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Selim the half-wit hoarded everything—that was the story they told me my first day in waste management. Selim had lost his wife, and I guess everyone figured he took up hoarding as a way to fill the void. It started out with stuff his wife might have liked—small earrings, a tea set, owl statuettes—picked out of garbage bins. Well, Selim ended up with a house packed to the rafters with trash he thought was gold. He tucked it onto shelves and into stacks, put it in cupboards, crammed it under floorboards, couch cushions, and the mattress, until there was no space left but overhead. Then he installed a system of boards and beams into the frame of the house, with maybe two or three inches of clearance from his head, in order to pile trash above him. More and more he took from the waste bins: old, tattered books, bicycle bits, apple cores,
orange peels, broken printers, smashed-up furniture, crumpled cartons and boxes, hundreds of pounds of paper, pens, eyeglasses, eggshells, water bottles, shoes with holes, sleeping bags with urine stains, jackets too small, jackets too large, bed frames, filing cabinets, coffee mugs, coffee grounds—on and on an impossible list of trash weighed down on those boards and beams until at last, while his dreams of finding his wife in all this waste were licking the night sky, the house’s framing broke and the collected works of the city’s refuse crashed down upon Selim the half-wit, killing him not instantaneously, but swiftly enough to confuse him into believing in his deliverance.

The garbagemen laughed at the end of the story, and then the oldest one, without a hint of jest, indeed with genuine concern, said to me: “And you are doubly at risk, because a woman hoards more than a man.”

And the other garbagemen stopped their laughing and nodded solemnly. The nearest to me said: “We make light of a truth; it is easy to find the merits in another’s garbage if only because it reminds us of the mortality of our own legacies.”

I smiled and laughed and so did they, and they all went out to their tasks. I found my assignment: a truck helmed by two men named Hamdi and Mehmet. I hopped into the cab. The older man, Hamdi, drove us off to our route, and as he did Mehmet said that I shouldn’t take anything the others said seriously. “Garbagemen, for who knows why, make up myths and tales more readily than any other profession. Still, it is not good to take from the trash. Once you start, there’s no stopping. Eventually you’ll find yourself buried under it.”

A DAY BECAME A WEEK, became a month, became a year, as it happens. Mehmet and Hamdi made me go down the thinnest alleys of Beyoğlu because they had round bellies they couldn’t squeeze between the buildings, and they laughed at themselves so that their laughter accentuated their jiggling bellies. They gave me a slender handcart to navigate and said, So long, we’ll see you at the end of the maze.

I went down the alleys because I was the thinnest, but it’s not hard to be the thinnest garbageman when you’re a woman. My small handcart scraped its sides against brick and stucco and stone—sometimes my shoulders, too, would scrape the walls, and I worried that over time I might erode a small,
Fatima-shaped tunnel into the alley, or worse, that the alley would grind me down into a rectangle.

I stopped at the back doors and loading zones, the garbage bins always stuffed to overflowing, but really only half full because people are very bad at the economy of space. I emptied the bins into my handcart and continued on to the next little station, on and on all afternoon until I came out the other end of the labyrinthine alleyways soiled and sweating and reeking. Then I waited for Mehmet and Hamdi to finish their route in the truck and pick me up. They didn’t make me squeeze between them in the cab. Always whoever was in the passenger seat moved over to let me sit by the rolled-down window.

IN A SUNNY CORNER crooked between a kuaför and a pizza place was a bin packed with sheet music. Every day it was full up with sheets, not the kind printed in a book and tossed out by someone quitting the piano but handwritten compositions, sometimes crumpled in disappointment, sometimes scribbled over with one, two, three layers of corrections. The man who lived on the second floor was a composer, that explained it. I knew little about listening to music and even less about reading it. But you can tell a lot about someone by the way their trash comes to occupy a bin. From the state in which I found the pages, I could tell the man was tortured by the impossibility of translating what swirled around his soul into a symphony that would render the same swirlings to the soul of a listener, and that was enough for me to know that his music was beautiful. I told Mehmet about the composer, even showed him a few sheets of music, and Mehmet shrugged. “Or else a piano teacher, or else a student, or else a lunatic. How can you know if you don’t read music?” He went back to arguing with Hamdi over the reinstatement of the death penalty.

Without any reason, I promised myself I’d find something to convince Mehmet it was a beautiful composer’s trash bin. But the next week I found nothing in the bin, and the week after that, nothing again. Not so much as a single note scratched onto a napkin, or a used-up resin block, or even a banana peel with fret marks pressed into its skin from distractedly being eaten during practice. No, the old man must be sick, I thought, come down with a summer cold. It was a shame; I enjoyed collecting the composer’s trash if only for the reprieve of tending to something precious, of being entrusted
with the death of the beloved machinations of someone’s art. You look for small grandeurs in my line of work. A month here and you’d be singing odes to those rare crumbless toasters.

TRASH, JUST TRASH, unadorned, unloved. Scorned because it announces decay and decay is the product of time, and time is the fear of all living things. Layer, layer, layer, layer.

“DO YOU THINK HE’S DIED?” I asked Mehmet. We were in the cab of the truck, watching Hamdi drag a large bin full of sardine tins across the street.

“Who?”

“The old composer.”

“Old men are in the habit of dying,” he said.

SOMEWHERE A FAUCET was loosing dribsbles of water over the flagstones of the alley, and above, the muezzin’s call to prayer slid over the grooves of the sky. The heat had me with my uniform off and over my head. My undershirt was soiled, the cuffs of my trousers slicked by the puddles. I dragged my cart behind me to the next bin: the composer’s. I lifted the lid, expecting to find nothing once more, and so resigned to my worst fears, but instead, deep in the receptacle, I spied a small instrument laid gingerly over a pile of clean newspapers, more precious than a pair of china cups in packaging.

I pulled the instrument up and knew at once to save it from the trash, knew at once to commit the only sin of a garbageman and keep this piece. The violin had obviously been loved. I took the instrument into my arms. The patina held that precious luster of esteem that seems to catch the light in even the darkest nooks—a compass for the sun, as liquid as the glow of a freshly skinned onion.

I had before prized a few items I’d found discarded, keeping them in a pocket or sneaking them into the cab of the truck only to find them broken and dingy in the light of my apartment, and so I’d later place them in my own trash bin or leave them along the side of a road or buried under the retaining wall of a cemetery. But when you come across a truly unbroken thing, it is a miracle, blessed, pure.
There was a new instrument in the composer’s trash bin each week. I would, excited as a young girl on her birthday, run up to his bin, peel off the lid, poke my snout inside, and fish out either an immaculate violin, or a viola, or a bow, or a hand-carved music stand, or once even a cello, always placed delicately on a bed of clean newspaper. Mostly, it was easy sneaking them home—I was the last person to put anything in the back of our truck, and would hop out of the cab as fast as an eel when we arrived to the dump so that I could retrieve my newspaper-wrapped treasure before anyone saw it. Then it was quick goodbyes, see-you-tomorrows, and I was off for home with my bundle in the seat beside me.

I lived in a closet turned studio in an old Ottoman mansion that had been partitioned into apartments many decades ago. There wasn’t space enough in there for me and my thoughts at once; however, one claustrophobic afternoon, while cleaning each crevice and corner in my studio, I found a small hatch. It was in the top of my wall, behind a layer of wood panels that were under a covering of stucco. I pulled down the hatch, revealing a ladder. The ladder led me up into the framing of the old house, what you might call an attic if there had been anything but timber and shingles, indeed if there had even been a few floorboards. I crawled from beam to beam like an insect. It was a cramped little attic, spreading out over only a small portion of the center of the mansion—most of the upstairs rooms had the roof of the building as their ceiling. Only in the very center was the space tall enough for me to sit upright. I resolved to make the attic the home for my collection of string instruments, and over the next few days, I took up a few plywood panels and a box of nails. “Quite a racket the birds are making on the roof,” said a neighbor. I agreed and speculated it might instead be a large owl or a rodent or even a child climbing around. Over the weekend, I cleaned away the cobwebs and dust, brought up a battery-powered lamp, and constructed a display case. As soon as I finished my renovations, I tucked the instruments into neat and tidy order. I spent my evenings after work sneaking up into the attic to pull one instrument down and back into my studio, where I studied it for hours, with no thought in my head other than to marvel in its beauty.

One morning, I showed Mehmet the latest violin from the composer’s trash. He told me the city’s orchestras and philharmonics had been ordered to compose and perform with uniquely Turkish instruments.
“Every day it’s something new stolen away from us,” he said. I thought he was being dramatic but I remembered now a few things—tampons, waffle makers, coconuts—and then just as quickly reforgot them. As we rode along the Golden Horn toward the dump, we passed at the shore a building that had not been there yesterday. They must have thrown it up overnight, or else when my back was turned. Enormous, gray concrete reached from the water to the sky.

**Next in the Old Composer’s Trash,** I found an oud, then a saz, then a ney. I worried what it meant that even these traditional instruments were being removed. Was it an act specifically against the old composer?

**The City of Istanbul Woke** knowing that books were now banned. We did not talk about it; we did not complain in the markets or at the office about how much this would put us out, but we felt it right in the sockets of our hearts. We simply rose from our beds and set about adjusting, some of us living now as if completely amnesiac regarding the reality of before, drowned in a blue fluid of forgetting.

Then the morning was filled with hundreds, thousands of narrow columns of smoke creeping up through the cracks of the city to hide the sky in black. People burned their books, but not everyone. Some forgot to do it right away, they were late for work, and so burned them later at the stove while making dinner. Some didn’t want to burn them, trusting them instead to the cycle of nature, leaving them to decay in their gardens or in the gutters of Istanbul, flowing then in scraps to the Bosporus and washing away into the sea. Frugal ones used their pages as toilet paper. Not all books had been banned. The last line in the presidential decree read: “Exempting all religious books, histories of religions, works by religious figures, spy thrillers, murder mysteries, and science and mathematics textbooks unless containing lines of poetry or else whole poems.”

There rose for three days large columns of black smoke that painted the reflections in the Golden Horn very, very dark. I returned from work one evening to find the six or seven books I had space for in my studio had mysteriously disappeared. Even the cookbook that was not an actual published book but merely a folder of my mother and grandmother’s recipes was gone.
I tried picking up the bin, but it wouldn’t budge. I squatted and tried lifting with my legs, but it was no use. So I dragged the bin into the alley from its perch, scraping it over the flagstones and into the sun to have a peek. The lid popped off easily enough. Curled up inside, with his knees into his chest and blinking quickly in the light, was the old composer.

“I’m the trash today,” said the old man.

“All right,” I said. “But climb on out and get in my cart yourself or I’ll hurt my back lifting you.”

The old man did as I told him, and after some huffing and grunting he was tucked into my handcart, not saying a word as I continued on my route, not complaining in the least as I made my stops and piled more trash atop him. We went like that until the rubbish was up to his neck, only his pointy head poking over the pile. Though he didn’t complain, he wore a harsh frown, one that doubtless took great effort and concentration to maintain. I’d just collected the last bin of the day when the old man said: “Well, off to the incinerator, I suppose.”

“Yes,” I said. “I suppose.”

“Will it be quite hot?”

“Oh yes, quite hot,” I told him, and this seemed to bring him relief.

“It’s just been so damn cold in my apartment. I could do with a change of temperature.”

“You might not fit through the slot.”

“I’m not so fat,” he said. He was very slim.

“It’s a narrow slot at the incinerator.”

The old man nodded with a strange sadness. He must have shrugged his shoulders, because some of the trash around his neck curled over and fell out of the cart.

