. Often the clothes we wore were ill fitting, too small already or still too loose, and sometimes the girl's, especially as they became shapely were told to leave school because their clothes were indecent. Mr. M., the Math teacher with whom father had once wrestled, and who later became the vice principal, was particularly fond of dismissing the too shapely Story children from his school.

That father had a hole in his heart, we learned one winter when the third son, Ezekiel, returned from medical school, a stethoscope in hand. He listened to each of our chests and confirmed, it was in me and it was in you. Like our noses and our misshapen clothing, the open fetal shunt, woosh—woosh was alive and functional in each of us, the irrigation of our bodies unconventional, foreshortened. Perhaps this too had something to do with the ashen complexion distant neighbors sometimes claimed to trace. Perhaps that was a noise his shadow, walking with us, impeding, oh slightly, our ability to walk, made. Whoso list, Ezekiel said. That's the rhythm. He let us listen with his stethoscope. And, remembering his diction, affected, seeped in King James, we supplied the end of the line.

Pulmones

We were biking to the desert in the south, where there were mummies I wanted to visit, and where you were supposed to be able to see millions and millions of stars. All the stars, a woman-mathematician I admired once wrote. She studied the lines that the pre-Incan civilization had etched into rock faces in the desert, and in the end had requested that her body be mummified after the fashion of the resinous, bleached Indians.

I doubted that you could see all the stars, really, but that is what I told Oskar when I called him, three weeks prior, out of the blue. You can see all the stars, I said. Come take me out of the slum. And he did. Oskar was good like that. He booked a ticket and, immediately upon arrival he bought us each a bicycle. That same day we bicycled up and out of the shantytown into the mountains.

This was not the first time Oskar had come to visit me abroad. His lifestyle accommodated travel. He had long chunks of unemployment, but he always had money. His last start up, from which he was ousted, apparently, involved online banking and African Dance and inner city youth, or maybe social media and refugees.

Some of the mummies had tuberculosis, I read on the Internet. They could tell, because the granulomas made their way into bone, especially into the big vertebrae of the lower back. I had tuberculosis too, but I didn't know it yet.

You are flushed, Oskar said the first night in our fifteen-dollar hotel room. He put the back of his hand to my forehead. Oh, I said, it is only from the ride. We had pushed hard, at my insistence, to get out of the city, up and up and up. But I was not exercising in my Lima life, and by the time we reached our little hotel room I was fagged. Oskar, between jobs in southern California, and he had been eating only

avocado and fish, which diet made his ski and hair look conditioned and his body shockingly sleek. The steep ascent didn't fatigue him.

When Oskar was very young his father had an aneurism. A vessel in his brain exploded, and he died on the spot. The family had been driving up five to go snowboarding somewhere near Yosemite, and his oldest brother, who was in the front seat, had to lean over Oskar's father's lifeless body and guide their van down an exit ramp. Oskar, who was still in a car seat when it happened, didn't talk about his dad.

I visited Peru for the first time nine years ago. I was studying structural violence and water born disease. This was the order of events: I moved back to Chicago for my second year of graduate school, into a clammy apartment with three economists who didn't like me; my mother became very sick (cancer); I decided I didn't care about anthropology; my mother died; and I dropped out of my PhD program and moved to Uruguay and then back to Lima, eventually.

A funny thing about people who live for many years in foreign countries is that in the beginning we look down on those among our number who spend too much time and money mixing with other foreigners—too many bars, too many hostels, too many pancakes with chocolate chips. We elite travellers cultivate local ties, try to learn indigenous languages, and sleep with drummers in all Peruvian punk bands. We frequent places where we are the only American. But then you are never more American than when you are the only American in the room, and the thing you are running from probably only makes sense to other people who are running from something too. So there is a second phase of expatriation when community doubles back on itself, and ties to other foreigners paradoxically matter again. We are a community of people who understand the impulse to escape community. We know you want to make yourself entirely new.

Then I had lived also in Bogota, for a while, but it had become too dangerous there, and my father, to whom I didn't feel I owed very much, but to whom I did owe some little scrap of something, some consideration of blood, told me he wanted me to leave. He was born in Bogota. He said that when he was a teenager the emerald trade was big, and you would be on the street someplace and someone would raise his eyebrows at you and open his mouth and there would be green under his tongue. Now it was dangerous because of cocaine.

I moved back to Lima, for what was then the third time, and, due to a complicated set of circumstances involving a young doctor who played mandolin.

I didn't think I was good for the doctor. He was four years younger than me, and he was a believer in the literal word. We would sit at night in lantern light in the shanty where he and one other man lived, after the other man had gone to sleep, and whisper and hold hands. We fucked too, but only intermittently. At night there were always moths indoors, drawn to the lantern flame, and so many mosquitos that you sometimes breathed one in.

The young doctor would leave the house each morning early, and I would walk back to my own shack, rented from a long time friend, who also ran an empanada stand. I would sleep for a few more hours and then I would walk down into the part of the city with buses and real roads, and I would catch the noon bus to my hostel, where I would shower and around one o'clock I would start frying pancakes. The backpackers liked theirs with bananas and chocolate chips. I would give people advice on where to travel next or where to find someone to fix their laptop, and if no one was around I would sit in the blue glow of one of the three old-fashioned macs and read the Internet.

My doctor would come get me sometimes, late in the evening, and we would walk home together up through the sprawl. Sometimes on Sundays, we would walk up to the green space above the shanty town, and hitchhike back down, and then in the

evenings he would sit on his stoop with the neighbors and sing and play the mandolin.

My young doctor didn't like Oskar, who represented, I suppose, any number of things that he recognized and had turned away from. The two of them had actually attended the same fancy university, but enough years apart that they did not recognize the other person's name. I told my little doctor that I was not sleeping with Oskar, had not slept with him since we were seniors in high school, which was technically true. The little doctor and I agreed that we should untangle ourselves anyway. But it didn't make my doctor, whose given name was Francis, and who wore his emotions transparent on his almost transparent face (he was very pale) look pleased.

I announced my departure only the day before Oskar arrived. These things should be done quickly, I believe, like pulling off a band-aide.

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It was not until we reached Nazca, on the seventh day, that Oskar told me he thought I might have TB. He thought I should come home to America, in case it was the drug resistant kind.

We were sitting near the head of what was supposed to be a giant monkey with a spiraling tail, a huge picture etched into the dry ground. You could only see it as a monkey from the air. From the ground it looked like demarcations on a gym floor. I thought about all of the alien enthusiasts—including my lady mathematician, about whom I used to think I might write a book someday—who had fixated on these images. She was right, the sky was very clear.

I remember having a conversation with Oskar about the bloated healthcare system in America, when my mother was sick, and we were taking her in for infusions in a

hospital built like a rocket ship, and she wasn't getting any better, and she asked the nurse if they could try infusing dollars into her. She was being sarcastic, but the nurse didn't understand. She asked if that had ever worked on anyone? I, still an anthropologist by trade, told her that in some cultures people did rub money, coins usually, across afflicted skin. Eventually she decided to stop treatment, even though she had good insurance; she didn't like doctors and the cancer wasn't going away. Oskar said we shouldn't call it bloated, we who were young and healthy. The people who should really judge if it was bloated, if the radiologists made too much money, if the buildings were too showy, the talkers too slick, were the very seriously ill.

Oskar said he suspected it because I had lost weight and because at I sweat so much at night. The last two nights we had camped, sharing a little orange tent. It was true, sometimes I when I woke up my t-shirt and the boxers I liked to borrow from my little doctor were completely wet.

I became very tired on the fifth and sixth days, so it had taken us longer to reach the southern desert than we had planned. The first thing we did when we arrived was share a roasted chicken and a beer, and then take a shower in our hotel. It was too late to visit the mummies, whose keepers went home for dinner, but Oskar and I decided anyway to bike up to the desert south of town and try to see the lines in the rocks and sand.

Oskar was one of my few ties to my childhood, to my young adulthood and the various earlier versions of myself. He was pray to fashion and to fads. I laughed at him sometimes, internally. But he forced a kind of honesty in me.

I asked him why, when he thought I was sick, he hadn't told me right away. I thought you knew, he said.

***

At first there is something cleansing about extreme poverty, something clarifying, you feel. But then the opposite thing happens, and the hard lives around you start to rub off, and you feel fatigued, and the pollution and the dry dirt kicked up from the road blots out the sun, and you start to feel uncomfortable, physically.

There was something I respected, something more honest, almost, if self-deluding, about the faith-based efforts at aid. There was something so dry about the other option—the statistics and the rubrics and the structural loans—and maybe something even more self-deluding about that approach (secular, positive). I liked that the religious people acknowledged that metaphor was at play, that what they were doing had meaning, that it wasn't only the doing itself. They were trying to see the poorest, my young doctor said, not save them. They were trying to fight invisibility.

You also have medicine, I said. You are also giving them pills to cure their TB.

***

Last year I had gone home for Christmas. My father didn't live with us when I was growing up, and I am an only child. I go see him in the distant suburb where he lives now with his much younger and stringy-haired girlfriend because I don't have any other family to visit, but I never stay long. I did not spend Christmas with them. I spent Christmas Day, like I used to, with Oskar and his brothers and his Mom. His father was some kind of cement mogul, and had left his mother and the boys plenty of money when he died. Oskar and his family were in a different social strata from me and Mom, but our mothers had a powerful bond that had to do with being single mothers. Even after Oskar and I broke up Mom and I would drive over for Christmas. This last year I got the same gift as all the daughters-in-law, a little bottle of expensive perfume, and one of his brothers had pretended to pinch my ass. Oskar's family believed we would get married eventually.

***

The little doctor grew up on a mink farm somewhere in Wisconsin. To feed the herd his father would drive around to dairy farms and buy up the "spent" cattle; corpses he would butcher and mix with old chickens, expired eggs, and cheese. This mix they called soup. They were good people, the little doctor said, but narrow-minded. And, yes, he said, he did believe God created the world in seven days.

We met because the dormitories where they housed the medical staff for the little clinic he was working for collapsed one afternoon. Luckily no one was inside them, but the foreign doctors and nurses needed somewhere to stay, and the clinic housed them, temporarily, in the little vacuna, the hostel where I made pancakes.

He was only twenty-six, but he was loosing his hair already. He would have a perfect tonsure someday. He believed that the world was created in seven days, and that Jesus died for our sins and descended to hell and on the third day rose again. He did not think that Jesus literally sat *on* God's right hand, he said, but he would have to ask someone who could read the Hebrew, maybe. He laughed. He was very patient.

He didn't sleep, which was how we got to know each other. For me, talking to this religious man about religion, felt a little like talking to a blind person about how they found their way around the city, or a terribly wounded person about their missing leg or something. But he had no shame or sadness. He let me come close to his wound to examine. He would sit at the bar at night, not ordering anything but studying big and ragged textbooks, after everyone else had gone to bed. Or, if not a textbook, he sometimes read an even more ragged copy of the New Testament. I asked him once if he washed his books at the laundry mat, and he laughed at that.

I was fascinated, and also embarrassed by my fascination, and afraid that I might embarrass him. But he never seemed defensive or disturbed. He said that yes, he

understood that we shared almost all of our genetic material with monkeys, but that he still believed in the story of Adam and Eve.

He had never been outside America. You are in America, I said. This is South America.

On Sundays he invited me to go to church with him. I'm not Catholic, I would always say. He wasn't Catholic either. He was some kind of heartland American protestant, non denominational. But he was a Christian, and he liked to go to Mass. Come to church with me, I said, finally and that was the first time we took our Sunday hike, up into the mountains, out of the salty, smoggy city, and then we hitchhiked back down. The two men who picked us up assumed I was the little doctor's girlfriend, and then after that in a way I was.

He thought sex outside of marriage was a sin. I tried moving away to Bogota, and then later I went home to California for the better part of a winter. He kept taking me back though, which, when I really thought about it, made me worried for him.

He owed an enormous debt to the federal government. He borrowed money to go to medical school, planning already never to repay them. He couldn't go back to America. And he didn't get along with his family.

I knew he had it to because he had been loosing weight steadily. I could understand, in an oblique way, how he could hide from himself the slowing and the weakening and the pallor, how he could overlook his own sickness, but I didn't understand how he could overlook the same in me. This was his vocation. This was what he was supposed to see.

***

Some people, my little doctor was one of them, are enamored of the idea that the ethical life is one that involves a kind of disappearing act, a shrinking of the ego, a hiding and a kind of abnegation or atrophy. I have disappeared before, slipping out of a city or a country, holding my breath as I close the back door. But I think this was fleeing responsibilities, running away rather than performing a Christ-like and essentially ethical move. He is good, my little doctor, kinder and more honest and better than me. I will tell him, of course, though he already knows. I'll call him from the hotel lobby. But I won't go home. Maybe he will interpret my departure as the ethical kind of disappearing, a reflection in the mirror or his martyrdom, a covering of the face at other people's pain.