“It’s terribly hot in my attic,” I said, trying to console him. “You could go there instead.” This struck me as a perfectly logical suggestion, in part because while we had been going along, I had grown nervous over explaining to Mehmet and Hamdi, as well as to our supervisor, why there was a live body in my handcart. It didn’t seem like the sort of thing people wouldn’t notice, or that they would ignore. And just how had I planned to stuff him in the incinerator anyway? The more I went like that down the alley with the old man in my cart, the more I realized he’d become a big headache, because though I admit I’m not very cognizant of the goings-on in my country, I
didn’t think having a composer in my trash heap was a good thing. That’s the way Turkey seemed nowadays—it was impossible to keep track of what could get you in trouble. I resolved then to pile trash all over the old man, to hide him from Mehmet and Hamdi when they picked me up. I loaded him into the back of the truck myself, telling him to stay quiet, and I offered to drive the truck back to the dump, dropping Mehmet and Hamdi off at their homes on my way. It took some extra care at the dump, but mostly nobody pays much attention to trash, and so with a quick bit of shuffling and waiting for the right heads to turn away, I had the old composer in the trunk of my car as I zipped home through the hills over Beyoğlu and into Kuştepe.

I PULLED DOWN THE LADDER to my attic and shoved him up the rungs. He was taking his role as garbage very seriously and hardly employed his legs or arms; his movements were half-hearted. When he stepped up into the attic, though, everything in him changed. The lights were out—the space was made darker by the single cataract of sunshine coming from the transom on the far wall. I pulled the hatch closed behind us and heard, in the darkness, the small sounds of secretive, embarrassed weeping.

“You are safe here,” I said, trying to console the old man, but he shook his head and slumped to the floorboards, reaching his arms out in front of him.

I had to crawl on my hands and knees to get to the light switch. When I threw it on, I found the old man bent over one of the violins.

“My violin,” he said. He held it to his chest, clutching it fast and wiping his tears away. “I thought it had been burned, or broken, or compacted into a small cube. My violin . . .”

His two cellos, the other violin, the viola, the saz, the oud, the ney—they were there, waiting for him in the dark, waiting for him to notice each of them in turn and display the same tenderness in their reunion ritual. He did so, not quite petting them, but running his hand over their bends and grains the way one reassures a lover of one’s presence.

MEHMET HAD BEEN SAYING FOR WEEKS NOW that it was dangerous. I never listened to him. It’s strange to me, how much people want to talk when they are nervous. But then the grocer started saying it, and my neighbor in the stairwell, and the postman, and the baker—it was dangerous to keep some things. They had all seen people taken by the police for having
hidden things they should have discarded. They all swore they were witnessing more crimes. The baker said someone was smashing her windows. The neighbor said someone had mugged him. Maybe Mehmet was right, the city was becoming dangerous. He said it with a nervousness of the vocal cords, a chirp in their vibrations like the scrape of a coin over a cello’s string.

**THE COMPOSER DIDN’T STOP PLAYING.** Even in his sleep (which was infrequent and often upright in his chair), he made faint gestures of bow over strings. All week his was hurried, ravishing playing, making up for lost time, which of course is an impossible game, especially for the elderly. The old man went about his life as garbage in my attic as though nothing had changed. He asked for paper and pencils, and then for the rest of his instruments, something I could not do because he was no longer in his apartment throwing them out. We speculated that perhaps the government (who had thrown him into the trash bin) might return to his apartment (maybe when they went to seal it up) and throw away the rest of his instruments, but until then he would have to be happy pent up in my attic, bent over and cramped with his remaining instruments. That was until, when making my route through the veins of Beyoğlu, I came upon a violinist in a trash bin. Just as the composer had been, she sat hugging her knees to her chest. She said: “Hello, I am the violinist of the building. They’ve thrown me out.”

**THEN IN OTHER TRASH BINS** I found other wonders. A glittering snare drum, two honey violins, a dented oboe.

It was like that for weeks; I found more and more musicians and instruments in the trash and stuffed my attic full with them. They all hunched under the pitched roof; only the cellist could stand with her back straight in the low attic.

**ONE SATURDAY AFTERNOON** I took a nice meze up to the attic to have a little celebration with the musicians. When I stepped up into the space, an incredible symphony picked me up and swallowed me. Loud, oh so loud, as if I were directly behind the conductor at a concert hall. It was a brooding piece with heavy brass (where had they found a trombonist and a trombone?), and as they played I felt I’d been made incredibly small. The walls of the cramped room sighed out and folded back a little. The musicians
floated up from their seats. The objects of the room shrugged off gravity. Even divorced from its function, each instrument was a masterpiece, but I learned now that especially in use they were devices of great beauty, expressing their songs into a growing bubble that threatened to consume the musicians and the composer and the meze and even me into its membrane. But I rubbed my eyes and the illusion dropped away, and seated at a stool right in front of me, the old composer spun the music out into a magnificent tapestry.

“Please,” I said, setting the tray of food aside, “the house is very old. The walls are thin as silk. Everyone will hear you. The whole neighborhood will hear you.” But why hadn’t I heard them as I put together the meze?

The musicians understood, and nodded with somber faces. “But please, we have nothing else to do.” The composer did not acknowledge me in any way. I felt a shift in my stomach and wanted to leave the musicians in peace. I descended the ladder as they returned to their music that shook loose the silt in the canals of my soul, but as I pulled the rope down, the trapdoor closed and made silent throughout the whole mansion what was in fact a dramatic symphony in C.

We were in the cab of the truck coming back from our route, with the windows down and listening to the birds hang their songs on the breeze, when Mehmet said that we’d be busy tomorrow, and the day after, and the day after that. He said they might even assign a fourth person to our truck, but where would we put them? He said the government had issued another, even more austere decree, and so people would have no choice but to throw away half of their lives. I asked Mehmet if I would have to throw away anything.

He and Hamdi both laughed. “You don’t own anything,” said Mehmet. “I, on the other hand, will have to burn a few of my books. A pity, to have saved them only for this.”

“You didn’t throw them away?” said Hamdi.

“No, but some went missing anyway, as if vanished by a ghost, and I wept all night for them.”

Hamdi, easily nervous, realized he, too, had kept some books, a few exempted spy thrillers, but it didn’t matter to him. He should have burned them all, he said. He knew better than anyone about hoarding, which he defined as any attachment at all to an object. “Everything is eventually trash. It
is the natural order. I shouldn’t try to intervene.” Hamdi’s thoughts, like an oil tanker, did not change course easily, so he spiraled down a whirlpool of worry and proverbs.

“I’m afraid for my books,” said Mehmet. He had hidden in his apartment, even from his wife, a few very special books, things he said were worth collecting, worth holding on to if only to allow another generation to view them. He went very quiet telling me that they were more than books, instead masterpieces of space, magnificent to behold.

“I didn’t know you could read,” I said, only partially in jest.

Disregarding my teasing, he said: “It is not about reading only.”

I TOOK ONLY A FEW OF MEHMET’S BOOKS at first. I promised they would be safe with me. I didn’t tell him about my own books going missing. Since the attic seemed to have been spared the disappearings, I didn’t think that was important. I placed the volumes on top of the display cases I’d built for the instruments. The musicians immediately began to read. In fact, the composer complained to me that now all his musicians were reading instead of playing their instruments. I told him not to worry, there’s only a few books, they’ll finish them soon, and they did, but then they asked me if there were any more. “These are marvelous, I haven’t seen books like this in months. Haven’t you got any more?” Instead, I brought back a few more instruments, and another musician. No one was throwing away books anymore. The musicians eventually went back to their symphonies, and the composer was happy again. He seemed to think life was better for him after his removal from the world. Still, I smuggled in an odd book or two from Mehmet, if only to give the poor creatures something more to do than play their songs. I worried somehow the word would spread that I had a tiny library in my attic alongside the concert hall. The musicians, you see, were very loud in their discussions of the books, and who knows how it is that the government finds you. Sometimes I held my breath just to escape the anxiety. But the attic proved immune to the police raids that were now a regular occurrence for Istanbul’s population.

WHILE I WAS AWAY ON MY ROUTE, the composer had managed, don’t ask me how, to install an upright piano in my attic.

“The floorboards are bowing,” said the old man.
“They’re only plywood.”

“Plywood this strong, eh?” he said, happy.

I worried my orchestra was escaping. I worried someone would see.

FROM MY WINDOW over the kitchenette sink, with a small cup of coffee at my lips, I watched three policemen get out of their van, saunter over to the median shaded by a long row of Judas trees, and handcuff the nearest one. They stood there, one of the policemen with his wrist in one loop of the handcuffs and the other loop around the lowest branch of the Judas tree, waiting for the municipal forestry department to send out a couple of men with a chain saw. I spent the afternoon at the window as the men from the forestry department set to work felling the tree. The policemen took over from there and stuffed the tree into the back of their van, but not before informing it of its rights.

I PREPARED A TRAY of boiled eggs, slices of white cheese, olives, and loaves of fresh bread. I balanced the tray on my head as I crawled up the ladder and through the trapdoor into the attic, where I found not only the old composer and his orchestra but also a dozen strangers. While I was away, the musicians had descended from the attic and into the streets, taking up as many things as they could. Already the only air in this tight space came from the lungs of the person next to you, and now there were so many more lungs thirsty for breath.

“I tried to stop them,” said the old composer. He curled up on his stool, as downtrodden as I was stupefied. The musicians had put up shelves in the far end of the space and stuffed them full with books. And now these strangers were joining them as they perused the books and discussed recommendations and prejudices. It was dangerous to have the instruments, they made sound, but this was worse! Who were these strangers, I wanted to know—who knew if they could be trusted? But was this on my mind while a bile of anger slicked my throat? More than anything I was furious that my musicians had stolen away some space from my attic that could have been used to house more of those beautiful instruments, more of those magnificent musicians, and yet, as I went to the strangers to kick them out of my attic, I found that they were a long walk away, that the piano was no longer overflowing with sheet music and musicians, that there was now a semicircle of folding chairs around a
podium somehow tucked into the attic, and beside me was a table of refreshments and coffee. How had all of this fit into the attic? How had the seams of the roof not come undone? How had the eaves not shot right out of the building?

**IT WAS JUST AN OLD WOMAN AT FIRST,** wrapped in a ratty blanket that maybe her mother had made decades ago. She stayed under the piano bench. But this one guest turned into two who turned into three, then five, then twelve, then an artist who had watched his portfolios being dismantled by police. “Each page of my drawings, each page of my studies. I thought they would set them on fire, but instead they took them gingerly into their own binders, marking each page and recording the contents before sealing them up in special containers they use with incredibly old documents, and that was worse, worse to know they were being preserved for the bowels of a registry. Who knows if they will use it against me one day, or else work to dismantle it in some metaphysical way, more permanent than burning.”

And then came a sculptor and a farmer and a baklava baker and two professors of literature and a French teacher and a pregnant woman and a man in a wheelchair and a family of Syrians, until the whole attic took on the strange and anticipatory pressure of a liminal station and filled each of us to the core with expectation.

**THEY BUILT THE MASSIVE CONCRETE STRUCTURE** up another level. It was so tall now one had the sense that it was growing rather than being constructed. If you blinked too long, it would expand right over you, swallowing you whole. Not a window to be found. I heard a rumor they were trying to grow space in there. They were trying to compact air so incredibly dense that you could put it into your pocket and chip away at it with a chisel anytime you needed a breath. I heard a rumor that they were storing all the things that had been banned. “What about everything that has been burned?” I had asked a gossip, but she only shrugged.

I heard a rumor that it was a catacomb they were building, with each of us assigned a shelf.

**THEN, AND YOU MIGHT NOT HAVE NOTICED** anyway with all the public works under construction for the past decade, all the trees were
I was picked up by the police in the morning, without much fuss. They found in my bag a tube of red paint I’d saved out of the garbage for the painter. It wasn’t Turkish red, they said, by which they meant it wasn’t the red of the flag, but instead a boring, lifeless red. It was on the latest ordinance’s list of banned items.

At the police station, I was delivered to a special officer in charge of the contraband division. “What’s with the paint?” he asked me.

I shrugged.

“You an artist?”

“They are banned,” I said.

That wasn’t exactly true: old Ottoman artists and nationalist artists from the sixties were still celebrated, their works remained in museums and galleries, while contemporary artists had been rounded up, their work removed from the public eye, their tools thrown into the sea. But the officer didn’t argue the point. He sighed.

“I’ve got a drawer of paint myself,” he told me.

“Evidence.”

He shook his head. “I couldn’t paint a straight line if I dedicated my life to it. Still, just having it around makes me think I could, makes it a possibility.”

I understood him.

“Is it like that for you?” he asked, holding the tube of paint up to me.

“No,” I said honestly. “It’s just a tube of paint.”

“Hmm.”

He put the paint into his desk drawer, then pulled from a file a few pages and held them close to his face. I noticed he needed glasses but didn’t have any. I thought maybe they’d been banned. It was possible, they made people look old, weak, the opposite of what a Turk should be.

“There’s concern in the department that your neighborhood is deviant,” he said. “How’d you get the paint?”

I hadn’t heard anything about the neighborhood through the grapevine. Did he mean me? I felt incredibly naive then, stupid for having believed no one had noticed the orchestra in my attic. But perhaps they hadn’t. The officer told me about the tips they were receiving: the rumors had nothing to do
with music, no one had complained of any sounds coming from my building. But it was standard to search someone's house after picking them up—there were probably police in my apartment now looking for the attic, or else just looking for anything. Undoubtedly, the musicians were playing, the artists were painting and hammering and molding, and the intellectuals were debating and laughing and writing, and the whole attic was a racket, racket, racket just a few inches over the heads of a half-dozen policemen.

“I saw the paint in the trash,” I said.

“You’re a garbageman.”

“It’s a habit,” I said.

“You have a habit of taking things from the trash.”

I invited only suspicion with my answers. What did he know about me from that file there? What did he know about my apartment?

“Not my habit. I mean, it’s sort of an understood nature of garbagemen. We warn each other not to take things. It becomes hoarding quickly.”

“And the paint?”

“My first transgression,” I said, trying not to sound any particular way, trying very hard to sound like I wasn’t trying at all.

He nodded. I remembered the few books I’d owned that had disappeared from my apartment. Surely he knew, maybe he was the one who ordered them taken, and had them now in a desk drawer to show me. Maybe he knew about the attic. I was struck by the horrible idea that he had let the attic operate as a trap. I told myself that they wouldn’t waste time like that. If they knew about the attic, this wouldn’t be an interview. This wouldn’t be about paint. I would be in handcuffs in an interrogation room rather than at a chair across the desk from the special officer.

“And where were you taking it?”

“Home,” I said.

“You haven’t got even a windowsill to put it on.”

I nodded. Were there still police in my apartment? Would the attic, now unbearably packed with people and things discarded, come crashing down on them?

“Two years can feel like a long time,” he said. “It would be a shame to spend it in jail if there were someone else who belonged there instead.”

I didn’t bother answering. The officer seemed somewhat relieved. I’d spared him some extra work, I thought.
He put all the papers back in the file and said that because of my inability to reduce my life along the guidelines of presidential decrees, I would be sentenced to two years’ imprisonment. He told me that with the nature of everything there would be no trial, but there would be a court date set at which I could issue a formal statement for the record. I would be provided a lawyer to help me word my statement before the judge, and then I would be taken to the prison and processed. I’d be held in the police station until my court date.

Everything went pretty much how he said it would. At my hearing, my lawyer was exasperated, no doubt swamped with court dates for people like me. Instead of offering any help, he told me not to worry so much about jail, it wasn’t so bad. All the people in there had changed. All the people outside had changed.

They put me and a dozen other people in handcuffs and drove us in a windowless van to the enormous concrete building along the shore. It was growing up the face of Istanbul, taking over the skyline like a creeper reaches up the side of a house. I looked for its shooting tendrils, its grasping fingers, but saw only straight lines, ninety-degree angles, flat concrete into the sky. How did it hoist itself up farther over the city?

Yet inside there was hardly any room for us. We stood single file in the hallway leading to the processing center. One of the guards pressed between the wall and our line to pass ahead of us. We were guided to a room with a camera in the corner. After some shuffling, one of us would stand in front of the camera while the photographer crouched beside it and took our pictures. Then in the next room a woman with an ink pad and clean sheets of paper took our fingerprints, but the room was so narrow that we stood in the hall and put our hand through the door while she did this. After processing and a shower, we were given our jumpsuits and directed toward our cells. The cell block was similarly cramped, the atrium a cross section of tightly stratified floors. The ceiling felt very close to me.

A guard escorted me down a third-story catwalk. Up ahead a young woman with her face jammed between the bars, her cheeks red from pressure, called out to me: “Do not worry. It’s your first day but don’t worry, there are more criminals out in the city than there are in here. It’s safer in here than it is in the streets.”

The guard leading me nodded his head in agreement. “I’m practically getting my bachelor’s degree just by hanging out in here—so many professors and writers, you know.”
At last we stopped at my cell. It was not all that large; in fact, when considering the space the building took up, it was surprising how small and how few the cells were. Despite its size, though, there were with me in my cell a few old women, a young man, a child, a backgammon board, a teapot, and a toy car—and I knew the items were in here with us rather than for us. In the nearby cells were a forest and a flock of academics giving lectures to each other. The guard who had escorted me was now halfway down the catwalk, stopping in front of another cell. A different guard came to him and shrugged his shoulders and relieve the first guard of his hat and his baton and his radio before locking him up behind the barred door. Then that guard continued down the catwalk, stopping before another empty cell where another guard met him and relieved him of his hat and his baton and his radio before locking him up and moving on down to another empty cell. I lost sight of anything else.
Ada Limón

POWER LINES

Three guys in fluorescent vests are taking down
a tree along my neighbor’s fence line, which is, of course,
my fence line, with my two round-eyed snakes and my wandering
raccoon. That is, if you go in for ownership. My, my, my.
For weeks the tree they’re cutting grew tight with a neon pink band
around its trunk. A marking, so you knew it was going to die.

Must have been at least fifty years old, a nonfruiting
mulberry with loads of wintercreeper crawling up the bark.

Still it hung low by the power lines. Its fruitless limbs
leaning over the wire like it didn’t care one bit about power.
Just inching up toward the sun under the hackberry.

The men are laughing between chain saw growls,
the metal jaws of machinery. It is a sound that sounds like killing.
I can barely listen, but then they are conversing in Spanish
and it brings me a mercy to hear them make a joke
about the heat, the lineup of jobs that day. Once
my friend Mundo wanted palm fronds for his patio
so he put on an orange shirt and climbed a towering palm
right in the center of town. *No one ever questions a Mexican in an orange shirt*, he said, and we clinked glasses around

his new tiki bar. My grandfather worked for Con Edison for years.

I thought power was something you could control. Something one could do at a desk or on a job site, work in the field of power.

Now the tree is gone. The men are gone, just a ground-down stump

where what felt like wisdom once was.
Two Poems by Kaveh Akbar

A N  O V E R S I G H T

I murdered my least defensible vices,
stacking them like bodies
in the surf. An armada of nurses rode in
to cherish the dead: *Try harder, little moons*, they said to the corpses, spooning
eggplant into each mouth. Winter
followed winter. Horses coughed
blood into the sand. Some pain
stays so long its absence becomes
a different pain—

They say it’s not
faith if you can hold it in your hands
but I suspect the opposite may be true,
that real faith passes first through the body
like an arrow. Consider our whole galaxy
staked in place by a single star. I fear
we haven’t said nearly enough about that.
A ribbon around an oak tree reads brother. The oak’s roots sinking deeper into the dirt.
A heart can sink too, like a root, or a library whose architect forgot
to factor in the weight of its books. First you lose Romance, then
Fiction, History. At the center of a heart is data, the same idiot degradation that turned the stars into us. I hope somebody
forgets you today too. I hope somebody cuts that ribbon free.
Tremor in his hands. He turns obsolete leaves edged with thunder since the opening scene. What he sees he reads under croton shade, out in the sun. Restless peninsula, dog-eared, melting off into the blue. The blue breaks white as hallucination, more haggard than foam. What he reads he is, in all unlikeness, except in margins. Patiently there his patient, brisk notes skim clean out of reach of spite he despises (malice, another matter, which he likes), that idle country, the cruise ship, curdles in his eyes, edgewise, blocking Saint Thomas from view. The last he had seen of it, dusk, at noon, recoiled from the cinder barracks at rest from working iron into sugar; long, shingled rows of them, glittering red and silent, and in that silence, Daniel, the brown boy, ripening by lamplight, died: remember Daniel, remember Daniel—he remembers Ariel in midday’s cloven dusk, writing by “Fine apparition,” doubtless, adding, on the next page, mirror. Sheer pain. Untarnished and all-circumscribing bright, the pain grips what he sees, his father’s shanty, fallen, shining, like hard rime against day’s violet’s blues in a mass of green leaves; his father, where he is gone, no one goes to come back. There the green dyes blue white by misprision, which underlies all he reads. An intimate limit strikes the pages.
still. As breath. Still as the nocturnal pool
his face vanishes and returns again
and again into, vanishing and returning,
until, irrevocable, he cries out,
“I am the island. I alone am it!”
Which he repeats, counting each syllable’s
weight on the flyleaf. He enters a sound
unheard of in paradise: “redemption,”
a word he does not write, not knowing it,
not more than its ghosting of something loved,
less of something forgotten, passed over
on airy nothings. Sun strikes the sea blank.
He grows dizzy on his coral Shinar.
Heat enamels his eyes. What he sees is
conditional, all of it survival’s
vast, charnel sea, from which the ship is gone.
An unfulfilled progress. Another looms,
pitch-black on the horizon, impatient
parhelion, Daniel-Ariel,
shining unburned there! He sees what he sees.
Then, at one strike at his notes, he shatters
noon; the croton leaves flare coronal red
and the sea shimmers tinfoil on his face,
haunted with a baffled stare at nothing,
nothing never before seen in such stasis,
as of the galleon, coming, frozen
between worlds, half seen, deformed
as twilight, fades off into a scolding
self-effacement on the page. He strikes it
again. This time it tears big and opens
oblivion. The hacked margin coalesced
within the text. He concentrates hard
for what is contingent, then looks away,
for a word that is not; the clanking heat
in his mind, writhing its wordless syntax
toward some core, less than clear, a mercy
buried by the shanty’s bare brilliance,
his father’s trumpet tree droops and withstands
the corrosive green, innervated. Here,
triumph is concession. That is the pain,
reversed easily, which he bows to see,
turning the page, writing *that is the pain*
in a fresh spot, but turns back to the tear,
hazed wider what he had cried out, “I am,”
as if to proclaim “All lost!” he shivers
dearer; all lost, and yet so much follows,
delayed to be named or renamed, snapshot
unaware, as he, by distant lightning,
as myth, etiolated, blackens the sun.
He concentrates. Asks what is contingent.
Is oblivion possible after
all that the lion of God has suffered,
burning in fields to find grace in himself?
(*Grace* is another’s word. He strikes out *grace.*)
There must be an error, that fiery
calm, that mighty constraint to make witness
antiphonal, with zero exposure
within his indigo shade, at half-mast,
by a pure blind rage, the little lines cry
out for apocalypse and find dumbstruck,
four chemtrail claws husking the sky; blue falls
into the sea and barely remains blue
before disintegrating on the page.
Are ghosts photographed flash on or flash off?
(Do not torment him. Do not torment him.)
His father can be anywhere and is.
Tomorrow, for instance, and yesterday,
too, the white-teething waves, silent now, will
be delirious. More cruel than vain,
the missing link chimes and reconfigures
his rattling babel, bleached black in the sun.
Is that bushfire ravening the green?
Has he given up grace for gravity
to fall over, almost, rekindling
doubt to write hope over the holocaust
gashed into the scene? What is it to die?
Tremor as his hand stops, abrupt. He hears
a belated thunder graze quiet.
It disappears into the void the ghost
ship had lingered, where dividing extremes
met, now something else, steady abounding,
breaks in abundance, the less the more so,
between promises and no promises,
an unbroken light moves and redacts his voice
of grief, a grief that cannot be disgraced,
whether a demon’s or a martyr’s wrath,
refracts all one, the page, the sea, his face
glaring from the shade. Do not torment him
for hearing double a depth charge too deep
to sound, bent, lifting wrecked songs of ascent,
kindled against noon’s mute samphire blaze.
"Heyman, so why were you telling him about it? That was in..."

"He's my little brother. I can do anything with him."

"This is not a good thing on your past..."  