Brain Cutting

Dr. M., I later learned, had trained as a general surgeon, but after the accident he was nearly blind, and so he became a psychiatrist instead. He was a gentle man. It was hard for me to imagine him in the military culture of the operating room. In the accident he lost his first wife and their son, Milton, named for a patriarch of her waspy clan, then almost one. They were driving home from a wedding on Cape Cod. Somehow M. neglected to turn his headlights on, and in the first rotary a Cadillac nosed right into the passenger side of the car. M. had been drinking, and he felt responsible, we were sure. At least they did not suffer. The wife, who was sleeping with the child in her arms, and the baby died quickly. M. was rushed to Mass General, where the surgeons saved his hand and lung and removed his leaky spleen. I heard his colleagues cried. Later they transferred him to the Eye and Ear Infirmary, where they could do little to restore his sight.

When I met M., during my residency, he was in his forties, but he looked like an older man. He had these hollow cheeks and a stoop and a blank, unfocused stare. But he had an unassuming warmth—not the sexual, almost predatory warmth of some psychiatrists, but something more honest and more shy. His specialty was pseudo seizures—psychogenic, non-epileptic spells. There are patients who can mime a seizure with maddening accuracy. There are various maneuvers one can use to try to tease out the sick brain from the sick mind—you can flick your fingers in someone's eye to see if they give themselves away with a blink, or you can raise their arm above her head, and let it drop, and see whether or not the patient protects her face. But to parse an electrical seizure from a "spell" with confidence you need EEG machines. Neurologists resent these people, understand their disease as a strange and elaborate dissembling. We accuse them of wasting resources, money and hospital beds and our valuable time. And we pass them along to people like M.

Dr. M. married my sister in the first year of my fellowship. When they married my sister was thirty-eight. My mother did not like him. No matter how kind he was, how gentle a person, she felt there was something scary in his blank leer. But my father liked him. And presumably my sister liked him; though there was always a bit of a mystery there.

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Shortly after M. married my sister, he and I shared a patient named Jack. Jack was a veteran of the first Iraq war. He had been hit in the head badly enough that we never did get the story entirely straight, though we knew it involved a helicopter, and he had both real epilepsy and psychogenic fits. On MRI his head looked horrific, skull fractured in two places, full of hardware, his brain essentially full of holes. In person he was surly and inappropriate, voice always too loud. He would sit there in his wheelchair in the waiting room, decrying injustice in the world: the shuttle schedule, the pain in his legs, his inability to find words (which was, it seemed to me, a terrible affliction, and unjust indeed). He was invariably uncooperative, as we wrote in his notes, with exam.

Unclear how much of this bad behavior, this "flavor" as the psychiatrists said, was due to the brain injury, and how much was due to the effect of the seizures on the brain, or how much was part of his underlying personality. I had a personal distaste for Jack because he had once made a very upsetting pass at me. That's what you get, sometimes, for trying to be an empathic, therapeutic ally.

He was on two big drugs for his epilepsy, which we believed was real, and worrisome. He once had a generalized seizure that sent him hurtling down his mother's stairs. But he would also come in telling vague, belligerent stories about "seizures" that didn't sound convincing at all (falling asleep in a bowl of salad, tingling in his fingers and toes). He had plenty of reasons to have periods of altered consciousness that were not seizures—the TBI, for one thing, and for another all the

drugs. And, needy and hostile as he was, it seemed not at all implausible that he would lie.

He had been in for long-term monitoring twice before. Long-term monitoring is the cynical test where they train a camera on your bed and wire up your brain and try to "capture" a real, electrical seizure on EEG. Or catch you faking it. On camera, Jack had both utterly fake seizures, in which he would jerk around and press the call button, and real electrical events, little partial seizures all through the night where, without waking up, he would wiggle his lips and tongue.

Jack came back that summer for a third round of long term monitoring. My attending worried it was possible that we were not controlling his real, multiple nidi, nests of abnormal activity in his swiss cheese brain, and that real seizures could either fry what was left of him or send him flying down stairs again (or out of bed or down in the shower or into the quarry in New Hampshire, now a deep lake, next to where he lived with his demented mother, his only company). I worried the opposite. I worried he was on too many drugs, and that the drugs were sedating, and had potentially serious side effects and interactions, with each other and with foods. This man was a time bomb, I thought. He might miss a dose for a few days, and then auto-correct, and eat a grapefruit, and get a gruesome, skin-scalding fatal rash, and that would be the end of Jack.

These were not his real concerns. Taking slightly more or slightly less medication was unlikely to change the miserable facts of his life (strange personality, intermittent inability to speak, need for connection along with terrible alienating ways of dealing with other human beings). But the question of more or less medicine was one that we had, in theory, a procedure to answer, so we brought him back.

During LTM, you are confined to bed, and we try to provoke a seizure. We dial down the drugs, and if that doesn't work we sometimes make you hyperventilate, and if

that doesn't work we deprive you of sleep. Jack was a nightmare to keep in the hospital for two weeks (although, oddly, he seemed to want to come in—we assumed that this whole circus of electrodes and attention met some need, for entertainment, for contact with ostensibly concerned human beings, that went otherwise unfulfilled). I didn't have to interact with him much, just read the EEGs, filtering the data the techs drew up, and presenting that to my nervous attending, and stopping by every day or so to say hello in the mornings. A formality. He gave the nurses hell.

On hospital day 10 of a planned admission for LTM, he started talking about suicide. The nurses paged. He wanted to jump in the quarry behind his mother's house. He wanted to jump out the window of his hospital room.

I put him on a sitter, a one to one supervising Haitian woman named Matilde, who listened to religious programming in her language on a portable radio trained her eyes on the desperate and the old people who sometimes tried to wander away. And I made my intern consult M., then newly my brother in law, on a patient J., well known to our service and to him. Question—provocative statements about suicide.

***

The Eye and Ear Infirmary is a strange place. Today beautiful, angular young women of diverse ethnicities man the ship. Some wear headscarves. They run a special emergency room, exclusively for crises of the eye. Late at night, the ophthalmologists, who are all elbow and cheekbone, take the keys from the nurses station all the way up to the twelfth floor, where there is an empty cafeteria, overlooking the Charles. They fill their purses with packaged muffins and vinegar chips in defiance of the rising sun. Sometimes I bring my breakfast there. When I am on service I like to arrive very early in the morning. I ride the train from Uphams Corner, where I own a house that might be called a tenement, with three floors and a hole in the roof over the back hall. I make notes on paper charts and drink my

thermos of hot tea. They register that I am out of place, the beautiful young optometrists, but they do not question me.

Back when M. was a patient there, one assumes the residents were young men. He regained some vision to his left eye, enough to distinguish light from dark, and name colors, and count fingers at two feet, but they could not fix his right eye or face, which was mangled by the steering wheel. Rarely, trauma to the forehead can damage the delicate fibers of vision just before they plunge into the brain. We assume that this is what happened to him.

He did not turn to psychiatry after the accident, he said, because he had changed under the weight of tragedy. He had almost gone into it the first time around, fifteen years earlier, in an era when, in some parts of the country, they still performed lobotomy, and physicians still read Freud.

His family came from Poland after the Second World War. They descended from a long line of mad aristocrats. A recurring belief across the generations was that one's stomach was made of glass. These pale, long fingered young men, piano playing men who read Rilke and smoked opium on isolated garden paths, would eat no hard vegetables or meets, but only soups and soft purees. One or two had been locked up.

His psychiatrist (during medical school he had undergone analysis) thought everything had to do with the Holocaust. His parents had been interred separately, and both seen terrible things, his mother more than his father, he believed. They had both come close to death, had seen it and smelt it and known its cold hands on their own warm skin, but that was only one part of them. And they talked about it openly. They did not keep it bottled up. Their neurosis were older than the trauma of the war—his father's ego large and engulfing, unable to assimilate what did not please him, jovially casting out pieces of the world, pieces of their family life as unreal—his mother's rather brittle (she came from the line with the glass—her grandfather,

whom she remembered fondly, had suffered from this malady), fearful and easily abused.

Dr. M., who was then not a doctor but a gangly young man, feared analysis, feared another man purporting to interpret the deep structures of his life (then still as yet relatively pure, without violence or injury or marital infidelity). This was, he said, the most important part of the process for him, acknowledging that he did not entirely know himself, and that the psychiatrist, while he too could not know M. in his entirety, might have access to angles, to vistas, that M. himself could not see.

There was something, he felt, quite blunt, quite crude about psychoanalytic thinking, all of the incest and death drives and transgressive, animal longings. But then there was something powerful in that gesture of submitting. Perhaps it was less crude for men, he said. When women submitted to analysis (submit being his word, not mine), they were submitting, in effect to history, to the double story of their inwardness and objectivity. But for him the experience was healing. It was not that he learned to blame and then to forgive his parents, but that he learned that blaming and forgiving was ok, that one could go one indefinitely blaming and forgiving, that this was perhaps the only way to live in a family.

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My father is a doctor. He is an ob gyn of the old school, unrelentingly scientific, unable to engage with the sexual or political nature of his work. My mother is a nurse. They bear one another no great affection.

My mother thought my sister was throwing herself away on M. Perhaps she was. Emma is very beautiful. Still. She is eight years older than me. She has a doll's face, with big eyes and a small chin, and wonderful dark hair and pale skin. She was never all that interested in men, and I suspected, for a long time, that she was a lesbian. M. considered that there might be truth in that. My sister worked at Children's hospital,

with the misshapen babies. They usually did not live. One of the physicians she worked with knew M. socially, and set them up on a date, despite their disparate ages. M. was such a gentle person, and my sister such an even tempered nurse, so competent, clearly suited to be a mother, that everyone who knew either of them was forever setting them up with other single friends. They were the favorite projects of their respective communities. And so it was inevitable, perhaps, that they would bow to that pressure and proceed from sexless first date to sexless married life. When I asked for details, which I occasionally sank so low as to need, M. told me that they had sex in the beginning, just enough to realize that there would be no children.

***

People who have had traumatic brain injury sometimes have a recurrence of their original symptoms—loss of speech or dexterity or a global confusion—when their bodies are otherwise strained. We call this recrudescence. M. was amnesic in the immediate aftermath of his accident, could not remember the events of the day before, the dancing or the wedding, and could not remember what had happened after, the hospital, the funeral. The first thing he can recall after the accident is crying in a rehab bed while he listened to a presidential debate on TV. Occasionally, later in life, when he had a bad flu, or when he had cancer in the end, he would have little episodes of recrudescence, days at a time during which he would loose track of the flow and order of things.

Once, when we were in France together, he ate some bad oysters, and later that day he threw up in a church, and that night he did not know me. We were spending the night in Chartres, near the grim suburb of Gallardon where he and his parents had briefly lived. We ate oysters for an early lunch, in a little restaurant near the coast of Brittney, and then drove south, toward Paris, for our flight that left the evening of the following day. There must have only been one or two bad ones, because nothing happened to me. He threw up in the famous cathedral, all by himself. I did not visit

museums or churches or historical landmarks then. I did not like to do anything that remotely resembled work when I travelled. I wanted things to be only beautiful and easy. I was tired. I could manage only landscape, which, sadly, had no appeal for M. He liked to visit churches. He liked the smells and sounds, he said, the sounds of vaulted ceilings. He could see enough to light a candle, which he did for his mother, who had believed.

He had had to sit down in a small chapel for Mary, and then he knew he was going to be sick, and he felt ashamed to throw up in a church, but it was already upon him. He made it back to the hotel, and lay down on top of the bedding. When I arrived home in the evening he told me that his stomach was made of porcelain.

I didn't like taking care of M. There were many sad overtones. I knew that he was an old man, that he would decline first, that he would be old while I was still young. I knew that he was not really mine to take care of. But I bundled him off to a French hospital, where they gave him fluids in the arm, and he bravely.

***

Jack did not do well. He died in November of that year, not from anything having to do with his brain, or from suicide, but from an infection from an artificial knee he needed because of a different injury from a different war. M. had, in the course of the unfortunate man's hospital stay, formed something of a relationship with him. Enough so that, when we heard he had died, up in a New Hampshire VA, he telephoned.

It was a Saturday or a Sunday, and I was just putting some notes in order before I changed into my tennis shoes and gathered up the laundry and food I had left in my office to haul with me in a shopping bag on the train. I was surprised that he called me. We were not close, either through my sister, or professionally. I said good morning to M. in the hospital, but apart from a Rosh Hashanah dinner at my parents'

house, and one birthday party for an old neighbor and family friend, I had not seen the couple since the wedding in May.

In a not at all intrusive way he wanted to tell me how he felt about Jack (frustrated, disgusted, sad) and maybe also about death (his father died earlier that year, at the age of ninety-nine, he had been living in a nursing home, a widower since the seventies). He was not overly emotional, claiming a bigger portion of some strangers' tragedy for himself than he could hold, nor was he cold. He did not try to make jokes about Jack or about death. These are things doctors do that I dislike.

There is something old fashioned and intimate about really talking over the phone. Perhaps as with letter writing, forms of communication accrue meaning or patina or nostalgic weight and overtones as they pass from use.

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We only knew that Jack had died because, through complex academic wrangling, we were taking receipt of his brain.