They couldn't read each other, but they passed their secrets like gambling debts and redistribute it without naming the amounts or asking who owned which.

"Tell me, now..."

"What have I heard about this thing?"

"He called pro-tales."  

"Tell me..."

"The story. The story. The only thing I feel for myself... the story of the stupid war. Stupid war... we have to fight... stupid war... Stupid war... We have to fight... stupid war..."

"You know what the worst thing is?"

"Tell me, tell me..."

"The story. The story. The only thing I feel for myself... the story of the stupid war. Stupid war... we have to fight... stupid war..."  

"Tell me, tell me..."

"The only thing I feel for myself... the story of the stupid war. Stupid war... we have to fight... stupid war... We have to fight... stupid war..."

"Tell me, tell me..."

"The story. The story. The only thing I feel for myself... the story of the stupid war. Stupid war... we have to fight... stupid war..."

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"The story. The story. The only thing I feel for myself... the story of the stupid war. Stupid war... we have to fight... stupid war..."
After her first novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997), Arundhati Roy did not publish another for twenty years, when *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* was released in 2017. The intervening decades were nonetheless filled with writing: essays on dams, displacement, and democracy, which appeared in newspapers and magazines such as *Outlook*, *Frontline*, and the *Guardian*, and were collected in volumes that quickly came to outnumber the novels. Most of these essays were compiled in 2019 in *My Seditious Heart*, which, with footnotes, comes to nearly a thousand pages; less than a year later she published nine new essays in *Azadi*.

To see that two-decade period as a gap, or the nonfiction as separate from the fiction, would be to misunderstand Roy’s project; when finding herself
described as “what is known in twenty-first-century vernacular as a ‘writer-activist,’” she confessed that term made her flinch (and feel “like a sofa-bed”). The essays exist between the novels not as a wall but as a bridge. Roy’s subject and obsession is, throughout, power: who has it (and why), how it is used (and abused), the ways in which those with little power turn on those with less—and, importantly, how to find beauty and joy amid these struggles. *The God of Small Things* is a novel focused on one family, while *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* has a larger scale, but in the questions they ask and the themes they explore, both novels are as “political” as any of her essays. Her essays, in turn, are as powerfully and lovingly written as her fiction, with the same suspicion of purity, perfection, and simple stories.

Roy was born in 1959 in Shillong, in India’s northeast, and grew up mostly in Kerala, on the southwestern coast. She left home in 1976 to attend the School of Planning and Architecture in New Delhi and has lived in the capital ever since, without practicing architecture. (She brought the school and its patois to vivid life in the movie *In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones*, which she told me is now screened there every year for the incoming class.) She has received numerous honors, including the 1997 Booker Prize for *The God of Small Things*, the Lannan Cultural Freedom Award, the Sydney Peace Prize, the Norman Mailer Prize for Distinguished Writing, and a 2017 Mahmoud Darwish Award, but might take even more pride in the list of those who have found her a thorn in their side. She told me that at a panel at the World Water Forum in 2000, after an executive promoting the privatization of water systems introduced himself by saying he wrote about water “because I’m paid to,” she began by saying, “My name is Arundhati, and I write about water because I’d be paid a great deal not to.”

We conducted this interview over three mornings in Chicago in the fall of 2019 as Roy was visiting the U.S. for speaking engagements. In private, she projects the same passion and urgency as she does in public, but there is a greater opportunity to appreciate her sense of humor as well—a generous one, which seeks always to share what she sees with her interlocutor.

—Hasan Altaf
Can you tell me a bit about your reading habits?

When I was growing up in Kerala, to nourish the English part of my brain—there was a Malayalam part, too—there was a lot of Shakespeare and a lot of Kipling, a combination of the most beautiful, lyrical language and some very unlyrical politics, although I didn’t see it that way then … I was definitely influenced by them, as I have been later by James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, John Berger, Joyce, Nabokov. What an impossible task it is to list the writers one loves and admires. I’m grateful for the lessons one learns from great writers, but also from imperialists, sexists, friends, lovers, oppressors, revolutionaries—everybody. Everybody has something to teach a writer. My reading can switch rather oddly from *Mrs. Dalloway* to a report about the National Register of Citizens and the two million people in Assam who have been struck off it and have suddenly ceased to be Indian citizens. Ceased to have any rights whatsoever.
A novel that overwhelmed me recently is *Life and Fate* by Vasily Grossman. Just incredible—the audacity, the range of characters and situations. It begins with a surreal description of the Volga burning—the gasoline floating on the surface of the water catching fire, giving the illusion of a burning river—as the battle for Stalingrad rages. The manuscript was arrested by the Soviet authorities, as though it were a person. Another recent read was *The Garden of the Finzi-Continis*, by Giorgio Bassani. It’s about the time just before World War II, when many Jews in Italy were members of the Fascist Party. The Finzi-Continis are an elite Jewish family who live in a mansion with huge grounds and tennis courts. The book is centered around a love affair between the daughter of the Finzi-Continis and a person who is an outsider to that world as the Holocaust closes in. There is something about the unchanging stillness of that compound, the refusal to acknowledge what is happening, even while the darkness deepens around it. It is chilling and so eerily contemporary. All of the entitled Finzi-Continis end up dead. Considering what happened in Stalinist Russia, what happened in Europe during World War II—one is reading, searching for ways to understand the present. What fascinates me is how some of the people who were shot by Stalin’s firing squads died shouting “Long live Stalin!” People who labored in the gulag camps wept when he died. Ordinary Germans never rose up against Hitler, even as he persisted with a war that turned their cities into rubble. I look for clues to human psychology in Ian Kershaw’s biography of Hitler, in the memoirs of Nadezhda Mandelstam, wife of the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, whom Stalin basically killed, in the poems of Anna Akhmatova and *Kolyma Tales* by Varlam Shalamov.

**INTERVIEWER**

A lot of Russians.

**ROY**

*laughs* A lot of Russians, right now, yes. There is something so juicy about the way they could take on a big narrative. And, of course, Chekhov, who can do it in that microscopic way, too. I enjoy the way they refuse to stay in their lanes. Especially now that the traffic regulations are getting stricter, the lanes are getting narrower and more constricted. Everybody, writers, readers, public conversation in general is being straitjacketed. Controlled from every direction, up, down, and sideways. In India, cultural censorship is literally
meted out by mobs on streets, mostly with tacit blessings from the government. We seem to be approaching a kind of intellectual gridlock.

**INTERVIEWER**

Your writing hasn’t really ever been tempted to go into the microscopic, short story mold—the novel seems like the form you chose.

**ROY**

I love immersing myself in the universe of a novel for years. There is never a time when I am more alive. Some writers suffer through that process, but I enjoy it. Being in that universe, that imperfect universe, is like being in prayer—it is separate from the product or the end or the success or the nonsuccess of the product. What a horrible word for a novel—*product*. My apologies.

**INTERVIEWER**

What is that product? What is a novel supposed to be?

**ROY**

I think there is an increasing danger of novels becoming too streamlined, domesticated. When you read Vasily Grossman or the big Russian novels, they are wild and unwieldy, but now there’s a way in which literature is being commodified and packaged—is it romance, is it a thriller? Commercial? Literary? What shelf should we put it on? And now we have the phenomenon of the M.F.A. novel, which can often be a beautifully confected product. There are no rough edges. The number of characters, the length of chapters, it’s all skillfully orchestrated—and I’ll say that male novelists are allowed leeway there. They’re more easily allowed the big canvas. But with a woman, it’s like, How many characters are there in that book? Isn’t it a bit too *political*? I’d ask them, How many characters are there in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* or *War and Peace* or whatever? I sometimes feel that the settled classes, the contemporary cultural czars who are the arbiters of taste in the arts and in literature, are often wary of the real, deep, unsettling politics that are not part of accepted pedagogy—we are expected to write within a sort of default worldview, in which the ideas of what constitutes progress, enlightenment, and civilization are agreed upon. But I think that is changing
now. It’s being challenged by young writers and poets, challenged from many directions, from across the world.

INTERVIEWER

The idea of a confected product is interesting, in that it also limits the subjects a writer is “allowed” to talk about, or what they can bring together into one book—as though a family story shouldn’t have a political dimension or vice versa. In Ministry, you say of Tilo that she “had lost the ability to keep her discrete worlds discrete,” which seems to speak to the way you work, too—in the novels themselves and in the way you move between genres.

ROY

A novelist can’t keep discrete worlds. Your business is to smash them together, against each other. The academic world, the journalistic world, the NGO world, they like to keep things discrete—this is a climate change dossier, in
this room we deal with Hindu nationalism, that is the war and peace industry admin bloc, this is international finance, this is the environmental issues funding department, in this room we administer and ponder upon issues regarding caste, race, gender, and other identities. Sometimes, when I’m in a cruel mood, I think it’s a bit like a taxonomy of funding applications. But in order to really understand these things, to radically understand them, you have to look at the interplay. To truly understand the conflict in Kashmir you have to be aware of not just the dynamics of a military occupation, but also the geography of the place, the control of natural resources, the importance of the rivers in that region. When violence breaks out between two communities in Odisha, apart from the history of conflict between those communities, you must also look out for the bauxite mountain and the mining companies working in the neighborhood. To understand how the Indian economy works, knowing finance is not enough. You need to look at it through the prism of caste. You need to have a circle of eyes, many pairs of eyes arranged all around your head and a skin that is osmotic. At least that’s the kind of novelist I want to be. That has been my life’s tragedy as well as my holy grail. It has blown my life apart and then glued the pieces together. Sometimes I wish I could be otherwise—some other kind of person.

INTERVIEWER

Your work points out both details and generalities—deliberately, as you said, smashing these things together, or zooming in and out.

ROY

It’s not conscious on my part, but I think it probably has a lot to do with how one is culturally positioned inside India, in which everybody is expected to live in a rigid grid of caste, community, religion, ethnicity. Transgressions lead to anything ranging from “honor” killing to ostracism. If you fall outside that grid, as I do—not really belonging to a particular caste or particular community, for example—then you become the outsider on the inside.

Let me explain that. It’s not that I come from an oppressed caste or a community that has been exploited over generations. On the contrary—my mother belongs to the very elite, closed Syrian Christian community of Kerala, like Ammu in *The God of Small Things*. My father, my hard-drinking father, whom my mother left when I was about two, came from the other
end of the country, Bengal. His family was extremely Westernized but not Christian. For three generations my great-grandfather, my grandfather, and my father separately, individually, converted to Christianity. I have a cousin who has embraced Islam, another Judaism. My father is buried in a Christian graveyard in a place called Burari, on the outskirts of Delhi. But ironically, my mother, because she married outside the community and then got divorced, is sort of excommunicated and will not be buried in a Syrian Christian graveyard. Not that she wants to be. Despite this, and despite the hostility she once faced from her community, she stayed on in Kerala, where she still lives and works. But I fled. I came to Delhi, studied architecture, and am now embedded in a personal world that I have put together for myself—I am a writer without a “people.” But my writing has created my community for me . . . it has become my passport to places that are otherwise not always welcoming to other people—to the islands on the Brahmaputra in Assam, where many of the people that have been struck off the National Register of Citizens live, into the brutalized valley of Kashmir where my dearest friends live and work, or the forests of Central India, where a guerrilla war is being waged. I go to those places because I know that unless I go and talk to people, I will never be able to understand the patterns and particularities, the uniqueness as well as the universality, the almost maddening complexity of the world I want to write about. The greatest reward for a writer is the invitation to enhance your understanding—not in a journalistic sense necessarily, because I make no claims to neutrality. The amount of time that I have spent rattling around in vehicles, in strange places with people who know their communities, their villages, their environments like they know themselves . . . that’s my people, in a way. It’s not a territorial community, it’s like we’re all walking on lily pads floating on the surface of a lake or on stepping-stones on a rushing river. Or maybe we are the lily pads and the stepping-stones. It’s my floating island of understanding—the people of my literature, the people who my literature is made up of.

INTERVIEWER

Part of how you live in the world—maybe part of how you have to live in the world, in a city like Delhi—is language. It has always had an important, conscious place in your work—Hindi, English, Malayalam, Urdu, Kashmiri, among others, like the Telugu/English/Urdu letter that Dr. Azad Bhartiya
translates in Ministry. People are translating for each other or to each other or just “each other” constantly.

ROY
When I am writing, I am always translating. I think my brain gets wired in a different way when I am writing in English what Musa would be thinking in Urdu, for example. Or, even if I don’t know Telugu, I know how Telugu people speak English, and I know how Malayalis speak English. [laughs] For me, English is like a rubber band. I have to make it do what all these different languages do.

INTERVIEWER
And you grew up speaking English and Malayalam, is that right?

ROY
As I said, my mother is from Kerala, where we speak Malayalam, and my father is from Bengal, where they speak Bengali. But I was born in Shillong, then part of Assam, now in a state called Meghalaya. When I was born, my parents were already not getting on, so while they fought I was farmed out to the tea pickers’ quarters, where the workers spoke a patois called Baganiya. Bagan is a garden. These were Adivasis, indigenous people, brought from Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh. Cruelly exploited to this day. That was the first
language I knew, I think. Then my parents divorced and I came to Ooty, where they speak Tamil. So, in my earliest years I used to know a little bit of Hindi, then English, then Malayalam.

INTERVIEWER
And the schools you went to in Kerala, were those English language or Malayalam?

ROY
Initially, when I was growing up in Ayemenem, I didn’t go to school, and used to speak Malayalam. When my mother started the school that she still runs, I studied there, and at that point there was serious punishment for us if we spoke in Malayalam—we had to write I will speak in English, I will speak in English—a hundred times. Sometimes five hundred times. It’s not like that anymore though, her school. Now the junior classes are conducted in Malayalam. Then I was sent to boarding school where the language of instruction was English.

INTERVIEWER
You also pay very close attention to “official” or political language in your fiction—the police list in The God of Small Things, the way Anjum in Ministry keeps using hijra while Saeeda adopts terms like MTF and FTM and cisgender, and labels like “untouchable” or “scheduled caste.”

ROY
The more I think about it, the more I realize how important this is to me—to be alert to public language, as well as the search for my own private language. When the nuclear tests happened in the nineties, for example, there was a complete change in the public language that was permissible to use in India. The idea that India had announced itself as a nuclear power, much of the commentary had to do with a new, aggressive Hindu nationalism, meant that portraying people as “real” or “true” Indians, the stigmatization and profiling of religious minorities, particularly Muslims, became acceptable. Overt Islamophobia became customary. That shift in the language is what made me write “The End of Imagination”—my essay on India’s nuclear tests. Then, when I traveled to the Narmada Valley and wrote about the antidam movement, there was a different language. People would refer to themselves
as paps—project-affected persons. Are you a pap? No, my name is not on the list. In Assam now, because of the National Register of Citizens, there is a new vocabulary. Fisherfolk in far-flung islands use English words like *doubtful voters, declared foreigners, and genuine citizen,* and worry about how to organize *legacy documents.* In Kashmir the military occupation has spawned its own vocabulary. It’s laid out in Tilo’s Kashmiri–English dictionary in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness.* And then there is the language of caste—the abhorrent traditional usage, the repulsive official terms. The way in which, in several vernaculars, women and people from Shudra and Dalit castes will be referred to in disrespectful ways that are coded into language itself.

How am I to explain all this to you? The story is, for me, life itself. The telling of the story is a story in itself. And the language in which the story is told is another whole story in itself. Because, in this part of the world, language is an ocean teeming with shoals of language fish and word fish.

**INTERVIEWER**

I think in one essay, you use the phrase “Language is the skin on my thought.”

**ROY**

That was not in an essay, it was just something I said when people were talking to me about *The God of Small Things.* Sometimes people think of language as something that you construct or choose. But, for me, it is never that. It arrives organically, to tell the story that needs to be told. It comes to me, like as an audio track, as music almost. When I write, I don’t write a lot and then redraft and throw things away. It’s more like I hear it. And then there’s an enhancement, but there isn’t a great amount of redrafting. Recently I was tidying up my cupboards and I found all these papers, sections of *Utmost Happiness.* They were written eight years ago, and there are pages, whole paragraphs, in which nothing has changed. It’s almost like these sentences and phrases appear as colored threads, and then it is a question of weaving them into a fabric.

**INTERVIEWER**

Can you say more about that idea—enhancement?
Let me see . . . for example, in *The God of Small Things* the first image I had, which isn’t of course the way the book actually starts, was a picture of a pair of seven-year-old twins in a sky-blue Plymouth with the sun reflected in its tail fins, small billboards advertising pickles on its luggage rack on the roof and stuck at a railway level crossing while a massive communist demonstration swirls around it. And the idea of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* germinated with this moment—an abandoned baby girl appears on a sidewalk at midnight in a place called Jantar Mantar in Delhi, which is a place where protest movements from all over the country used to converge. My goodness—it just occurs to me as I think this through—the thing I seem to have with children and political protests! Something about being born into resistance and chaos . . . When I say *enhancement*, what I mean is that I might write that paragraph about that baby that appeared, or the children at the level crossing, but around that, the oyster-novel secretes its story, layer by layer. In the case of both novels, those chapters are not the opening ones. But they are somehow the nerve center of the novel. That’s what I meant by enhancement.

**INTERVIEWER**

Something like a revolution in a graveyard happens frequently in your writing—there is a discrepancy or an unexpectedness to places, even to metaphors. At the beginning of *The God of Small Things*, you describe something as domestic as rain in a garden with a very violent metaphor, plowing up the earth “like gunfire.” And in *Ministry* there is a bullet wound “like a cheerful summer rose.” As if things are in a sense the opposite of what we might expect them to be, especially in terms of this kind of violence or peace.

**ROY**

I’ve never thought of it like that before you pointed it out . . . the juxtaposition of those two metaphors. But yes, I think that things are seldom what they appear to be. We have to peel off the layers of publicity from almost everything . . . peace, love, death, rain, sunshine, established ideas of normalcy, motherhood, families . . . for me, personally, the family’s been a very violent place. A very, very violent place. Terrifying. All of my breakage happened there. Whenever I see an advertisement with the vision of the perfect house in which the happy family lives, I’m filled with foreboding. What saved me
was a raft of friendship—intense friendships and great loves. Not bloodline and “the family.”

On the other hand, when you see what’s going on in a place like Kashmir and the assault on people, there it looks as though the family unit is the last thing standing—the last module that has not been smashed by the Indian state and its army of occupation. I always find myself a little lost when I go there, because I’m bewildered by these seemingly loyal, unquestioning family ties. But of course, inside that module there are all sorts of things going on, too . . . but when a people have to face what they face, I’m sure there’s a huge pressure not to let on, not to let their side down.

Revolution in graveyards, not metaphorically but literally, is the theme of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. The graveyards of Kashmir are where, as Musa writes to his dead daughter Miss Jebeen, the dead are alive and the living are only dead people pretending. And a graveyard in Delhi is where Anjum builds her Jannat Guest House—Paradise Guest House—in which every room encloses a tomb. Where separation between the living and the dead is very porous. If you pay close attention to who lives there, who dies there, who is buried there, and what prayers are said . . . it’s actually a revolution.

So, here’s a warning—don’t come to my novels expecting graveyards to be full of the dead and family homes to be inhabited by the living. Or, for that matter, expecting cinema halls to be screening films.

**INTERVIEWER**

If you were to baldly describe the plots of your novels, they’re both rather bleak. But they are also both very beautiful, with a lot of joy and richness, and both books end at a place of joy. That’s another kind of tension I was hoping you could talk about.

**ROY**

That tension is a part of what we were talking of earlier, changing lanes, messing around with metaphoric traffic regulations, not just in the public realm, but inside the human psyche, too . . . intensely private things, feelings, darkness and light, yearning, love, and loss. In *The God of Small Things*, there’s a section where I speak of kathakali, a dance form in Kerala—an exquisite, balladic form of storytelling, which I think is perhaps what has influenced me most of all as a storyteller. There I describe how the kathakali dancer can show you the nugget
of sorrow that happiness contains, the hidden fish of shame in the sea of glory. Also in “The End of Imagination” there is a sort of writer’s manifesto—“To seek joy in the saddest places. To pursue beauty to its lair.” I sometimes feel that for women in India, happiness is a weapon. Because we’re not expected to be happy. We are expected to sacrifice, to suffer, to serve. When I was growing up in Kerala—my mother was very bitter, about men and about many things. But her school is such an exuberant place. The women, the girls in the school, are never made to feel unequal to the boys in any way. And you can see it in the way they walk, the way they conduct themselves, in their easy confidence.

INTERVIEWER

It’s a coed school, right?

ROY

It’s a coed school, yes. Unthinkable, utterly scandalous at the time she started it, in that conservative little town. I studied there, initially, and then went to another coed school, and then I left home for college when I was sixteen or seventeen and I didn’t go back. I could feel that this idea of the woman as a needy victim was—I just couldn’t survive that. There was always this thing in me, this almost militant search for happiness. I’m not going to voluntarily suffer. I mean if I have to suffer, I will, but it’ll not be an offer. The place I came from in Kerala—I don’t know how to describe the burden of conventionality. I mean, there’s nobody, nobody that I knew like myself in that place I was growing up in. Not even close. And given my parents’ background, it was made clear to me that a conventional marriage was nowhere on the horizon for me. “No self-respecting Syrian Christian boy will marry her” was a whispered refrain. So, a fair amount of unhappiness and bitterness was written into the script that was being readied for me. But I thought otherwise … No, I’m not going to be unhappy. I’m actually going to be really happy. And that was a militant aspiration for me. To pursue that. It requires you to slough off a lot of conditioning that you pick up from people around you. Even then, I had to work at it. For years, I felt somewhat guilty, somewhat apologetic and embarrassed about where my work has got me—too much fame, too much money, too much nice flat—too much by my standards, not by rock star or movie star standards. Guilt is a debilitating emotion. I literally had to shake it out of me like a wet dog shakes water out of its fur.
The real question is, What do you do with what you have? What stories do you tell? How do you tell them? What do you do with money? How do you deploy it? How do you share it?

Joy is ephemeral. Of course it is. For me, happiness—and I’m not talking about the externalized Facebook-type of faux happiness—is a feeling and a state of mind, but sometimes it’s also a posture. Because they don’t want that. They want you to look beaten up. That’s why laughter is as much a part of my writing as anything else.

**INTERVIEWER**

That kind of happiness, that posture, can also be reflected in seeing humor and absurdity in the world, even in dark places. This comes up repeatedly in your work. How consciously do you think about this?

**ROY**

I don’t consciously think about it, because I live it. I see it all around me all the time. Uproarious laughter in the midst of the grinding guerrilla war in the Bastar forest, where people greet each other in the morning not knowing if
they will see each other in the evening. Graveyard humor that is an essential part of the discourse in Kashmir. It’s only a question of having your ear tuned to it, being a part of it ... people are incorrigible. And hilarious.

INTERVIEWER
What was the move like, from Kerala to Delhi? That seems like a big culture change and language change.

ROY
It was. But it was wonderful. It was very difficult between me and my mother in those days. I have an epic mother. She is my creator and my destroyer and I mean that in the epic sense of both of those words. She is very severely asthmatic, and that was a source of terror in my growing-up years. She kept saying, I’m going to die and what will you do? You’re going to have to live on the street. I felt like my breath in my lungs was hers. I was living on the thread of her faltering breath. I really thought that if she dies, I’ll die. I was very fearful as a child. And now she’s eighty-seven! But on the other hand, it is also she who put the steel into my spine. Who laid the groundwork for who I am now. It was she who made me turn our social isolation into defiance. It was she who made me comfortable in my skin—I was darker skinned than the rest of my family. A terrible crime. She made sure that the only doll I had—although I was never the doll type—was a black doll. But then, when the girl I was began to grow into the woman I am, my mother was infuriated. And there were years of terrible conflict.