On Friday mornings we held brain cuttings. We gathered early in the morgue, and someone presented the story, and the most senior person in the room asked various other people to describe their thinking about the case, extemporaneously. I do not like it. We sliced the brain with a bread knife. And the morgue is cold and smells of bodies. A fear of death lies at the heart of the thing, but there is also something more complex than that, something closer to Hamlet's graveyard soliloquy—Imperious Caesar dead and turned to clay might stop a hole and keep the wind away. There is something almost intolerable about that level of gross materiality. In medical school I fainted on the first day of anatomy.

Unfathomably, M. wanted to come to see Jack's brain.

The turn out was poor, as we all knew Jack, and knew the story, and there was not much of a role for suspense or mystery. The brain was badly damaged, that was all. And you couldn't even see much of the damage because, by that point, the specimen was a week old. The department Chair was reduced to calling on medical students, quizzing them. The students go by so quickly, one after another, an anxious blur. Having passed through the same gauntlet oneself, one feels for them, wants to give them some encouraging words, but they are gone again and replaced by new ones, equally over and underinformed, almost as soon as they arrive. I attended, as Jack was my patient most recently, so I presented the story. M. came, which I thought was both morbid and quaint. Also strange, because he could not see the brain. In the end one of the dieners (that is truly what we call them, still) let him hold in his gloved hands some of the slices of bruised organ, so he could run his fingers over the misplaced contours, the soft places and curdled indentations.

We walked out together, and he asked if I was on call tonight. I was not. Did I want to get dinner with him? We could get a drink and burger at one of the restaurants near the hospital.

***

We both drank more than we expected to. The dinner, which was spaghetti, we had decided on instead of burgers, was slow, and we had two beers each before the food came, and then we shared a bottle of wine with the meal. I am not a big drinker, and neither is he, I would learn. But somehow it seemed like a good idea to get drunk that night. He told me the story about the aristocrats with the glass stomachs, and how he was interested in psychiatry from the beginning, in part because of his mother's family, in part because he felt more comfortable in the world of language than anywhere else, but then he had fallen in for the charisma and the prestige of surgery, you fix it and you are done, and he had always excelled at school, and he had earned himself a spot (with the help, he admitted readily, of some of his father's family friends) in one of the more charismatic and prestigious places for it.

We did not sleep together that night, or for many weeks after, but somehow that evening the idea arose, was recognized but not spoken aloud, was born into possibility.

***

I believe we started off for reasons that were selfish. I have always competed with my sister and felt that, in the important realms, she won. She is soft and sociable and easily loved. I would see M. at the hospital, late in the evenings, dictating softly to the computer screen. He understood my giddiness and fatigue. We talked about patients first, gossiping really, about these peoples' sad and convoluted lives. Later we talked about ourselves. I made the first move. I invited him to dinner at my house, the house I purchased a year before, alone, assuming that now was the time to invest in real estate, that there was no partner likely to appear at this late hour. I felt so old during my residency. I have not felt so old since then. The house I bought was a duplex in a rough neighborhood. It came with elaborate woodwork and one stained glass window and many, many rats. I rented the downstairs apartment to a sweet old couple from Cape Verde who cared for an ever-changing cast of grandkids and great grandkids. The hour was very late, and the invitation was very clearly what it was. Why he stayed with me, why he continued to "spend the night at his office," and sneak away for "conferences" I think that I more or less understand. Two people grow dependent on each other for many things, for closeness and witnessing, for all of the sisters and brothers and brothers in law of love. But I don't know why he came with me the first time. He was an upright soul. And he still loved her, he said, at that time. Later their bond would weaken and change. He didn't know either exactly what made him agree. You are very pretty, he said. I said you couldn't have known that. You can't see.

***

Emma was home with my mother when she died—of ovarian cancer—Dad's specialty. She moved back into my parents' home when Mom was diagnosed, and Emma cut back her hours after they tried the experimental drug and Mom got this terrible neuropathy. She couldn't cook anymore, or button her clothes. She couldn't stand up to walk to the bathroom. It was very bad, worse than the cancer in a way, which filled her belly and lungs with fluid, stretched her out like a giant bladder, a woman shaped balloon, but it was the clumsiness that was really debilitating. Dad was at work, of course, as was I. Dad was in surgery that morning. I was in clinic. I cancelled my last patient, but I didn't get home in time. By that point hospice was involved, and we had all said our goodbyes. But then, as in so many other moments, I had the sense that I, in overreaching, in trying too hard, I had done it wrong and Emma, in her calm way had got it right.

When Emma moved back to the house on Dartmouth St. to take care of Mom (and Dad too, in a way, because Mom couldn't cook or wash his clothes, and if someone else didn't cook for Dad, we laughed, he didn't eat), they didn't call it moving out, they called it going up the street.

The winter of the trial drug was the winter when Boston had all the snow—day after day of it, week after week. To make up for lost time the schools had to run through June. The trains would shut down and the busses, and at the hospital many of us were sleeping in the narrow bunk beds in call rooms near the emergency room. When we didn't have to stay overnight, out of concern we wouldn't make it in the following day, necessary staff, M. spent the nights with me. We would stagger our departures, him first usually, and when I got home he would be cooking something. For us this was a period of sudden intimacy but also fighting. I am a difficult person to live with, I believe. There are reasons, beyond my affection for M., why I never married. We fought about how to fill the dishwasher, when to replace the milk, myriad meaningless domestic things. I had three cats, and I was forever accusing M. of overfeeding or underfeeding or spoiling or ignoring the feral things. I wanted him nearby, but I also felt suffocated, unable to regroup in solitude, unable to quietly

knit, which I liked to do sometimes to tune out, the products always ugly, but the repetitive motion soothing, or read. And I was feeling sad and anxious about my mom.

He was feeling sad and anxious, too, I suspect, though he deflected those feelings away from me. We didn't talk about it until much later, but that winter Emma realized. She did not read his emails or check the messages in his phone or search his wallet for receipts. We were careful about all of these things. But she knew that he wasn't living at home, his bed undisturbed, the frozen dinners and packed lunches untouched. He wanted to go back, to try harder to keep up the façade, but I wouldn't let him. I would invent excuses. I had a radio show I wanted to listen to with him. I would need help shoveling.

When there was no public transportation we left the hospital together. This seemed not too strange to our colleagues, who were bunking up together in all manner of ways. And they knew we were related. I guess he finally used that excuse with Emma, told her that because there was to train he was going to drive home with me, and she accused him of doing exactly what he was. This was out of character for her, the poor, mild mannered thing. She didn't like to make other people feel bad. He denied it to her, which he later regretted, he told me.

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When we were children my parents owned a house in the Berkshires. One summer, when I was maybe ten and my sister eighteen, the time in our lives when the eight year gap between us seemed the most wide, she got what must have been some kind of viral encephalopathy. What I remember was that she became profoundly sleepy, getting up in the morning early and then going back to bed, sleeping on the porch rocking chair, slouching over her dinner. Mom was a little bit of a hypochondriac (until the very end, when she seemed indifferent to all of her ailments, and she no longer cared what other diagnoses they add on, she only wanted her children near

her and her little bit of morphine). When we were little she was always calling Daddy about us at work, and he was always yelling at her for worrying about every little thing. They are healthy girls, he would insist. But when Emma got sick that summer, and he finally broke down and allowed himself to be fearful, he became very scared. First he took her first to an ED out in Western MA, my dad with Emma, my mom at home with me. But something about the country doctors worried or offended him, and so he bundled her off, acutely feverish and encephalopathic, and drove her all the way back to Boston, to Brigham, to be seen by his colleagues.

We were not country people. Dad bought the little house for Mom, because she insisted that he needed to relax, and that a little place in the woods would be relaxing. Most of the time it was just the three of us girls out there, Emma taking care of both Mom and me. Dad would come on the weekends. Mom suffered from what she used to call nerves, but what I would later describe to M. as a crippling lack of self-esteem. She did not like to write checks, fearful that she would overdraw or miscalculate. She did not like to drive long distances alone (getting out to Western MA could be harrowing). She did not like to be home alone when the plumber came. It was hard for us girls to entertain ourselves. Emma was our camp counselor. She would organize day trips to the music festival or short hikes. She was athletic in high school, and she would go for long runs by herself in the woods because, away from Boston for the summer, she could not train with her cross-country team. But when Dad was around Mom looked to him and not to Emma. Then Emma would become quieter, almost shy, relegated to the land of children with me in the back seat.

Once Mom let slip to me that she and Dad had only planned to have one child. Was I a mistake, I asked. They should have been able to manage contraception of all things. No, not a mistake. I was hoped for and welcome, she said. They changed their minds. I may have been a last ditch attempt to save their marriage, I think. Emma made them very happy, or if not very happy at least purposeful and allied with each other and filled with family meaning. Maybe they wanted another infusion of that thing.

She got better at the hospital. My mother and I drove back to Boston to be with her. They only kept her a few days. They said it was probably a virus, something born by mosquitos or ticks or birds, not something they tested for, and she got better so quickly. I don't think we went back to the camp after that. Ultimately, I think Mom decided it was not relaxing.

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He did not discuss my sister with me, that would have been bad form, but one assumed that on the evenings when he went home to her, evenings few and far between, they had little to say. When I was young I speculated that perhaps she was a lesbian, not because she was a tomboy, quite the opposite, but because she was so entirely self-contained. Later I thought maybe that was just her way. Perhaps she too had lovers, or a lover, all of those years, or perhaps not. Maybe she just came home and read novels from the library across the street and listened to the radio, and on the weekends she walked to the grocery store and her yoga class, and she was content. I needed M., but I needed his presence in carefully calibrated quantities, not too much or too little. We were always fighting about that. Why did he not leave her? He never offered to and I never asked.

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When Mom died it was March. We just had the first thaw, and the ice on the Charles was wet and Balkanized. I went in early that morning, and ate my breakfast in the cafeteria with the post call super models in ophthalmology, and I remember suspecting that today might be the day. At that point any day might have been her last one. We had all said the important things to each other, I love you, I am sorry, I am grateful to have been brought up by you, or it gave me joy to bring you up. I am proud of you, exactly as you are. She had a kind of peace at the end, and insight, Emma and I both thought, and generosity. Emma was fighting with M., and I was

fighting with M., but paradoxically I was getting along with Emma, and with Mom. When I went home to the house on Dartmouth Street and spent a weekend with them, Emma would pull me into the kitchen and talk about Mom in a confidential tone. Had Mom pooped this week or not. Was she comfortable on the morphine drip or too sleepy. How calm she had finally become in the face of real calamity. It made me feel trusted, and perhaps as though the generations had flipped, and Emma and I had become the parents, sublimating our conflict.

Dad was not doing well. Emma said he was avoiding Mom's room almost entirely. We could not blame him, we said. Loosing your partner of thirty years, even if there was bitterness there, was something we couldn't imagine. And we had to let him process these things in his own way (we said this resolutely, as though there were a chance we would intervene and make him behave differently, make him face the way he had disrespected or controlled Mom, controlled or ignored us, make him see and make amends. Of course we would do no such thing. We did not wield that kind of power with Dad). If Mom minded, she certainly did not say.

At home, the snow had melted, and the rotting pumpkins were exposed where my tenants' grandchildren had smashed them in the autumn, all around our porch and driveway. M. thought that I should be a better landlord, should keep things cleaner and, in general in better repair. He had a lot of feelings about one's physical environment and a kind of civic or at least domestic morality. That winter he yelled at me about these things: the leaky roof, the pumpkins.

He yelled at his first wife a great deal, M. once told me. We were driving home together from Quebec, where he had attended a conference, and I had eaten gelato alone in the sunshine. He yelled at his first wife, he said, both because he was a surgeon then, and up to his elbows in a culture that rewarded aggression, sharp looks, and yelling. It was common in the OR for people to snap at each other—the one who was snapped at, if he was not too low ranking to open his lips, would sometimes say, hey, you are not married to me. There was an odd assumption that

aggression was at home in domesticity, foreign to the operating room. The other reason he yelled at her (she never yelled back) was that they were, for each other, very poorly matched. She was an artsy type, listening to Black spirituals and writing poetry. He said that he was probably acting out some conflict within himself by marrying her, some clash between the apollonian and dionysian or something. She was really very interesting, he said, but hard to live with, especially then, when his career was most demanding. Living with her, he could not be any of the spontaneous or creative parts of himself. She smoked clove cigarettes.

My mother died well. I can say that of few patients I have cared for in the hospital. She died in her own bed, with at least one of her daughters close at hand. Emma was not actually with her at the moment she died, she was lying down in the next room, but she had been in and out all night and all morning. I cancelled my last patient of the day when Emma said things were getting worse, with her weird eye movements and her breathing. She lived poorly (or not poorly all in all, but she made some poor choices along the way, marrying my father, allowing herself to be plowed under by his strong personality and her own probably clinical and untreated anxiety). But she died well.

I did not clean up the rotting pumpkins, or, later that spring, the mattress pad that appeared in our lawn. But someone else threw out the mattress pad, maybe my new Samoan tenants, the two woman sharing the basement one bedroom. M said that he refused. But no one cleaned up the pumpkins, and the next year two new pumpkins, fresh and orange, grew where we left the old ones in the mangy front yard.

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When M. died we sat Shiva for him, in my parents' house on Dartmouth Street, where Emma and my father now lived. After my mother's death they sold the house that M. and Emma bought jus a few blocks away, because Emma was living in our childhood home, anyway—she didn't feel that it was safe or acceptable to leave

Daddy home alone at that point—and M. was for all intents and purposes living with me. Daddy's decline must have started before Mom died, but somehow we didn't notice it until after, when it seemed like he was really senile really suddenly. They made him retire from his clinical roles, though they found a few dribs and drabs for him, presenting awards, taking would be residents out to dinner, teaching the very new medical students about female anatomy. But after a while he had to step back from even those things. His personality changed. Mom became clearer at the end, more resolute, and more generous with that newfound resolution. Daddy became muddled, but less obstreperous. He was, in his dotage, melancholy and confused but kind. Emma took over with him, doing the bills, driving to doctor's appointments (at first he refused to go—Daddy had not seen a doctor in nearly ten years, it turned out—he didn't like them—but Emma in her firm and gentle way convinced him), in the evening taking him for walks.

Emma was the one who wanted to sit shiva, even though she and M. were not at all practicing, and M. was raised Catholic and had never converted or anything. She said it was for the living and not the dead. We had done it for Mom, but it had gone kind of disastrously. Emma walked into the kitchen while M. and I were fighting quietly, and it was obvious what we were. She had given us no hard look or words, but we both felt terrible then. I felt conflicted about the situation in a way I hadn't since the first few nights. And it was a strange seven days because, apart from us, Mom had few relatives or close friends.

With M. it was different; he had mentored many young doctors, and had a circle of men with whom he sometimes played chess, and a handful of old surgeon colleagues. The house was full of people who loved and respected him. M. had developed a tremor in his good hand in the last few years, and his gait had slowed, and his face had changed. We all suspected Parkinsonism. It is my belief that he took his life when the disease started clouding his brain. Nothing dramatic. He died at my house, in our bed, or rather next to it. I found him on the floor, alone one Sunday afternoon while I was buying groceries. I had to call Emma then. She instructed me

to call a funeral home, and have them pick him up. We buried him quietly. All of him except for his brain, which, against my express wishes he left to the medical school, for the advancement of science. I cannot say for sure that he took his own life, he had a motive and the means. He was on warfarin then, for his heart, and it was entirely possible that he overdosed on that, rat poisoning turned medicine, tripped and fell and had some kind of bleed in his head. The brain cutting would show, but I chose not to attend.

When I came home on the seventh day (I had been granted the status of a first degree relative, by Emma, my colleagues, and somehow the rabbi), it was Halloween. The women from Samoa had pumpkins out again. They were whole pumpkins, not carved. I smashed them in the front yard.

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They put him next to his first wife, all except his brain. I moved hospitals, then, because I was tired. I went to work at a smaller institution, on the other side of the Charles, where I could see the river from our epilepsy clinic, and from my office I could see the cemetery where they buried him.

Emma married again, and at the last possible fertile moment, and with the help of technology, gave birth to a baby boy, who is precocious and sensitive in all of the best ways. She and her new husband, who was a Buddhist monk formerly, moved to a small farm where they raise their thoughtful child and chickens, occasionally. I still think of her with envy.

When I sold my tenement and moved, with my cats, to an apartment, I also bought a plot of land in the same cemetery, not next to, but near M. and his first wife, who I never knew, the poet who smoked dark cigarettes. Occasionally I leave flowers or, once, pumpkins, on the graves.

"True, True, and Unrelated" or The Color of the Sky

The man across the isle wore a beard and gold corduroys and a moth eaten sweater the color of the darkest leaves, a soft burgundy, and no wedding ring.

Lily was explicitly in pursuit of colors this weekend. She worked as a radiologist, in a dark room in the basement of a children's hospital, looking at black and white images on a computer screen, and when she was on vacation she paid special attention to the colors of things, naming them and sorting them and storing them away.

Like other middle aged, middle class Bostonians she was travelling north to enjoy the more prime autumn foliage. She found the train more relaxing and more romantic than driving alone.

Out her window the fall was, indeed, exuberant.

Lily was not a romantic person, generally. When she was young, she had wanted to be a painter for a time, and when it became clear to her that she did not have the talent, or the patience, or the ability to tolerate uncertainty (which are so much a part of that world—what strength of will it must take), she had done a graduate program in art history instead, and hated it. Then, finally, as a repudiation of all of that had she gone to medical school.

Her work now employed the technical skills of art history (much like a strong fingered pianist might make a good milk maid, or a dancer might also make a good currier, what with her strong calves and light frame), without any of the affect or aesthetics or story. She was a noticer only by trade. She noticed fractures (the bad kind and the funny, benign kind that toddlers got walking down stairs because they still didn't know how to bear their weight correctly), and she noticed coins in the belly and peanuts in the right lower lobe bronchus.

Neither was she romantic, anymore, in the other sense of the word, in matters of love and sex and all those things. In the past she had loved an architect, a deep voiced man of humble origins who had been a carpenter, but then los his thumb in an accident, and went back to school with his workers' comp. That had gone awry because she was too regimented. When she was younger still, struggling through graduate school, there had been a great love, an energetic, affectionate man with whom she rode bicycles up and down the Rhine. He was a professor now. They had talked about marriage, but he left her on a boat, finally, unable to tolerate her outbursts.

But none of that had happened, none of those putative partnerships, and her life was what it was. She had reached an age when it was unlikely that she would marry, she considered, and almost impossible that she would have children. Some of her sadness around this was connected to ego (babies belonging to the constellation of achievements that we imagine for ourselves in ambitious youth), but some of it stemmed from real loneliness as well.

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That child was born at home. Her mother was a city person, an educated woman with formerly stylish hair, who wanted to be a film maker and wanted to be an anthropologist, and had come very close to a kind of local success in each of those things, within the rarified circles in which she travelled, but had always at the last moment shot herself in the foot. Once she actually shot herself in the foot—that was the closest she ever came to suicide. She was in her father's garage, back from what felt like a waste of a year in Delhi. Now she lived on a farm, killed chickens, and sharpened knives. The father was an older, religious man. He may have been a lunatic. He was had formerly converted and joined the Mennonite community, which was real and robust where they lived, in their soft Pennsylvania valley, but he

had fallen away from the flock. He feuded with his neighbors over grazing rights and fence mending and adult baptisms and all manner of basically medieval things.

The birth was unremarkable. Everything happened smoothly, mother and child exhausted afterward, but unharmed. The father was stunned. They barely put her down, but took turns alternately sleeping and holding the baby.

The mother, who told the father she had not meant to have a baby, but may have conceived her duplicitously, loved that child mercilessly, all the same. The mother had a tendency to give up on things just before they gave up on her. For example, when she felt that she was falling behind in graduate school, falling to the wayside or out of the running, when her work seemed to languish unlauded and unseen she turned her attention to film, and for four years she had recorded everything. And when her projects did not come together as she hoped (those images of North African women walking into Europe wearing all the clothes they owned, like some strange enveloped species, swaddled, desperate adults, they were beautiful images, but she could not string them together into a compelling unified thing), when her projects didn't work and she anticipated that she would not be granted a grant again, she returned to her dissertation and tried to lay claim to an intellectual identity. But it didn't fit. She didn't have the right patience, the right skills or cast of mind. She felt that things withered when she tried her hand at them.

She met the father trying to make a documentary about the empty mansions left behind after the bubble in the housing industry. She was trying to film herself blowing bubbles inside of these lofty, anonymous, uninhabitable follies. She married him out of what may have been spite. Her former lover, who was a poet, had grown cold toward her, had moved to teach at a sad college in the middle of the country.

So, instead of finishing her bubble project, or following the poet to the plains, or finishing her PhD, she married a religious lunatic and moved to the country. She recognized in this pattern a kind of one upsmanship, a kind of outbidding and out

doing of tomfoolery. But, she promised herself, she was not going to abandon the project of that child. She was not going to jump ship for anything else. This was it, the threshold of real, intransigent adulthood, a thick and obdurate responsibility.

On the sixth day of her third month she started vomiting. She vomited on the mother and on the father and then on the cradle they had barely laid her in. On the seventh day they brought her to the hospital.

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Medicine emphasizes the sameness in people, because it is only through their sameness, same pieces of anatomy, and same patterns of thought, that they can be fixed, or at least intervened on. The man across from her likely had some age related changes in his pancreas, maybe even his brain, had some calcium in his aorta, probably some osteoarthritis and degenerative disk disease.

Lily knew what the insides of people looked like.

She considered talking to the man, asking him about To The Lighthouse, which he held in his lap, his index finger holding place somewhere near the middle, his other hand scratching his beard. Or telling him what she thought of Wolfe, but she couldn't think of anything at once clever and innocuous to say. It was an impossible hurdle. The desire to flirt, to be found attractive was not dead in her, nor the desire to have sex, even, but there was a stiffness and a pride that had accumulated around these things, had settled in her over the years.

She wondered if he had anything bad. He would be the right age for something bad to grow inside him, especially if anything ran in his family.

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That child had a tiny thickening in her gut. An olive is what they compared it to on x-ray. The outlet from the stomach had closed over just as it becomes the proximal bowel, the busy duodenum.

What was more troubling about that child's tiny x-ray, she seemed to have two rib fractures, one new and one old. Fractures at different stages of healing over, different stages of interdigitating and recalcifying into bone, different intensities of fusion and scar, these are a give away for abuse. Lily called the emergency room about the olive, and then, reluctantly, called CPS.

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They did not bring her to Philadelphia, which would have been closer, though not by much, but all the way to Boston, where Eseu did not fear that his wife would take comfort from people not part of his world.

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Her role, like that of the mortician, was to hold something untouchable, to know in an intimate way the things other people did not want to know about the body.

Usually, under the beam or the magnet, the body revealed only itself, only the stories of biology (sad and lovely in themselves--once she had seen in a ninety year old a calcified pregnancy, a little fishy baby, turned by time to stone, to fossil, to lyme, attached ectopically, out in the peritoneum), but sometimes it revealed the sad stories of domestic life.

Lily's mother drank. She drank expensive red wine, as though the vintage disguised the thirst. She would drink while she cooked dinner, and drink with the evening meal, always very fine, sometimes very late. This was considered normal (grossly normal, as radiologists would say). But then she had some traffic accidents, and, at

the insistence of Lily's father, and the various grandparents and uncles and aunts (from whom, let it be known, mother very much resented the advice) she tried to quit. And when she tried to quit she would stop for a time and then she would binge, alone in the daytime on the third floor. Twice she beat Lily so badly that they had to go to the hospital, both times for finding her in the attic, passed out or nearly passed out, but then waking and finding the energy to flog her child.

They sent her to live with her mother's parents after that. At least they did not send her to foster care. The whole situation was made easier by the fact that there was so much money in the family, so much wealth and stability to be to be thrown at the problem, so much austere, protestant concern to be tossed around. Lily hated living with her grandparents, though. She felt it was a punishment, as, in a way, did they. Later they sent her to boarding school.

Now, Lily had done a great deal of therapy as a young woman, and felt somewhat distant from the events of her childhood, and knew that the child was the victim, always, and that it was part of her job as a physician, even an ex ray reading physician, to protect her. But she never felt one hundred percent comfortable doing things this way. She felt there would be more harm done in foster care (maybe different harm, maybe more of the same), and that sometimes families had to work things out internally. She had voiced this to trusted colleagues once or twice before, and everyone conceded that these situations, situations of "intentional harm," as they say, were complicated, but others had a clarity, and a push, and a sense of heroism. They did not doubt that calling CPS (which, in the end, they were obligated by law to do, anyway) was the right thing, nor that there was such a thing as the right thing at all. Medicine makes everyone the same, because on sameness it is possible to intervene.

***

The father of that child feared the woman he had married, out under the willow tree down by the pond. He found her beautiful and forceful, but not, ultimately, good. He married her because they slept together, once, in a cheap hotel next to train tracks near the swampy boarder of New Jersey, and felt that God meant for him to marry her after that. For example, when she returned to his house the following weekend, she demanded to move in (this was an example both of her forward willfulness and, in his mind, confirmation that marrying her was part of God's plan). She would stay and help him harvest the winter vegetables, the gourds and all the kale, and pick through the marijuana that actually brought him income. Sometimes he hired teenagers for that, but it made him uneasy to have strangers in the house, especially half grown strangers, blunt faced youth who smoked too much pot themselves, who might try to cheat him, might let his enemies in, and he agreed to let the woman stay, on the condition that they not engage in any further fornication, and she said maybe they should get married then.

They were married the next month, by a lady pastor who drove out from Pittsburg. His wife had found her, a Unitarian. They did not invite any family or friends.