I came to Delhi when I was sixteen, in 1976, to join the school of architecture, and I just loved Delhi for saving me. However polluted and terrible it is. However huge the cultural change was ... To me it all smelled like freedom. Soon after my second year I stopped going home. I worked my way through college, as an architectural draftsman. I lived with a fellow student, my first boyfriend. I just became savage, stoned and reckless. Without any supervision because I was not taking money from home. I was living like a rat, on virtually nothing. But I was so happy.

INTERVIEWER
In one essay, writing about Delhi, you ask where else you could “be the hooligan that I am here, at home.”
Yes!

INTERVIEWER

In that same essay you write about finding the people whom you will love, and who will love you back. That idea comes up in *Ministry* as well, when Tilo talks about looking for her people and how, for a brief span of time, she and Musa are each other’s people. In addition to finding your place—how do you go about finding your people?

ROY

I found my people through my work. Through my writing, through the films
I worked on. That was where my most enduring friendships and relationships were formed. But my first people I found when I joined the school of architecture. It was an absolutely amazing place. Those of us who stayed in the hostel came from all over the country, between us we spoke so many different languages. You find your people quickly, the ones that you smoke up with, go sketching with. The people who are so young and so free. You can decide that your community is this one, you know? [laughs] There were hardly any girls in the school at the time. We would arrive and there would be four or five of us in a class of thirty or forty. There was no girls’ hostel, so a little section of the boys’ hostel was cordoned off, but nobody paid that much attention to us. It was anarchy, wild liberation—by default. We were working all the time, night and day. And it was a completely fucked-up, broken-down, smoke-ridden, filthy place. There was a coal plant next to us, so if you put a blank piece of paper on your drawing board, after five minutes it was gray . . .

INTERVIEWER

Oh God.

ROY

It was an awful place. But it was so wonderfully free for all that. Because people forgot about us. Even when I was a child, I think people forgot to indoctrinate me. It wasn’t that I was given some radical education, it was just that no one had the time to indoctrinate me with all the rules. And in the school of architecture it was a bit like that, too. I just kind of grew up in this rubble.

I have this memory of a relative of mine, a sort of grand-uncle, who was a senior government engineer, coming to visit me. Not out of love. It was just one of these rather creepy things—to gossip, to go home and tell people, This one’s gone wrong. By this time, I didn’t give a shit. So, he came to the hostel gate and I came down. He was one of those guys who would rub your back and be like . . . Oh, you’re not wearing a bra. He looked around and saw all these girls and boys sitting on the lawn together, chatting, smoking, he was scandalized. And he said, Aren’t you going out of bounds here? And I said, We have no bounds. I knew that every word spoken would be a nail in my coffin back home. Each sentence would be carried away like an indictment. Then he says, Where is your warden? I said, We have no warden. He said, By what time do you have to get back at night? I said, We don’t have to get back. He left, horrified.
I had burned my bridges. It wasn’t too hard, because I had found my people. I think in India the interesting thing is that if you’re a person like me, who is seen as being completely off the rails, you earn for yourself a kind of freedom. An accommodation is made.

INTERVIEWER

“There’s no hope for this one . . . ”

ROY

Yes. But not in a bad way. The rules that apply to others, the suffocating, debilitating rules, sometimes one escapes a little bit. Because of the visible eccentricities, maybe. But of course, you have to be economically independent. Otherwise you’ll be crushed. Finished.

INTERVIEWER

You brought a lot of that to life—visible eccentricities and all—in one of your earliest pieces of writing, In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones.

ROY

Actually, the first thing I ever wrote that was published, was . . . [laughs] . . .
there were some friends of ours—mine and my husband Pradip’s—who were wildlife filmmakers, and they were making a film about rhinoceroses that were being transferred from two national parks, one in Nepal and the other in Assam, to Delhi, to a national park called Dudhwa to hopefully start a new gene pool. The first batch of five arrived in Delhi in a Russian aircraft. They were in massive crates, which were loaded into five trucks, and this convoy of rhinoceros was going to drive from Delhi through these dusty little towns. I wrote the commentary for this documentary film, it was called How the Rhinoceros Returned. It was something though, driving with these convoy of rhinos, stopping by streams to water them, to make sure they weren’t getting too hot. Villagers looking through the cracks, seeing different parts, joining them up to make a phantom beast. Arriving at the park, where the rhinos were released into stockades, in which they were held for some weeks. And then finally, watching them being released into the wild.

INTERVIEWER
I have to ask—are the rhinoceros still there?

ROY
Yeah, they are. Some of them. A few, I was told, walked through the grasslands all the way back to Nepal.

INTERVIEWER
How did you go from that to working on Annie? It’s a movie, but the screenplay is quite unorthodox when you read it. There is a lot more description of setting—that cow walking as though it’s going to go file its taxes.

ROY
Ha! Well, we’ve skipped a whole chapter of my life in which I met and fell in love with Pradip Krishen—we live separately now. He saw me somewhere and asked me to act in a film he was making, Massey Sahib. I agreed to, more because I was dead curious about how films are made than due to any interest in acting. That was soon after I had graduated. After that I began to write screenplays. We worked on our first project, a twenty-six-part series for television, for two years. Midway through the shoot the production company collapsed. We were left broke and devastated. By the mid-’80s, in India, there
was something new happening on the TV front. Doordarshan, that’s Indian state TV, was beginning to change. Every Saturday, Doordarshan would show one film, and the whole country would watch that one film. Because there was only one TV channel. State-owned TV, we thought at the time, was the worst thing in the world. Who could have anticipated the nightmare we live in now, when we have something like four hundred corporate news channels, many of them spewing religious hatred and fake news.

Anyway . . . back to Doordarshan, the new chief was a pretty open, broad-minded bureaucrat. We managed to get an appointment to meet him and made a proposal for a film, quite radically different from what Doordarshan would normally even dream of doing. He said, Write it. Show me. So I just sat down and wrote the script for *In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones*. It’s about students in architecture school. Annie is a male student, Anand Grover, repeating his fifth year for the fourth time. The language of the film was a particular Delhi University patois—in which “giving it those ones” means doing your usual shit. It was language that had never been used in either cinema or literature before. It was remarkable that Doordarshan gave us whatever little money we asked for to make that film. It was impossible, you know, to imagine that it would happen, but it did. It was made with literally nothing—a few thousand dollars. I was hand-drawing the titles on pieces of paper. But its raggedness as a film somehow complemented the raggedness of the people in it and all together it made a sort of ragged sense. Pradip directed it. I wrote, designed, and acted in it. Millions of people watched it on a Saturday night—because they had no choice! That was it . . . just that one single screening and it was gone. But what a massive audience. Even today people come up to me and tell me how they remember gathering with their families in front of a TV set to watch it. At the National Awards it won my favorite award of all time: Best Film in Other Languages Than Those Specified in Schedule VIII of the Constitution, i.e., English.

INTERVIEWER

I think there was another movie after that, as well.

ROY

*Electric Moon*. It was commissioned by Channel 4 TV in England. It’s set in a jungle lodge in a forest in Central India—Kipling country—where a spurious
Indian royal family sells a spurious Indian experience to foreign tourists. You
know that stuff, the Tigers and Temples India Tour. We used to jokingly call
it the Fuck a Maharaja Tour. We shot it in a place called Pachmarhi. Pradip
directed it. I wrote and designed it. At the time, there were a lot of those “Raj
films” being made. On those units the big guys, producers, directors, DOPs
were white, the minions were Indian. The old colonial power equation was
firmly in place. In our film, suddenly it was reversed. It turned into a very
peculiar experience because my film script sort of came true in real life—there
was a complete breakdown of communication between, to put it crudely, the
Indians and the white folks.

It was all very difficult and unpleasant. Just to understand what had hap-
pened, to explain it to myself, I started to write about it. It became an essay
called “In a Proper Light.” That was, and still is, a common accusation, “You
are not showing India in a proper light”—as though the purpose of all art is
direct or indirect publicity for the ministry of tourism. I had just printed it
out and it was lying around when Vir Sanghvi, the editor of a magazine called
Sunday, happened to visit us. I didn’t know him, but one of my friends who
had worked on Annie was a friend of his, and she was at our place. The two
of them were going out for dinner and he came by to pick her up. While he
was waiting for her to get ready, he read this thing lying on the table and he
said, Who’s written this? Can I publish it? And I said, Sure, you can, but you
can’t edit it. He said he wouldn’t touch it. So, he was really my first publisher.
That was the first essay I wrote. After that I wrote “The Great Indian Rape
Trick”—a series of essays on the film called Bandit Queen that were also pub-
lished in Sunday. By then I was already working on The God of Small Things,
in a leisurely, experimental way.

INTERVIEWER
So, we’re talking about ninety … four? How was the switch into prose fiction?

ROY
Beautiful, for me. Screenplays taught me a lot of things. They taught me pace.
They taught me economy and dialogue. But by the time I was starting to write
The God of Small Things, I didn’t just want to write “Exterior: Day, River.” I
wanted to write about this river, I wanted to describe it. I want to tell you
what it’s thinking, what the moon looks like in it.
It was like breaking out of the bonds of writing a screenplay, but also breaking free of the negotiations that take place when you work in cinema. All the artistic stuff that happens in cinema has to flow via contracts and money and producers breathing down your neck. Fabulous as the medium of cinema is, I found it very stressful that you have to continuously explain yourself. For me, novels exist as a negotiation between myself and myself before anyone else gets to look at it. After working in cinema, I liked the solitude of making my own decisions and being amorphous about things. If you have a cow walk past, you don’t have to have a budget for the cow! Also, as you pointed out—a cow at a traffic light looking as though she’s going to file her income tax returns, that is unnecessary nonsense—a naughty insertion—in a screenplay. It belongs more to a novel. But, shh! These days in India we have to be very careful about what we say about cows… I don’t know whether suggesting that cows file income tax returns is unholy or antinational. It probably is. Cows are at the center of the story of scores of people, mostly Muslim, sometimes Dalit, who have been lynched over the past few years.

INTERVIEWER
What was the writing process like, for the book?

ROY
When I started writing The God of Small Things, I thought that if a film like Annie was a fringe thing, then the novel was going to be even more fringe. There’s a sort of freedom in that. I had some money from the screenplay of Electric Moon, because after we signed the contract, which was in pounds, there was a huge devaluation of the rupee, and suddenly it became double the amount for us in India. We were just like … wow. It’s a party here now. So, I had a little bit of money to buy time and just work on the book. And the idea that one was so irrelevant to everything is a form of liberation, you know?

Writing it was a kind of secret activity. We lived out of two rooms on the roof of Pradip’s parents’ house. My deal with him was that from the morning until about two I would be allowed to lock one room. I didn’t tell anyone what I was writing. I hardly knew myself. I was searching for something. I began writing the chapter where the sky-blue Plymouth is stopped at the level crossing. It went on forever. I wondered whether when I was eighty years old, it would still be stuck at that fucking level crossing and I would still be writing about it.
I think the architect in me was always searching for a structure, for a form. I was searching and I didn’t know what it was. And then suddenly, like two years into the writing, it came to me almost like a graphic. In fact, I drew a graphic of how the story spanned across a period of a single day while other threads wove across several years. It came to me as a sort of rhythm, a phantom drumbeat that I was trying to get the measure of. Then one day I saw it. The structure. I drew it . . . just on the back of an envelope, and stuck it up on a tack board. It was a huge relief. The level crossing opened and the car went through.

INTERVIEWER
That’s interesting to think about—the graphic way into writing. Do you still find yourself using that architectural training in thinking about the form and structure of your writing now? You always hear about writers outlining work, and so on, but this sounds different.

ROY
Yes, it’s more like designing than outlining. Architecture has always been central to my way of thinking.

INTERVIEWER
It sounds like writing The God of Small Things was a very private experience. Did you have an audience in mind at all? Or do you now?

ROY
Nobody. I don’t have one. All my writing, for me, is an experiment with itself. It’s got its own logic, its own impetus. Once I put down the first sentence it takes over. It has its own impetus, its own velocity, it becomes its own thing.

INTERVIEWER
Has that changed at all, from writing The God of Small Things in the nineties to writing Ministry some twenty years later? I wonder also if there is some difference here between the fiction and the nonfiction—your essays, you’ve

A still from In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones, 1989.
said, are “wrenched” out of you in a way that feels much more quick than your fiction, which you’ve said “dances” out of you.