She opened the curtains and washed the windows to let the sunlight in. She washed the sheets and the pillowcases on his bed. She brought groceries from Walmart, shitake mushrooms, and cloves, and cinnamon, back in the trunk of her distinctive car, and she cooked real meals for him. And to deal with the mouse problem she found a cat. And she cleared out wordlessly when his buyers came in. And he desired her, and she was affectionate. She didn't want to listen to him read the Bible aloud at night, and she told him she had complicated feelings about religion, and that she probably didn't believe in the resurrection. This confirmed his suspicion. She was here to be saved, and a helpmate to him.

When she got pregnant (though she said she wouldn't) was when he started to worry that she might represent a more complicated kind of temptation. She grew less affectionate, not kissing him first thing in the morning, or in the evening when

he came in, like she had, or running her hands, when he sat in a chair and she passed by, absently over his bald head, not, frankly, smiling at him. And there were two difficult weekends when she left, drove back to the city where she used to live, to do he didn't know what, left without telling him.

And it occurred to him that it might not be his child. She could easily have done what she did with him with another man. Could that have been why she was so eager to marry him? When he prayed he prayed the baby would belong not to her but to him. She would raise it, yes, nurture it, nurse and tend it, but it would be his child ultimately, and a child of the Lord.

***

She knew he thought of her only and always in relation to himself. Her other lives, even her inner life, was essentially invisible. At first she liked this. It made her feel close to the crazy old man. But then, later, she felt the gross iniquity of it, the weight of the relations of the sexes across the generations bearing down.

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Lily was not, by nature, an interventionalist. She wondered about the ethics of this sometimes. Her motives were aesthetic, nine times out of ten. She wanted to see, and, in a morbid way, to hold. Only in the abstract did she want to do (or, by describing, get something done). She lived between the worlds of those who could only appreciate, and those who could only execute, belonging to neither of them.

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He knew he was not supposed to shake the baby. But her mother was gone in Philadelphia, doing he did not know what, and there was frozen breast milk, but the child (who did not yet have a name, they called her only baby, or baby girl) wouldn't

drink it. And she would not stop crying, screaming (maybe with colic, the mother said) inconsolable all weekend. On Sunday morning he read her psalms and she did not quiet herself. He walked her up and down the gentle slope to the pond, and she did not quiet herself. And then, because he was angry, he knew he was too angry, he left her alone in the bed, where she slept, or did not sleep at night, between the two of them, when her mother was not gone, and went for a walk alone. And when he came back it was quiet, on the ground (it must have learned to role), awake but quiet, only for a moment, and then she started crying again, now not screaming but mewing weakly, and he turned it over, angry more at himself than the child, and slapped it across its diapered behind.

That was the first time he laid hands on the little girl.

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Lily appreciated many secrets, savored them for a moment, and then passed them on, so with the inexorable progression of biology and decay, so too with the injury to that child.

What she did not know was this: in her own left breast, in the upper outer quadrant, at two o'clock, was a nest of cells that would soon be large enough to call a spiculated mass, spokes like fingers tracing ducts, reaching toward the satisfaction of lymphangitic spread.

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The librarian across the isle grew up outside of Bangor. His father and mother still lived in the same dark paneled house by the river, on the still unpaved dirt road, where his father, improbably, still practiced medicine, and his mother still wove carpets and tea towels and other beautiful and practical things on her loom. His

sister lived in Portland, with three children and a dog. There was a husband, before, but last year she acquired the dog and dispensed with him.

His elder brother lived in Pennsylvania. Esau. The poor man. He was someone who had never fit comfortably into the world, had bucked their parents in youth, had run away to California for a time, had come back east and joined what Andrew and his family thought of but did not call a cult and then left it. Now he had apparently beaten his child. There had been four, now, or maybe five, high emotional register, fraught but loving reunions. Reconciliations between Esau and their mother, and now, more recently, between their own generation, the children grown now to full and even waning adulthood, to the time of life when one's prostate enlarges, and one begins to have serious dental problems, and cancer, even, and one's own children are growing into increasingly troubled adults, when one expects to be done with the pushing and pulling of one's natal family home.

Esau had called Mother from some sort of county jail, and explained that his wife had left him (his young wife, whom Andrew and his family never knew), and taken the baby, and that he, Esau, was on trial for abuse and in need of bail. Father had, of course, wired him money, in the old fashioned way, from the post office, had told the clerk of his family drama, heaving his well respected chest in a deep sigh. Mother would have cried alone in the privacy of her half of the downstairs, the living room that she was old enough to sometimes call a parlor, that looked out over the river in the rear of the house.

Andrew had left his dog alone in a kennel for the weekend. Priscilla. He hated doing that. He used to be able to leave her with his ex wife, also named Priscilla, they got the dog before the divorce, and that was their joke, to name a dog for a human, and then after the divorce it became another, different kind of joke, funnier to her than it was to him, but she had moved to London in the spring, and their grown children lived in far away San Francisco, and what sometimes felt like even farther away New York, where they cultivated a refined kind of resentment, a brittle ennui, and though

his daughter might be willing to care for the dog for a weekend, might even revel in the opportunity to perform such a favor at the expense of her own plans, he couldn't bring himself to ask her to drive up.

And Andrew couldn't drive anymore, not since the solitary brain met, now removed, God be praised, and the funny spell he had this summer, that his doctor thought might have been a seizure, so he had to leave Priscilla in a stranger's backyard.

He had gone back to work, even, earlier this fall. Andrew was a librarian. There was a time in his life, before he was married, when he had started medical school. He wanted to be a psychiatrist, in the old, German language tradition of Jung and Freud, but he had done very poorly in his classes and had been encouraged to drop out, and, after some time, he found himself working as a science librarian instead. When he went back to work after the surgery it was the time of year when acorns were dropping heavy from the large oak trees in the yard, and he had approached the tall steps of the library with is hand over his right temple and head, careful of the surgical site. Though he was several months out, he did not want to get hit hard.

The plan was to go home for a few days, just the weekend, just to be with Mom and Dad and show support. There was really nothing to be done about Esau. He couldn't leave Pennsylvania until his court case, which, who knew when that would be or how it would go. Andrew's sister had wanted to drive to Pennsylvania this weekend to be with him, instead of driving north to Maine, but Esau had declined the offer rather explicitly, and said he hoped that they wouldn't get involved in his legal proceedings.

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Esau, who was named for his maternal grandfather, who was named for his father before, a fierce revival tent minister, a Methodist of the very old school, who was named, presumably, for the Old Testament hunter, the furry anti-hero, seller of

birthright and inheritor of lentil stew, Esau sat eating exactly that dish, red lentils with a an onion and a carrot boiled in, and meditating on beginnings and ends. He sat alone at his kitchen table and considered the Gospel of John, in which, Esau remembered the words clearly, he who sits on the throne says, "Behold, I make all things new."

He spent two nights in the holding cell in the county seat. There were three rooms with bars, all looking out onto a hallway, lit all day and night with florescent bulbs. Each room had a toilet and a bed and a sink. They, Esau and the two other inmates, where brought food on metal trays, like they had in the school cafeteria when he was a child. He had two neighbors, a white man who had been picked up for drunk driving, and was furious, and spoke at a high volume about his lawyer every time a uniformed person, sometimes a man sometimes a woman, walked into the florescent hall, the other a black man who was quiet the whole time. Ultimately, just before they let Esau go, the white man's angry wife was able to post bail. When a uniformed woman delivered the news, the white man celebrated by sounding his metal tray against the bars.

Esau had been in jail once before, when he killed his neighbor's dog. The dog had killed one of his lambs, and it had the taste of blood, and once a dog had a taste for blood it had to be put down, everyone knows, but the neighbor did not agree, and Esau tied the dog up down by the pond and shot it. Then, as now, his father had posted bail and someone, his brother and sister, probably, had arranged for an attorney to speak on his behalf. He had been fined, and the neighbor moved. But what made him furious, when he thought about the episode, which he did as little as he could, was the attorney. He was a big man with beefy fingers and blond hair, who said he was church going, and maybe he was, after the fashion of the Pharisees, the hypocritical lawyers of their time, he had suggested that Esau needed medical help, that he had something wrong in his brain. He told him this after the trial was over, as they were walking into the sunlight of the parking lot. Esau had said nothing at the time, but after, when he replayed the scene in his mind, he imagine spitting at

the man, or challenging him to a fight. It was simpler, probably, better that he had done no such thing at the time.

Esau had several bad teeth in the back of his mouth. Two on the left had been pulled last year. At the time, he had chosen to keep the one on the right, though it was infected in its root and gum, and cracked somewhere deep down, out of some combination of frugalness and pride. It bothered him now. He wondered if he could pull the tooth himself, if he had the tools to grab onto it the right way.

His wife and child were gone. He did not know where. His wife did not answer her phone.

It was high autumn, time for the leaves and the refuse from the summer garden to be burned. He had two bay leaves that needed to be taken out. He had worked on them that morning, angrily, stripping their branches and loading them into the pyre. He could smell the bay, so intense it made him a little sleepy, still on his arms and clothing.

There is a violence in the turning of the seasons that was difficult for him to put his finger on. It had to do with the violence of the new school year, some ancient apprehension of fights (he had once been beaten so badly he passed out and his father, the good doctor, had to take him to the hospital), but also with the quiet transformation of the natural world. The softness of the fading, the mellow smells of wood smoke and rot, the gentleness with which the woods released their hold on life, belied another, fiercer change bellow.

He had hoped the woman would stay with him in his autumn years, care for his failing body, and that the child would gladden his dotage, like the miracle infants of the patriarchs, arriving at the very cusp of old age. That was an illusion.

When the sun set he would light his fire.

He finished his lentil stew.

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They would tell their great nieces and nephews, and his grandchildren by his first marriage, for of course they never had children of their own, that they met on a train. There was a terrible accident. The train derailed some miles outside of Portland, travelling slightly too fast for a curve, dislodged by a flaw in the tracks, and part of it near the engine burst into flame. Their car did not catch fire, but collided with the car ahead, and then double back against another car further up, now fully in the woods, and then twisted over onto its windowed face, swaying for what felt like minutes before there was a great straining of metal and wrenching of bolts, and it lay down in the trees. One man became hysterical, screaming at the other passengers and into his cell phone. One woman had a dislocated shoulder, and one woman passed out, presumably from a blow to the head. Several people found themselves sitting on and among broken window pains. Andrew found himself lying next to Lily on a window to the ground. They were, they ascertained, both fine. No broken bones, no blood. Lily, though it had been many years since she had been an intern, rose to the occasion, and climbed up out of her seat, now something of a booth, and surveyed the train. She had instructed the bleeding women not to make tourniquets, as their lacerations were shallow, and told the woman with the dislocated shoulder to relax, and lie down, and helped her pop it back in, and had gone to sit with the woman who passed out until she woke up again, and then had instructed the woman's companion to sit with her quietly and watch her pupils and not let her get too upset or move around. Later, as they were waiting to be rescued, someone heard that there was a fire up ahead. They could not see it, as their windows now faced only the sandy, shrubby ground and the full zenith of the sky, but they could smell, they thought, perhaps unusual smoke, the smoke of vinyl and plastic and petrol, and someone said bodies. They waited sideways in the car for several hours. The man who had been hysterical tried to organize an effort to climb

out of the windows above, but everyone else, having received word from the national guardsmen outside that it was only a matter of time and supplies, that they only needed to wait, more or less ignored him. Andrew shared a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with its crusts cut off with a fussy child. Later, when they were free of the wreckage, lining up next to the medics' tent, where they were all to be given clearance before boarding the police van that would take them to a hospital or hotel or the train station to continue their journeys, Lily started to cry. It's nothing, she said to Andrew, who was walking next to her and looking for a kleenex in his pockets, only the cold. It stings your eyes. Affectionate in public, they would hold hands when they narrated. Affectionate in public if not behind closed doors.

Three people died, but otherwise it was, in a way, a romantic story.

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Later, when Lily retired because of the cancer, they got a German shepherd, and then another, and then another, so in total in the apartment there were the two people and three large dogs. Priscilla had long since lain down in the neighbor's sandbox and died. Lily walked them around the pond many times every day. Their names were Mainz and Worms and Speyer, after the Jewish cities on the Rhine. Lily and Andrew had taken a special, gentle cruise for the elderly there. In the autumn of the cancer Andrew thought, next year I will have to walk all three dogs alone.

Children's Story

They were making a house for their dolls out of mud.

Two years ago Helena would have imagined, had she been forced to entertain the question of Barbie dolls, that she would not buy them for her foster girls. If you asked her, she might have objected to the distorting power of their distorted bodies, the huge boobs and tiny waists, the ethics of teaching women early to think of themselves as objects of male gaze, of teaching children to be consumers of the blunt, the bald, the uniform, and so on, teaching them to think of sex in that way. She had, come to think of it, even thrown away some hand me down Barbies a neighbor had offered as a welcoming gift—carefully, of course, disguised among household waste, so the neighbor wouldn't see their shapely legs in the shared trash bin. But the first time Delilah and Xeranda ganged up on her in a Wallgreens' check out line she gave in. They each held one of her hands and pulled and said, "Pleeeease," and she thought, "They are ganging up on me."