ROY

Actually, oddly enough, it hasn’t really changed. Because it’s a sort of instinct. Sometimes I feel there’s something shamanistic going on. A while ago my literary agent, David Godwin, called to ask how the writing was going. And I said, As you know, David, I don’t write. I just wait. It’s true in a way. Someone, a spirit, a wraith, a naughty thing, just comes and whispers in my ear. Or creeps up and punches me in the gut. It’s usually the fiction that whispers and the nonfiction that violently intervenes. I am restless when I write nonfiction. And peaceful but crazy when I write fiction.

INTERVIEWER

I wanted to end by asking you a little more about kathakali, which has an important place in The God of Small Things when Estha and Rahel go to the temple. It’s another form of storytelling or presenting a story. How did you find that form?
In Ayemenem there was a whole community of kathakali dancers. The person who I was thinking about when I described the kathakali in *The God of Small Things*, I knew him from the time I was very young. He was just the most beautiful man you could imagine. He told me about how, when he was a child, he dreamed of being a dancer, but his family was poor. His mother took him to see the ustad, you know, the guru. It was raining that day and the tiny boy and his mother walked to the guru’s home, sheltering under a huge yam leaf because they didn’t even have an umbrella. They didn’t have any money to pay what was known as guru dakshina, the gift, the reward to a guru for the favor of taking his shishya, his student, into his care, and teaching him all that he knows. So the guru took his mother aside, gave her five rupees—that’s, I don’t know, a few cents—and said, Now give it back to me as guru dakshina. And with that sweet act of generosity, one of the most magnificent storytellers I have ever known began his education.

For me, everything I see and absorb, I harness it, I turn it to my purpose—which is to tell stories. It’s odd to be a writer whose greatest influence has come from dance. But it’s true. Kathakali, *katha* is story and *kali* is play. The kathakali dancer, the body of the dancer manages to be the story, become the story, not just tell it. It can change in a minute from being the all-powerful king into becoming a tiny, intimate detail. It can be the sky, the chariot, the war, the lover, the deer, the monkey in the forest, the ferocious king, his conniving queen. I like that. Writing with my body. My skin, my eyes, my hair. I always feel that the fitness of a storyteller is the ability to be able to make those leaps without heavy breathing. Without showing the effort. The ability to move, not just from the epic to the intimate, but also from humor to poignancy to heartbreak to hardness to vulgarity—all these things, to me, are important. Sometimes you’ll see a piece of very beautiful, poignant writing but there’s no humor, there’s no vulgarity and, to me, that is very much part of what I do. It needs to be everything—in the language of Hindustani classical music, it needs to be a raag that includes all the notes in an octave. Sharps and flats, too.

**INTERVIEWER**

*Fitness* is a powerful word in this context. For a dancer, that involves physical fitness.
ROY

Yes, but to me that is a good word for writing too. Because you need to be athletic, metaphorically you need that ability that a dancer has—to glide. To lift that limb gracefully and effortlessly. Whereas sometimes you can hear the heavy breathing in writing. I always think that some great writers leave the reader with the memory of their brilliance, which overshadows the memory of the universe they wrote about. And others leave you with the memory not of their greatness but of the world they conjured up. That’s the writer I would like to be. I want to live in the world I write, the world I create. I want to inhabit my fiction. I want to live in a graveyard, in a room in Jannat Guest House. With a tomb of my own. Actually, I already do.
Two Poems by Jennifer Barber

PREGNANCY DREAM

At first puzzlement, then joy.

My baby in the making—surely my last—would, like a ferry heading for a wharf, know what to do along the way.

The multiplying cells, the chemistry of contentment spreading through my blood:

I was as ready for her birth as I’d ever been in my childbearing years.

The natural laws stood apart like trees onshore.
TO MY BOOK

I’ve been grooming you for years.
   Now I’m asking you to go
through the gate unafraid
   past the weeds towering
in the heat at the end of July,
   the sun dropping like a red
bucket into a well of clouds.
   You look like no one I know
and everyone I’ve known,
   the branches of the specimen elm
reaching their furthest shape,
   a wind rustling at the door
of the cottage beyond the field
   whose sleeper breathes the same
evening. Lie down, my book:
   lie down beside the sleeper.
Tennis is not the only sport with skew angles. Pool has skew angles and spin and backspin. But pool is murk, pool is cramped in the dark. Soccer has geometry and passing shots, but teams, not individual players like tennis. Soccer has sun, like tennis, but also many violences. Football has an ugly sound on TV in the afternoon in a care home. Football is crippling and chunky, as is rugby. Basketball has leaps, suavity, fingertips on pebbled rubber and rubber through a net. But mainly interiors again, mainly night. Cricket has too many points and a bat like a headstone. Baseball has a prospect: all that land. And baseball has apartness, like tennis, but long periods of time where nothing happens, and also that situation of so many players and the sitting and the spitting. Tennis has brutal match lengths and returns
and apartness and ongoingness and sunshine. It has one player as an intelligence moving around in space. It has elegance and wreckage and bad manners.

2. When you were grocery shopping on any Tuesday last winter, the tennis tour was going on. When you were throwing jacks as a child. Years before your player—the player you follow—was born, the tour was going on. The tour was on while you were getting married, dissecting a pig, learning to drive. While you were losing your virginity, the tour was going on, well lit, with player check-ins, catering, ticketing. Workers were misting the clay on the clay courts. Grass courts were seeded, grew, withered, grew again, were watered, were clipped. Stadiums razed, built anew. Roofs that close over stadiums, allowing play to continue if it rains, engineered and installed. The tour was never not going on. Even as you stood in the office supply choosing a lamp bright enough for your father to read his newspaper in the care home.

3. The served ball comes at your player with rageful intent: its m.p.h. could burn a hole in a racket head. And your player steps up and takes all the rate off it. Your player is your player because no other player reshapes force in quite this way, linking racket tilt and footwork, calibrating wrist swivel by intuitive degree, coordinating approach and angle. It is as if with bare hands your player has stopped a meteor, changing certain destruction into: Here we are sailing on a summer afternoon.

Suddenly you are in an alternate present. The ball is tracing a graceful arc back over the net. It is a kind of communication, your player’s return: a flirting. I’ve ignored that you tried to kill me, says your player’s impossibly gentle slice, and I like you. Tennis is not only sport but spell. By changing force, your player reshapes time.

4. In the six hours it takes to drive to your father in the care home, you have changed. You are no longer a mother with a young child, a woman who left
a child home with a spouse and drove across two states to visit a father. You are not a person using a large and powerful machine to move at high speed, changing lanes, crossing bridge spans. An adult with full agency, pulling off at food courts, returning to a vehicle, the owner of a windshield, bumpers, fuel injectors, a steering column—you are not. You are not the purchaser and owner of ten gallons of gasoline, let alone the owner of two dogs in a city two states to the east. You no longer have a city. You are an annoying thirteen-year-old girl. You hand your father his newspaper. He bats you away like a mosquito.

5. The expressionless ball kid runs expressionlessly crosscourt between points, retrieving balls then kneeling, still. So still as to never have drawn breath: an ancient icon, a carving. Neither lighting up at nor regarding with enmity or appreciation or excitement or admiration or intimidatedness, or any other lifelike aspect, your player.

When ball kids move, they move obviously, to prove, in peripheral vision, that they are not birds or food wrappers or a hat in wind. They toss balls without opinion. They ask their single question with the position of their arms, straight out, semaphores.

Ball kids exist not only to supply your player with balls but also to shade (with umbrella) and guard (insofar as a child can guard) your player, who may ask for another water and another, more bananas, more ice. The inscrutable ball kids can deliver, should you wish, and your player does sometimes, an espresso on court. It will be hot.

6. You stand at the ATM as your father withdraws from his pocket his checkbook, into which he has intricately folded his deposit slip. A car pulls up behind your car and idles. As you helped your father out the passenger side, he gripped a handle over the door you never noticed before was there: he must have conjured it. More cars pull up behind the car behind your car, idling, waiting. You avert your eyes while your father punches in his secret code, as though you had not, minutes ago, seen him naked as his aide assisted him out of pajamas and into clothes.
The small amount, whatever it is, is sucked from his fingers. Next comes the job of getting him back in the passenger side. The line of waiting cars purrs. No one honks. No one lowers a window and swears. There is a bit of mercy here, and even a roof (it has begun to rain). There is some grace, but will you manage to slow the speed of your existence so that it matches your father’s grinding slowness? Your jaw aches.

7.
At sunset you leave your father and drive to the wine bar. Where before was tightness, where there was shakiness, here is calm. Where there were pants mended and stained from a time your father planted tomatoes in the yard of a house now sold, now occupied by a stranger, here is a leather-covered bar stool. You sit in dimness. Where there was a man readying himself for death, but without knowledge of it (you sense), without reflection, here is your face above a line of aperitifs. You smooth your hair in the mirror. Where at your elbow was a sleepy father you kissed goodnight at seven o’clock, there is, this night, a tennis match, the first tennis match you have ever watched.

Your father never watched tennis. No one in your family followed a sport. This tennis is playing on a screen set into the wall at your left elbow—a match almost sitting on the bar, next to your waiting wineglass. You don’t get the scoring, you don’t know the players. You don’t know there exists a player who will become your player. But there is boundedness in this tennis, and sunlight. A story unfolding within crisp lines. Into the glass comes your wine. It smells of pears.

8.
Your father slowly pushes his walker.

Your player bashes the umpire’s chair with a racket.

Your player’s coach (and father) has a welt on his arm where your player smacked him with a racket.

You guide your father to a dining room seat—will he fall, can he see, is the bench too low, where is the server the coat hook the menu—

Fuck you, says your player to the linesman for a bad call.

Your player gives the booing crowd the finger.

Your father hit you with a belt. That was long ago. So long. The server is patient, tapping her pad.

The clocks runs out. Your player is warned.

You took a roll of dimes from your father’s dresser drawer. It smelled of leather. The drawer pull banged. This was your way, as a child, to level the score.

Your player, radiant with sweat, throws a chair.

Your father was not home when you went into his room and stole the dimes. That roll he began by balancing on his fingertip the thinnest, lightest U.S. coin had a surprising heft. Like a hammer, a candlestick.

Your player was once stabbed by a fan (a fan?) at courtside.

Your father picks up a fork and looks at it. Your father, with tennis balls on the legs of his walker, is moving over uneven surfaces now toward the exit. As on some practice court your player swings a racket and in match must show best effort or face the consequence.

Willing/praying no one gets in his way, you follow close behind your father. Your mantis-mandibled father.

9.


Paramours in the stands, thin-lipped. Players’ mothers gnawing their cuticles, or holding a little dog, or yelling after the set; players’ coach-mothers standing taciturn; players’ coach-fathers touching their foreheads or grinning or nodding quietly. Your player’s entire future happens, will continue to happen, within the clear bounds of a court. Tennis is the opposite of death, so obviously.
Your father puts his hand on the wall, steadies himself, as he practiced with the occupational therapist. In the twelfth century, tennis players used their hands to hit the ball. Rackets came later, an extension of the hand. As your father leans against the wall, practical man he is, still with the mind of an engineer. He rises carefully up the vertical after his latest fall, which left a welt on his arm. The wall has become an extension of his back. He rubs his elbow gently.

You get an uncanny feeling watching your player, as if you are watching a distant past from far off. Across the net, your player’s opponent looks exactly like your player twenty years in the future. On your player’s skin there is not a mark. Your player’s face is like an accidentally perfect planet viewed from space. Don’t be ruined, you think without words, at your player. As your father, for whom beauty was always suspect, a seduction leading to ruin, prefers to see you “natural,” without makeup. He himself retains his smooth cheeks, his rosy translucence, although he washes his face, as always, with the cheapest bar soap.

Your player is a champion. Or your player is up and coming, in a first Grand Slam. Your player played college or never went. Your player is a woman, a man. Your player is from Tunisia. Taiwan. From Egypt. Your player is from your country, your player is from any country. You don’t have just one player, because you don’t have to.