She was not displeased to see the Barbies now getting treated to mud baths. The house was first a house, then a bath, then a house again. One of the Barbies was missing her leg.

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There is just enough room in the apartment, which was listed as a three bedroom but is really more like two and a half, for the four of them to sleep. Helena sleeps in her own bedroom, which is the same, though she doesn't anymore bring home strange men. Delilah and Xeranda sleep in the other bedroom, together in the bottom bunk of a bunk bed furnished by Helena's own parents at the outset.
And Mimi sleeps in the small bedroom, in what is essentially a large crib. Mimi was shaken as a baby, and she has developmental delays.

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Xeranda, who was more physically affectionate than Delilah, came up to Helena where she was sitting on the porch and threw her arms over Helena's two thighs, the legless Barbie still in her hand. She had a loose tooth, and it made her sad. At first it had excited her; it was far back in her mouth and she had shown it to various friends and strangers by opening wide and wiggling it with her tongue. But last night when she was lying in bed she said to Helena and Delilah, "it's my last one," and then she was quiet for a long time.

She showed it to Helena again now, almost uprooted, squelching in the bog of the little girl's gums. Helena remembered the feeling.

***

Helena used to be a surgeon. A pediatric surgeon, in fact. She didn't do the heart stuff, because she was too tired by then, by the time that path branched off, but she did tiny hernia repairs and most of the gut things: appendicitis, pyloric stenosis, NEC, an occasional congenital malformation (gastroschisis—a shock for us all). She didn't like it.

There were long periods of Helena's training when everything felt dull. She felt no pleasure or pain, only a steady irritability, an itch all the more bothersome because in pediatrics everyone has to wear this lurid perkiness all the time. She couldn't do that with her face.

She had only been in practice, had only been a fully trained, slightly pudgy doctor for a year and a half when she took a part time job in the ED, which meant no more OR, which meant not being a surgeon anymore. Depending on who she was talking to, she had cut back her hours so she could become a foster parent, or, conversely, she

had decided to become a foster parent because of the terrible things she had seen in the ED. Both things were true, in a way. But there was a third thing she didn't say: perhaps she became a foster parent so she could quit her job. The girls were a sacrifice, of prestige, of dollars, but they were also an excuse. They were an occasion.

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Xeranda and Delilah are extraordinarily resilient, she says when people ask about it explicitly, the trauma, what it does to a child. Children are resilient, she says. She does not talk about what happened to Mimi.

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On Wednesdays Helena had her own therapy while the girls had play. At first she talked about motherhood, or fostermotherhood, how it was different, how the girls were doing, how it was mysterious and draining and new, but then at some point she stopped talking about the girls (this was around the time that Mimi came to them), and started talking about her men, her historical men. How they each wanted to be artists or writers or filmmakers of some kind, how that meant they got to privilege their own experience, the "richness" of that experience, above interpersonal commitments or anything else. She hated them.

It never got to the point of marriage, but she read Great Expectations the summer they got Mimi, and sometimes in therapy she referred to herself as Miss Havisham.

The irony was not lost on her, the layering of rich and poor anger, of white and sadness and not white sadness, the way the world screws professional women and the way the world screws little girls. They both shrank and enlarged the other. Helena wondered if they would ever talk about this when they were grown.

***

Delilah was still playing, alone now. Their favorite spot was the edge of Helena's property, perhaps technically the property of the neighbor adjacent, who had gifted the Barbies, and who watered her back yard. Helena's own grass was parched, but the girls found a muddy spot where the neighbor allowed her hose to run, and they dredged their Barbies through the river there.

"I want it out," Xeranda said.

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Delilah and Xeranda were born at the same hospital, only days apart, but up until the past two years they had lived in different neighborhoods and cities (the geography of their early childhood being checkered, and checkered with violence).

Delilah, who came to live with Helena first, was excited about the prospect of a foster sister, but when Xeranda moved in the two girls ignored each other. It was winter in Chicago, then, and they would put their snowpants and coats and hats and boots on in the hall, silently, without looking at the other. Once they got into one physical fight, in fact about a Barbie doll. Delilah claimed the doll because it was white, and she was white, and Xeranda was black, and Helena had found them scratching and hair pulling, and it was something they had to have a lot more conversations about, but now everyone was allotted one Barbie of each shade.

Now they did everything together, even baths, and Xeranda, who could read, read aloud from a chapter book about babysitters each night. Delilah selected their (often matching) clothes. Even though they were the same age, Xeranda could already control her emotions, and Delilah, who could not, imitated Xeranda's good example and sometimes her patterns of speech. She had been working hard to learn to read.

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She knows, because the people from CPS told her, that Delilah had a history of trauma, all kinds, first at the hands of her stepfather and then in the previous foster care home. Her birth mother was a drug user and perhaps, they insinuated, a sometimes prostitute. She was trying to get clean and build a home where she could raise a child she clearly, if unskillfully, loved. She came over on the first Sunday of most months to see Delilah, whom she called Boo. She fed her peanut butter cups and swore with her when Helena was in the other room. Helena pretended not to care. The woman had stringy hair and marks from skin-popping and veiled, angry eyes, but Delilah was delighted with her. Usually Delilah's real mom asked Helena for money at the end.

***

Delilah lashed out, sometimes, biting and kicking, screaming inconsolable. Sometimes she banged her head against the ground. Once Helena had brought her to the emergency room, because she didn't know what else to do. This was shortly after Xeranda came to live with them, before they had Mimi, and she was playing jump rope with Helena and Xeranda in the small front yard, and a German shepherd took a shit in the grass between the sidewalk and the street, and Delilah became angry with the dog, and then with Helena, for reasons Helena was never completely able to understand, though she speculated with the children's therapists, and they had to give her a tiny, child sized dose of Haldol, to Helena's disgust, humiliation, and, well, relief. After that it was not so bad again. Helena refused to let them prescribe anything for her, Delilah, long term. Usually the foster parents don't get to make those kinds of decisions, but it bent the system a little, that she was a pediatrician. Or so she believed.

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Xeranda's real mother, who did not visit, because she died three weeks after Xeranda came to live with Helena (drunk driver, bad luck), had pulled out her previous baby teeth using an the knot of dental floss around the tooth and doorhandle system. This was what Xeranda wanted Helena to do now.

Mimi was crying in her chair. Mimi was five, but she could not walk or talk, and she was very small for five years old. She had the body of a toddler with loose, upturned eyes. Xeranda rocked the chair as she explained about the dental floss.

"Not now," Helena said.

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Xeranda had not attended her mother's funeral, at the behest of her grandmother, who thought it would be too much for the girl, and Helena wondered if she really understood that her mother was gone. She hadn't cried about it. It was possible she was stoic, but also possible that she really didn't understand.

***

Helena offered Xeranda string cheese that she had packed for the trip to family therapy (they would need to leave soon). The late afternoon, when they were almost always on their way to therapy, almost always running late, she found they all four strategically needed to eat. Xeranda especially became irritable around that time, but she quieted beautifully with a stick of string cheese, or a bag of gold fish, or slice of ham. She had perhaps gone hungry in her previous life, Helena speculated with her therapist, or she had needed to learn early to self soothe with food.

***

On Mondays and Tuesdays the girls had play therapy. On Wednesdays they had play therapy and she had her individual time. On Thursdays they had family therapy. And on Fridays the older girls each met with a social worker for a half an hour, and then Helena met with the girl and her social worker for a half an hour. Helena's mother watched Mimi, as the timing on Fridays was complicated.

Helena had not participated in organized therapy, not willingly anyway, and never for more than a few weeks at a time, prior to the girls. But, as her therapist observed, she did not do things by halves. Helena said, no one in their right mind would try to do this alone. She did not say, they are an occasion and an excuse.

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Delilah came to the porch too, now, which was set a few steps up from the small patch of green and brown that was their backyard. She trod in among the irises that were dying to a thick straw. Delilah did not climb the steps, but hoisted herself directly onto the wooden platform.

"Why did you come that way?" Helena asked, trying too late, at the end of the sentence to sound curious and not accusing. Delilah shrugged and took a cheese stick.

She pulled her sister back to the game, made her climb down through the garden too, though Helena told them to take the stairs, please.

It was Delilah who narrated the game. Sometimes the Barbies were bears. Now the Barbies were at court, because the mama bear had died, and they had to be given to somebody else to take care of them.

Delilah understood what happened to Xeranda's mother, the cruelty and sheer randomness of it.

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Xeranda's mother was not a bad mother, not in the desperate, chaotic way of Delilah's birth mom. She was only very, very young. She was only thirteen when Xeranda was born, subtraction had led Helena to understand. At first they had all lived with Xeranda's grandmother and several uncles and aunts, and the family more or less got by, but then at some point grandma was evicted, and that was how Xeranda came to be in foster care.

What her mother needed was respite, Helena and the social worker had once agreed. The idea was for Xeranda to spend a few weeks to months in the system, while her mother got out of the shelter that made her feel so hopeless and overwhelmed, while she got her feet back on the ground. Yes, she had hit the girl, she or her partner, no one was sure, but basically, the story went, she was trying to be a good mom. Now it was an open question whether Grandma or Helena would adopt the girl.

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When Helena was in medical school, she dated a man named Stew, like a thick soup. It was possible that Stew was a homeless man. He was a graduate student at the University of Chicago, and he had a stipend, but he may have elected to be homeless, for reasons that were spartan and political and artistic, and also, Helena thought later, incredibly self indulgent.

Where does bitterness go?

He left her to make an art film about refugees. She wrote him a nasty letter, saying she hoped the project was fulfilling, and that it brought meaning to his life, and decreased the suffering of others. She wasn't sure if the sarcasm travelled. Her anger

with him was such a veiled anger—that might have been her earnest wish, she might have half pretended.

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The day before she sent that cruel letter, Helena watched a Whipple procedure. A Whipple is a terrible surgery for a terrible cancer. It is a re-plumbing of the abdomen that barely ever works. It takes many, many hours, and back in the day, when she was a student no one was allowed to leave the room. She had not eaten breakfast, because she knew she could not pee, and through the procedure, (transect the stomach, bile duct, small intestines, reattach, try not to nick anything serious, hope the patient doesn't die—but know they will, soon, probably), she became increasingly faint and headachy.

The surgeon she stood next to on that day was a giant. He literally had acromegaly, and the instruments looked miniature in his hands. He was an angry giant, not a gentle one, tight lipped and disapproving. She was not cut out, she could feel him deciding, for this work. One of the hardest parts of training was absorbing this constant stream of disapproval. She had a theory that physicians were hard on themselves and soft on their patients, and a little schizoid in their treatment of students—if you stood around long enough you were in the inner circle, and they were hard on you. This giant of a surgeon told her not to pass instruments, so she mostly just watched, but then the scrub was distracted, and he needed a scissors, and she passed the wrong mayos, and he threw them to the ground, so no one could use them for the rest of the operation, the next ten hours. After that every time he called for mayos the scrub glared at her.

That night before she left the hospital she bought herself some bread and soda, and she ate this on the sidewalk in front of the large revolving doors, and something about it was too much, and she threw everything up again, masticated but undigested, in the gutter right outside.

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Curiosity, wonder, patience, most of all patience, these were the things that had fallen away.

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The two girls solemnly exchanged Barbie heads. Now they were bears doing an operation.

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There was a chance that she would adopt Delilah as well, though the party line was that, if possible, it was the best thing for children to be with their birth parents.

She was already in the process of adopting Mimi, whose birth parents no one thought fit to take care of the floppy child, least of all the parents themselves.

***

There was a problem, in Helena's life, of seeing and doing, a problem of how close or far to hold tragedy. If you held it at a certain distance, arm's length, say, you could observe it and take it into yourself as an aesthetic object, could digest it, or digest the representation of the thing, the new image inside you, but you could do nothing to the change the contours of the raw thing in your hand. If you held it very close you could sew up its surfaces or pick apart its seams, but then the shape of the thing was gone, its wholeness lost in details you could change but not really perceive.

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That night, after therapy, her mother would watch the children, and Helena would meet with Xeranda's grandmother. The social workers thought they were supposed to mediate these conversations, but neither Helena nor Xeranda's grandmother, whom she addressed as Mrs. Lu—she didn't know the woman's first name—wanted that. They were meeting at a steak house. Helena had told Mrs. Lu to pick the place. She was older than Helena, but not so old as Helena's mother. Not so old that they should worry she too might die. Helena told herself each time: I will do whatever she wants. What skin can I possibly, ethically, have in this game?

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Again she wanted the tooth to come out. Xeranda said, "I'm ready."

She batted Helena's string cheese fist away and said, "Take it out." Mimi was crying steadily by her side.

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Helena had been an extremely good child, collected and poised and seen and not heard. That was how she remembered it, anyhow. She was an only child and so confused, perhaps, about the ontology of childhood itself. She thought of herself as a tiny adult. She had a string of nannies who found her to be precocious and well brought up. She actually had a brother, a younger brother, who died unexpectedly at two months, but she did not remember him. Her earliest memories took place at a lake where they must have rented a cabin one year. She was afraid of the minnows, but said nothing, and bravely swam with her parents each day. Helena, whose childhood, like Larkin's, was a forgotten boredom, had made something of a fetish of the child, she had to agree.

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So she brought all three girls inside, for none could be trusted alone, and left the Barbies in the mud. She made Xeranda and Delilah wash their hands. She let Xeranda instruct her in the dental floss procedure, a knot here around the tooth, a knot here around the handle on the other side of the door. Before she closed the door (behind her, so Xeranda was left in the kitchen by herself) she thought, forgive us, we will hurt you in so many ways.

Pilgrims

Chapter 1

They found Moses in a pumpkin. He had hollowed the inside, as one would to make a jack o'lantern, but without a mouth or eyes. He was a tall man, above six feet, and at the time, the autumn of 1975, before the medicines had taken their predictable course, he was thin. They found him knees to chest, like a lanky fetus, coated with the stringy gunk of interior gourds.

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Moses had a singular mission. Born into a family of potato farmers—French Canadian, and, remotely, Penobscot Indians on his mother's side, grim Protestants on his father's—he believed that the end of days was near, and that it was his special purpose to assemble to Jews of Maine and sail with them down the Penobscot river, out the bay, and to the Holey Land. Moses was, indeed, his given name. If the name determined the system of beliefs, or if the morose father's predilection for numerology, for esoteric exegesis, tacking back and forth, aloud, by the light of gas lamps in the long winter evenings before the electrification of the countryside, between the most radical and radically uninterpretable bits of the Old Testament and the New (he favored the Book of Revelations and the Abrahamic cycle, but he did not neglect the story of the Hebrew baby for whom his youngest son was named), or if, as I rather suspect, the elements of leadership, election, of wandering and of plagues that were mixed up and pressing for Moses, and would have been even if his name were George and he were born in Boston or Canton, I cannot say. Like the Moses of the Bible, he also had a speech impediment, but this may have been because he had no teeth.

To this end—the return journey to Israel—he had, in his youth built a barque, or tried. This was somewhere up in Aroostook County, in a clearing in the woods, a kind of swampy meadow, I understand. In that remote corner of a remote and

landlocked place, he had lived alone for four years, and assembled some length of rope, plexiglass, pine tar, a mast that he had felled, planks he had borrowed from a sawmill, and some buckets of sap. He had a root cellar full of potatoes for the journey. For the Jews. His meadow, though it was technically on state land, abutted his parents' farm. For them and their few neighbors he worked the harvest and was paid in potatoes each autumn, for there was not much in the way of cash on hand. Some of the materials for his barque he stole. It was finally the owner of the sawmill who had him jailed. At that time I do not believe he had ever met a person of Jewish faith or descent.

All of this I knew from his brother, a bachelor of few words, not without eccentricity, who visited Moses on Sunday afternoons. They played chess in one of the parlors. The brother, whose name was Vern, smoked a pipe and blinked infrequently. He was also very tall.

From Vern, taciturn Vern, the nurses called him, I learned that the father, too, had been most likely quite mad. The old man's madness was of a madness of productivity, where Moses' was a madness of impasse, and the father's lunacy was more or less cyclical in nature, coming on each year in the spring, allowing for periods of relative calm in between.

In the fifth waning moon of the spring (for root crops were to be planted in the darkening of the moon, crops that bore fruit above ground were to be planted in the gathering light), he would stay up all night, consulting almanacs, carving potato eyes, and all day in the fields he would drive the oxen, those steady, heavy creatures, who, in their family they did not name but called only by the side of the team, left ox and right ox, hollering at them "gee!" and "haw," and "get thee up," and feigning beating them with a stick, a stick with which he sometimes actually beat his boys. He felt no exhaustion. In those days he would compose reams of letters, mostly about the biblical codes he believed he had broken, the letter A, the number nine. He believed that the Gregorian calendar made a grave error in the calculation of the

Easter date, and that this mathematical oversight had ushered in an age of spiritual decline. Thus they celebrated a Julian Easter in their family, a somber Sunday in early summer, like the Greeks. At that time of year, the time of planting, after the long winter of short days, their father's skin would be pasty white. On the first days of planting he would burn, "like a lobstah," he said, though they had never seen a lobster in their home. They did not travel, and they were far from the coast.

The father's people were poor Celts, potato farmers since the first contact with the new world, and they knew a balm for sunburns. The treatment was to grate one of the precious seed potatoes, perhaps one that had gone to rot, or a blind nubin, without eyes, the cut potato the exact color that the neck had been before such rough exposure the sun, a kind of grey dough, and pack the potato salve on the carmine flesh. Later, the father would die of a nodule, a mole that turned black then purple then white, grew like a tuber through the basement of his skin.

Sunburned and lusty, the father fathered other children. Moses was the oldest, that they knew, and then Vern, and then three girls by the old blacksmith's widow, a woman some twenty years their father's senior, who had had no children by her late husband, the last of his name, the last of his trade (now horses had to be shod in Allagash, but no matter, almost no one farmed with horses anymore). The girls were a surprise, each time a surprise again, named Wonder, Revelation, and, ominously, Portent. The three girls lived between the families. In their mother's home they learned reading and writing and sewing. In their father's they learned potato hilling and interpreting of numerical signs (the number of rows of potatoes, for example, and the number of potatoes in a row, must be as carefully selected as the dimensions of the arc of the covenant, the number of kittens in a litter corresponded to the seven seals, and one must treat with great caution a bird that laid one egg with two yolks).

The girls and their aged mother perished quite suddenly in a freak cholera outbreak when they were twelve, eleven, and ten. Vern and Moses' mother, who

acknowledged the girls only grudgingly, had walked to the widow's, a farm of small hogs and a dirty dairy, to bring the girls for Easter to the potato farm across the valley, and found all three women dead in their bedrooms, pale and covered in excrement. She and Moses, who by then already spoke to birds, cleaned the bodies and buried them in the family ground. After that he went off to build his boat.

***

The Allen twins, epileptics both, who were born on the last night of the last century in a farmhouse near the coast, their mother a deaf mute, alone in her labor without doctor or midwife, were longtime residents of the hospital on the hill, but they were not exactly patients. They had been admitted a lifetime ago, when seizures treated with long confinement alongside of idiocy, lunacy, and other diseases of the brain. Their mother, a single woman in a stiff town, with not one but two daughters, and not one but two sermons preached against her (not that she could hear), in which the affliction of the girls, named Alice and Ashley, was taken as a mark of her sin, had perhaps been happy enough to place them under the care of strangers in white uniforms.

Alice and Ashley spoke the English native to this place, an old English of cunnin babies and unexpected dipthongs. They spoke of dressin gardens, a dite of salt, a scrid of cider they liked to take after their noon meal. They also spoke a second language, all their own. When I first arrived at the hospital, the accent of the coast was so thick to me I did not at first comprehend the distinction between the Down East and the Allen dialect. Theirs was a language they had invented, learnt and generated simultaneously, together as girls, presumably because there was no language in their earliest home. No humans else could understand. They had an uncanny way with animals, though, to whom they also spoke in their private tongue, and for years they had run the dairy, the hen houses, and the rabbit farms of the hospital. They were also decent hands with vegetables. Theirs was the pumpkin Moses had commandeered. They had been offered a salary, I was told, a chance to

build life outside, to attend high school or perhaps to marry, to have farms and families of their own, but they stayed on.

***

Moses was an impish tall man, bent and grinning, who was becoming harder and harder to understand, having recently lost the last two of his teeth and placed them, smiling and nodding, on his metal lunch tray and sent them back with his dirty dishes in the canteen. His grey hair was always in disarray, windswept, and he liked to have a hat, except mostly he did not wear the hat but held it in front of his narrow chest—pectus excavatum—and sometimes fanned himself or his interlocutor. And he had the dancing in his arms. He was a compulsory teller of truth as he experienced it (yes, I stole the nutbread and ate half of it and left half of it on the window sill for the birds, still for the birds, who are also ghosts, most ghosts, who talk with me, for if you have a loaf of bread break it in half and give half to the flower of the narcissus for bread feeds the body, body, but flowers feed the soul. Yes, I stole the nutbread), and handy in the wood shed.

Somewhere along his path, he had learned piano tuning, and on his arrival, as soon as he was moved off of the restricted floor and into the general community, he tuned all of the pianos in the hospital. He arrived at the hospital on the hill the same year that I had. Previously a small number of patients had made noises, cacophonic noises, with the pianos, but after Moses tuned them there was a sort of musical revival, a revival involving many church songs, show tunes, Hungarian dance music, and one catatonic woman who played over and over again the opening bars of Beethoven's Fifth. He fixed the organ in the assembly hall, and we found someone who could play the musical accompaniment to old, silent films.

The old medicines gave you the shakes. At first they made Moses very sleepy, slowed and want to faint. They made him more mellow, but they did nothing to the convictions about the birds or the Jews or the end of days. Eventually, the medicines

gave him such a tremor that he could no longer do the fine work required for some of the more delicate wood carving or the tiny boats he liked to make. But he continued to preach, sometimes to clouds of starlings, and to make rather beautiful furniture, undecorated, after the style of the Shakers on the other side of the hill, who were just then fading to memory.

***

There used to be Shakers who lived on the other side of the hill until, due to their chastity, they died away. Two women and a man still lived in the large barn my first year at the hospital, but they left soon after, going, it was said, to New Hampshire to join the vestiges of a larger colony.

***

It was the shakes that gave Moses away. He had a fine tremor in his lips and hands, but he also made these billowing motions with his arm, rolling them out, undulating like a dancer, first the left then the right. Though he was all folded over in the pumpkin, he could not be still. There is a terrible side effect—a restlessness beyond restlessness, a total inability to feel comfort in one's skin—called by the Greek akathisia: un-sitting. The pumpkin shook eccentrically from the life within.

***

Moses had done well at the prison in Thomastown, where he was sent for his theft of boat wood. He had learned fine woodworking, specializing in dollhouses, which the prison sold for a profit, and tiny, bottled ships. But he had escaped from the prison in 1944, and there was a twenty-year gap during which he hopped trains, wandered, and slept mostly in a sleeping bag. He made it as far as California, and, Moses claimed, Alaska and Mexico, though it was impossible to verify that, before

turning up, the day before Christmas Eve, on his brother's porch in sandy soiled Aroostook, in far northern Maine. How he escaped from prison he never would say.

By then the parents were in their graves, in the family cemetery at the edge of Vern's lot, next to the blacksmith's widow and her three girls, and Vern, though he wanted to help his brother, found that he could not prevent Moses from sleeping outdoors, or, sometimes, from wandering, unkempt and preaching to an invisible host, or to songbirds. He stayed with Vern through the agricultural year, the planting and the potato hilling and the harvest, but took off again one night in October, walking north. In the end he was apprehended by border patrol. When the patrolman stopped him, Moses, in what is to my knowledge his only use of physical force, punched the officer in the nose.

***

He had made attempts before, once, when he was accompanied to town to repair the church organ—he had offered his services to an anxious Congregationalist minister, and, low, he really did seem to know about organs, or else to simply have a knack for these things—he had hitched a ride with a pig farmer who drove him straight back to the hospital gaits. And once, very early in my tenure at the hospital, he had picked the locks on the ward door, the front door, and was only apprehended as he was working on the lock on the front gait. He has that look in his eye, the nurses said, the look of someone who plans to make a break.

It was not clear that Moses wanted to leave because he was unhappy. On the contrary, I think of him in that early era as one of the happier souls I have known, under the circumstances, grinning and fanning and chattering at birds. Nor was it clear that he wanted to leave because of his mission. He had a sense of urgency about the Jews and the Holy Land and the boat, but the urgency was not time-bound. It did not matter to him, he said, if he built the ship today or tomorrow or forty years hence (forty being an important Biblical number). He trusted God's plan.

Deep down I think he was afraid to actually do the work. All of the years he had wandered alone on the buslines and forest and desert he had made no progress with the boat, and before that, when he first became ill, he had assembled the pieces but he couldn't bring himself to build the ship. He feared what would happen if he undertook God's tasks: building the boat, assembling the Jews, embarking for the Holy Land. He feared he would fall short in some way. We all dance this dance, to greater or lesser degree.

But, if he was not unhappy and he did not truly, in his heart of hearts, feel prepared to begin the project he believed the Lord had proposed, why did he continue to attempt escape? My belief is that it had something to do with potatoes and forest birds. That there is a part of all of us that desires roots, and a part that desires wings. And that Moses had an akathisia of the soul.

***

Moses, like a perverse Cinderella, was found on the back of a pick up truck bound for the county fair. The two women driving the truck, the Allen twins, soft spoken white haired women, representing the hospital's horticultural endeavors, stopped to get gas on their way through town, and together, standing next to the bed of the pickup, they noticed that the pumpkin trembled.

The Allen sisters, some of the more common sensical humans I have known, did not open the pumpkin, though they identified a seem, gently undulating. They discussed the situation in their own language, and, guessing that the pumpkin harbored a stowaway, they paid for the gas and then drove back up the hill, returning the way they came.

A Hospital Death:
Philip Larkin's "The Building" Considered from the Third Year of Medical School

Higher than the handsomest hotel
The lucent comb shows up for miles, but see,
All round it close-ribbed streets rise and fall
Like a great sigh out of the last century.
The porters are scruffy; what keep drawing up
At the entrance are not taxis; and in the hall
As well as creepers hangs a frightening smell.

There are paperbacks, and tea at so much a cup,
Like an airport lounge, but those who tamely sit
On rows of steel chairs turning the ripped mags
Haven't come far. More like a local bus.
These outdoor clothes and half-filled shopping-bags
And faces restless and resigned, although
Every few minutes comes a kind of nurse

To fetch someone away: the rest refit
Cups back to saucers, cough, or glance below
Seats for dropped gloves or cards. Humans, caught
On ground curiously neutral, homes and names
Suddenly in abeyance; some are young,
Some old, but most at that vague age that claims
The end of choice, the last of hope; and all

Here to confess that something has gone wrong.

It must be error of a serious sort,
For see how many floors it needs, how tall
It's grown by now, and how much money goes
In trying to correct it. See the time,
Half-past eleven on a working day,
And these picked out of it; see, as they climb

To their appointed levels, how their eyes
Go to each other, guessing; on the way
Someone's wheeled past, in washed-to-rags ward clothes:
They see him, too. They're quiet. To realise
This new thing held in common makes them quiet,
For past these doors are rooms, and rooms past those,
And more rooms yet, each one further off

And harder to return from; and who knows
Which he will see, and when? For the moment, wait,
Look down at the yard. Outside seems old enough:
Red brick, lagged pipes, and someone walking by it
Out to the car park, free. Then, past the gate,
Traffic; a locked church; short terraced streets
Where kids chalk games, and girls with hair-dos fetch

Their separates from the cleaners - O world,
Your loves, your chances, are beyond the stretch
Of any hand from here! And so, unreal
A touching dream to which we all are lulled
But wake from separately. In it, conceits
And self-protecting ignorance congeal
To carry life, collapsing only when

Called to these corridors (for now once more
The nurse beckons -). Each gets up and goes
At last. Some will be out by lunch, or four;
Others, not knowing it, have come to join
The unseen congregations whose white rows
Lie set apart above - women, men;
Old, young; crude facets of the only coin

This place accepts. All know they are going to die.
Not yet, perhaps not here, but in the end,
And somewhere like this. That is what it means,
This clean-sliced cliff; a struggle to transcend
The thought of dying, for unless its powers
Outbuild cathedrals nothing contravenes
The coming dark, though crowds each evening try

With wasteful, weak, propitiatory flowers.

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It is the anonymity of death and dying—its sameness across people, its radical discontinuity with the narrative structures of separate lives—and the shock of that frontier between individual story and a faceless universal that motivates Philip Larkin's long poem, "The Building." That frontier is a feature of life's extreme terminus; it is also a feature of modern bureaucracy.

The "turn" comes in stanza three. In the waiting room "There are paperbacks, and tea at so much a cup…And faces restless and resigned" We see the room first through its component parts: paperbacks, tea. Nouns are concrete. The topic of the poem, here, is the mundane, and its form approaches that of a list. At the moment when the content of the poem moves away from the concrete, the rhythm and

language registers a change. "Humans caught/ On ground curiously neutral, homes and names/ Suddenly in abeyance." The largely iambic rhythm gives way to something more halting: iamb iamb iamb trochee (on ground curiously neutral) and then iamb iamb dactyl (suddenly in abeyance). The tongue is accelerated and reversed, accelerated and reversed.

Abeyance is perhaps my favorite word in the poem. Like "contravenes" in the penultimate verse, it is borrowed from the idiom of the law. The unfamiliar diction registers the strangeness of the situation: people's individuality (their homes and names), in this space, recedes. It implies not the violence of tragic heroes dying—Lear or Richard—stripped of something as they approach the end, but a temporary, technical, and rather polite condition of being. There is a quiet analogy here between bureaucracy and death; both efface individuality. The anonymity that emerges in this "neutral" space is both a given of biology and a product of bureaucracy, capitalism, and modernity.

Abeyance describes the way in which private lives, personal histories, idiosyncrasies, and tastes sometimes seem to, or are made to, retreat in the setting of disease. There is a way in which idiosyncrasies are perhaps distracting; medicine would intervene on that which is the same. In this telling: doctors, or the hospital, refuse to see. There is also a way in which, as the Larkin poem emphasizes, we are all united, all equal, the same in our mortality. "All know they are going to die." This is one of only three lines in the poem that does not flow haltingly, over complicated subclauses and enjambment, into the next. We are the same in the obdurate fact of death. From this view the sameness is then not imposed by the hospital, but something that the whole of quotidian life chooses not to see. "A touching dream to which we all are lulled/ But wake from separately."

***

Larkin, himself a librarian (we imagine him sensitive, grumpy, burdened with the sins of his time), wrote several "institutional" poems. Closest in size and weight (each of Larkin's collections is arguably built around one or two long poems) is "Church Going." Closest in conceit or structure (the speaker omniscient, above and without) is "The Large Cool Store." In each of these poems a building stands for a larger system. These three buildings, the church, the hospital, the department store are a kind of shorthand for modernity, for things the way we found them when we were born (the French theorists of modernity might add a fourth and fifth: a school, a court). Among these, the church and the hospital have a unique relationship. They stand for incommensurate and sequential world orders, the hospital rising, the church in decline and disuse. But they are also alike. In its deep history, the hospital was once a church institution, a house for pilgrims, the sick, and the indigent. Both house mortality (the body intervened upon, the body entombed), and both produce discourse about death (the technical means of delaying death, the hope of something else beyond), and, because to speak about death is to interpret life, both describe (differently) what it means to be a human being.

The poem places the hospital in explicit contact with the church. We come to the hospital to "confess" that something is wrong. The sick (or the dead) are imagined as an "unseen congregation" in "white rows…set apart above" One sees a choir. And the building itself (for in the end the speaker seems to leave again and see the hospital as edifice from afar), is compared to cathedrals. The flat modernity of its architecture, the "clean sliced cliff," eerily described by a noun and a verb (slicing, cliff) that are both means and figures for death, stands against the ornate expression of an earlier era's fears, hopes, and beliefs. The facile contrast (and challenge even—"unless its powers outbuild cathedrals") here is between a secular world of bureaucracy and science and a religious one, a disenchanted modernity against a believing past. But cathedral and hospital both fulfill the title of the poem.

***

Early in my third year of medical school, I had a patient who was diagnosed with pancreatic adenocarcinoma. He was eighty-nine. His father had died of pancreatic cancer at that exact age. I liked the man and his family. My resident brought me along to talk with him several times to share the results of new tests (giving bad news piecemeal, though the patient was, in many ways resigned). Knowing that his cancer was not operable, and understanding very well the natural history of the disease, the patient chose to go home and undergo palliative chemotherapy. He did not do well. Later that month he was readmitted with failure to thrive. He didn't bounce back to our team, but was instead admitted to the pal care service (they have nicer rooms at the VA, no roommates, space for family to sleep over on a couch). My resident (who is a good doctor in all of the ways I aspire to be, present and upright and caring) encouraged me to spend time with the patient, who, it was now absolutely clear, was dying. I was hesitant. I would poke my head in sometimes in the afternoon, because I knew my resident would ask if I had seen him, but I told myself he wasn't really our patient anymore, and I had other things I was supposed to be doing (important respiratory viral panels, haggling with the man in the prosthetics department, aspiring to select a dose of lasix with a more confident voice). And sometimes when I stopped by the family would be in the room, and I told myself that it was not my place, that this was there most private time, and that I should not intrude. My resident didn't give me a hard time, but I think he was disappointed. I think he was trying to help make an opportunity for me to learn to sit with people at the end. Reflecting on it later, I realized I was afraid. I was afraid of being awkward or intrusive, of making a difficult thing more difficult for the patient and his family (these are perhaps legitimate concerns). But somewhere below that I was afraid of sitting with this person at the hour of his death.

***

I cannot write about a poetry of death and modernity without thinking of the German poet-doctor Gottfried Benn. Benn served in the medical corps in WWI, and his poems, though they cling to the individual bodies, register both the horror of war

(death scaled up) and the horror of the gross materiality of an individual dis-inhabiting his or her body. His first collection is titled "The Morgue," and his second collection, "Flesh." His poems, which are phonically very beautiful in German, derive shock value from two things. There is first the violation of boundaries (inside and outside the body), the moment of cutting in dissection or surgery, or the wholeness of the body violated (parts of the body seen separately: guts examined too closely as guts, or organs frankly removed). The knife and the eyes cross inward, and innards cross out. There is second the juxtaposition of beautiful things with gross: an aster flower in a brain, a single gold tooth in the mouth of an unknown whore. Within this sits the juxtaposition of the language, the aesthetics of words, with the horror of carried content. Larkin's is an aesthetic of looking slightly away, past or askew. Benn's is an aesthetic of looking too close and too long, looking beyond the threshold of what is tolerable to view.

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One thinks, also, of Hamlet in the graveyard, tacking back and forth between disgust and comedy.

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Ratanawongsa N, et al. coded 45 interviews with medical students, quantifying the words they used to described their experiences with death and dying. The found that students looked to their teams, their interns and residents and attendings, to model end of life engagement, and that when teams did not acknowledge death, med students found it emotionally confusing. C. Williams, C. Wilson, and C. Olsen (their names are not a joke or a line of language poetry) read narratives about death and dying by 108 medical students, and identified in them the following affective responses: guilt, fear, blame, impotence. 40% of students identified an active belief in an afterlife was identified as a coping mechanism.

***

I have noticed that we sometimes send each other pages about a patient's death. Out of politeness, it seems, a primary team will notify a consulting team, an intern will alert a co-intern who went off service last week. There is something heartening about this (at least we remember, at least we assume that the other person will care), but also something insufficient (a life is so big, our pagers so small, the message so brief, it is hard not to feel like the effort is somehow paltry).

My patient with pancreatic cancer passed away, of course. I think I found out through the EMR.

I have noticed also when the preternaturally calm lady on the PA system announces a code blue, "Code Blue, 45 Francis Street Lobby, ED Code Team, 45 Francis Street Lobby, ED Code Team," that we look up for a minute, but we do not look at each other. What is there to say?

***

We use "code" in our argot to express our medical belonging, express our closeness and distant from the event. Code is a verb. The patient coded. The word points both to a thing (chaos, broken ribs, paddles, a last attempt) and describes its own function in language. "Code" is a code word for death.

***

"Send not to know for whom the bell tolls," wrote Dr. Donne in his *Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions*. Sometimes, when the news of death in the hospital feels particularly unceremonious, I think of this sermon. I have often wished for a little more ceremony, a little gravitas and ritual. Perhaps this is my own aesthetic bias, or my sloppy spirituality.

We do need a certain frankness around death to work with it and among it and close to its edge, and perhaps ritual diminishes that. I wish, for example, that I had the frankness to sit with my VA patient.

Part of growing into that frankness, must have to do with moving past the Gottfried Benn feeling, what is both a childish and very adult horror of looking too long at the violated limits of the living body in time or space. Part of our vocation is to be unafraid. But unafraid can too so easily pass into another kind of horror, the more subtle horror we encounter in Larkin's waiting room, the horror of an isolating, cold, modernity, in which individuals disappear behind systems, and the sick walk unaccompanied. This is the horror of looking away.

***

O world,
Your loves, your chances, are beyond the stretch
Of any hand from here! And so, unreal
A touching dream to which we all are lulled
But wake from separately. In it, conceits
And self-protecting ignorance congeal
To carry life, collapsing only when

Called to these corridors (for now once more
The nurse beckons -). Each gets up and goes
At last.

The sentences in the last three stanzas of Larkin's poem grow longer, more alliterative (conceits, congeal, carry, collapsing, called, corridors), and more complex. There is a carrying forward of shadow words from one sentence to the next (the stretching hand reaching into the touching dream, a phonic and visual

echo; the poem's conceit of the waiting room as life itself, and the nurse as reaper or fate, collapsing with the collapse of the "dream" as the present tense nurse beckons, again with the shadow hand). This is the crescendo.

***

There is an openness about "The Building." In it hospital death—the peculiar shape of biology and its givens enacted in our recent, contingent moment of history—is either profoundly lonely, or a path to agape, universalizing—catholic with the small c. The forced glimpse, in a hospital, of our mortality is a "new thing held in common," but we wake from our illusion (and, the counterpoint, enter into the sleep of death, Hamlet again) "separately." Larkin famously deflected the suggestion that his poems were highbrow, or in conversation with elitist literatures, or otherwise fancy. But they are. Donne, in particular, haunts the edges of "The Building." We see the sentiment, and even, oddly, the diction of Emergent Occasions excavated and wrestled with. This is our struggle, also, in the trenches, in the real hospital, finally: "for I am involved in mankind, each man's death diminishes me."

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