For instance this player here, so intriguing. This player lost in last year’s first round but has since beaten your player in a small tournament. This player spent that prize money on data analysis and has come into possession of your player’s serve speeds, net approaches, and baseline habits according to court surface, time of day, wind conditions, incidence of sun. A data analyst has been paid to interface with a coach (this coach once coached your player), who dispenses information as needed. This player has taken in the data. The data are in this player’s cells now. There is a chance this player, this rising player, could beat your player.
You feel a swirling and gathering in yourself. Details of this player’s game start to stick. You ingest, without realizing, this player’s story and find yourself repeating it to your husband: “—from a country that has never had a player inside the top two hundred … ” Your interest assembles, the way people start to move onto a dance floor. You go and get the draw you printed out and check which corner of the draw this player is in. This player is now your player.

But any player can be your player for the length of a match and then afterward not. Becoming not your player happens in the time it takes to go upstairs, get undressed, lie down, and decide whether to turn off your text alerts.

Sometimes both players in a match are your player. In such a match, the tennis is very good, and you are more apt to get up and get coffee in the middle of a point because there is so much—really too much—goodness, and tennis. It’s hard to bear.

13. Voice mail: Your father’s mild cold, it’s pneumonia. He is struggling to swallow.

14. Come to remember, you aren’t the only one in your line to watch a sport. Your grandfather, whom you never met, he died so young, followed baseball. He would sit in a rocking chair, said your father, chain-smoking Camels and listening to ball games.

When you step in the door from your visit to your father in the care home, there he is, your dashing grandfather, where he always is, on the mantel. In your hand is your phone, on which a match is happening—you listened across two states to this match being called, play by play, by your favorite commentator, whose voice bounced back from the ionosphere. You stand there with live tennis in your hand and look at your grandfather. “Tennis,” you say, in recognition. Somewhere, he recognizes you back.

15. As a young father your father scared you, your cousins, the kid who came to the door selling magazines. This you watched from the window: a father
driving from house to house in the rain so his child could sell subscriptions. A father holding his sobbing son in the front seat—your father had turned him away meanly. His meanness came easily, was his natural element, a sort of habitat. The memory of this sobbing child twists in your chest.

The cousins were always talking about your father. You never knew. And at your wedding, your father, the man your cousin called a jerk, made a beautiful toast. Your cousin used that word, jerk, to describe your father to you recently. This was the nicest thing, the most caring thing. To be so honest. You did not know what your father was, you were simply inside it, living. As anyone does.

16.
Voice mail: Your father is swallowing better.

17.
And tennis has eras. This match you are watching, from forty years ago, has an unfamiliar, pleasing, definitive tennis shape. Without the whiplash of replays, without the whooshing sound effects and graphics of the corporate tennis moment, there is a feeling of connection between points, like tied notes in a musical score.

Neither player in this match on YouTube is your player. Both of these players still exist, of course; tennis is the opposite of death. These players are famous now and retired. Under the scoreboard are emirs. There are still emirs under scoreboards. But underneath these players’ sweaters are vests, and underneath those, collared shirts. There is a general boxy lumpiness.

The players dispense their own water from a plastic spigot—a spigot with a button, the kind anyone might use at a picnic. Also, there is a Coke machine on court. Did many players drink Coke? Anyway, it was available. People smoke in the stands, maybe, forty years back.

18.
On clay courts, players do a two-beat shoe smack, racket to rubber, between points. Otherwise no traction: sole grooves clog and clay pebbles meet clay.
Smack smack. The two-beat split step a precondition for movement, not a tic. Begin to solve the point, sound signals body. A gesture no player thinks about or forgets to make lest they slip.

Some days it is possible to like tennis just by listening. A point intensifying in traded backhands; louder, deeper, one player on gut strings, the other on poly. A forced exhale, a shriek, light as a contrail. Hard-court squeaks. When there are no fans in a stadium, foley mics catch a lace tightening. The pat pat of a physio wrapping a stressed ankle.

Other days tennis is fun because the identical outfit looks different on two competing players in the same match. It is possible to enjoy tennis by wondering about the designer who had to make those clothes look right proportionally on a muscular, oyster-like mover and on a giant who tends to slouch. Your player is hopeless in large patterns and crop tops. Scuba gear, or a bodice, or bullfighter pants, would better suit your player.

Will the rising player that is now your player make it to the major is a question. Passport and visa issues, to say nothing of weather events or travel restrictions in a pandemic, cause this player to suffer through self-booking tickets and itinerary changes, making cancellations, arranging car rentals, managing being bumped, sleeping gateside. All of the same stresses you would suffer traveling, but you do not have to prepare a body for its punishing, public, however loved, labor, the earnings from which (if they are high enough) families, coaches, and others live on.

This new player may not land in the tournament city or not in time to quarantine or to practice in its altitude, temperature, levels of particulate matter. This player left a child home with a partner and will play without a coach because they cannot afford to fly their coach. They do not have the winnings or appearance fees or sponsorships to lease a private jet. A private jet allows an interview at thirty thousand feet with a select journalist, who is offered a croissant on a salver.

That the top several players are levels of wealth above the rest is talked about, but not how their wealth makes possible complete devotion to caring for and training both the body and the mind (it is possible to hire a thought coach), erasing every question that can be erased. How money becomes
arriving across the globe a week early and renting a private house, becomes 
tickets for hitting partners and personal physios, how money makes pos-
sible the fullest rehearsal of the practically invisible maneuvers that shave 
seconds off a return that accrue to minutes that become wins that become 
honored preferences to play at certain times of day on certain courts and 
not others. Money transmutes to an extra rest day before a final, widening 
the chasm between the top several and the others, so that it takes longer 
than ever for a new player, such as your player, to attain top standing and 
keep it.

The new player makes the quarterfinals—having landed, having stayed 
healthy—and gets, after a polite request, more bananas. Which delights them. 
They remove their own wrappers and bottles from the bench after matches. 
They delight in the players’ cafeteria. Which pleases other players. And so 
your new player becomes liked, which delights you.

The man studying current events in order to join the breakfast conversation 
with his tablemates in the care home is your father. The one perfecting tinier, 
quicker side steps, your player. The one who lost the one job and the other, 
your father. Who loves large dogs, your player. Your father: small dogs, bel 
canto opera.

Found a nutritionist, has your father, has your player. Your father lost his 
job again. You moved again. An irritated, shamed (you see now) man run-
ning his belt through the loops of trousers laundered cold for decades.

Your player is the one in low trainers with speckles embedded into the 
sole. They look like birthday cake sprinkles. Your father wore a short-sleeved 
shirt with a pocket protector holding four mechanical pencils. And the belt 
he snapped against your legs, your back, now lies quietly bedside.

Your player, who has worn shorter and longer and tighter and looser and 
more graphic, more colorful, outfits, appears in this tournament in the neu-
tral khaki of a zoo uniform. Your father still owns just the one suit, the suit 
he married in.

This match you are watching on demand was played days ago in a past 
that is tomorrow across the date line. As today your father was so kind to you, 
like a stranger.
Red and yellow dots fly across your screen, landing in a pattern of your player’s serve placements. The dots look like cake pops, and you crave sugar, which makes you think of that one player’s side hustle, candy. As a teenager, that player was pushed on fans and viewers as a kind of consumable chewy—strawberry gummy in athlete form. This was before your time on the tennis continuum.

After a commercial break, another graphic turns a racket into a giant, rotating body you can flow through as if you are a blood cell. Cruise inside, around the curves, circle the acres of sweet spot . . . there is no end to craving the endlessness of tennis, and tennis obliges by continuing no matter what, without pause, without end.

Players play decades longer now by skipping tournaments on less-than-ideal-for-them surfaces (grass, clay, hard court—each injures differently). Not that some players’ bodies aren’t fall-apart bodies from the start, that’s just luck. It’s okay, they don’t leave the tour, no one leaves.

That one player you forgot about is still here. And the player who became your player when your player pulled out. If pretty, if telegenic, having a certain demeanor, even a certain iconic (if barely withstandable, at least by you) personality, a player may one day commentate. Or call matches on radio, which begs the reflexes of an auctioneer.

Rackets have peaked, so light are they, so assiduously engineered, requiring fewer calories to hit harder, swing faster, leaving your player to devise and express eccentricities: in-the-air full turns, skimmier slides. Or to just stand there, a mile behind the baseline, punching serve after serve with no other plan. This is not the best tennis. Not even good tennis. But coaches need not gauge the life left in a serving arm, rationing serves as pitchers ration pitches in baseball.

Your player is at this moment watching a junior, getting almost the idea (not planning or visualizing, only drifting toward the idea) of coaching this junior when the junior moves up, joins the tour, the barrels of mineral water, towels rolled full of ice and tied on the ends, tape coiled in physio cases. Pale yellow and pink drinks disappearing into players mid-set, replenishing specific minerals. Racket stringers offstage stringing. Line judges reaching for their knees all together at the ball toss.
Your father is again struggling to swallow.

There are styles of waiting. Your player is one who slowly rocks back and forth while waiting to receive serve. There is a teenage player who waits leaning on their racket, as if it were a walking stick, looking for an instant like an old man. A player may wait with steady legs, just moving their shoulders. Or stand strangely casually, as if in line to buy beer. Or your player may remain marble-still till the path of serve is seen, then react with a spring that begins somewhere in the body you can’t pinpoint.

Between points, this player is a racket twirler. That player adopts a stocky ballet second, legs apart, then hops heavily forward to enter a rally. Your player with this clunky, two-footed hop is unbeaten right now. Seems improbable, seems odd.

Should your father go to hospice is the question. He could recover, no one on the surgical team will say he can’t. The hospice coordinator won’t say he can’t. Where are the bounds of this, you can’t see. Apparently no one can, or will, call it.

If you challenge a call, the chair umpire will announce, “Ms. [Your Name] is challenging the call on the right sideline; the ball was called out.” Chair umpire voices issue cleanly from atop ladders; the flavor of their birth tongue may be ascertained. (Chair umpires know every swear in every language, by the way. Try to fool them and you’ll be fined.)

When you challenge a line call, the chair umpire taps a screen, ordering the replay technology named for a bird of prey, and you wait for the close-up of your shot. The crowd waits, too, if there is a crowd. You stand staring at the stadium screen. First in silence. Then amid rhythmic clapping from the stands, a pounding like the blood in your head. Finally the ball appears, huge,
hairy, and you see your shot was in or out by microns. You are relieved, or you are dismayed; either way, certain.

A point in space and time, where something happened because you made it happen, exists. Thousands, or millions, of retinas carry the image of your happeningness.

27.
The boundary between breath and unbreath is what you wait for. Where is it. You expect it will be announced. The nurse shakes you gently. “Your father is taking his last breaths.” Here is the announcement. The call. You’re up.

Can you wear your pajamas in, yes. “Don’t change.” Hurry.

Now, the line, where is it. Which breath is a next breath, which a last. Where is the end of that breath, and if it does not definitely end, if there is a force anywhere on earth left of this breath, has it an end, can we say it ends definitely. Why were you not woken sooner?

If breath slows and pauses lengthen, but the inner arms stay warm, is there breath to come? There may be. If arms are warm when you slip a hand beneath, when you slide arm next to body to keep in warmth, then what is the last degree of warmth and the first degree of unwarmth?

The window is open, there are birds. From where comes the strength (strength?) to not take the next breath, to leap like that.

28.
There is an expression in tennis, playing free. When you play with complete freedom. Freedom from pressure in the occasion, whatever the occasion is: first major, first match against a top ten, against tennis’s greatest, of right now or of all time; first time defending a title, first time back after almost dying giving birth, after hip replacement, after getting knifed in the apartment.

All players most fear an opponent playing free. To reach this state—it can’t be reached in the way you reach for a ground stroke—you must be up against an insurmountable force, such as death. You must be untalked about and unfavored. You must be indefinite—a player, instead of the. You, the underthought. Predicted to lose a match commentators prep for with pages of tidbits about the town your opponent is from, your opponent’s Instagram,
your opponent’s precocious childhood, your opponent’s asparagus regime, because it is certainly going to be a lopsided hour. When there is not much to say about you, you may find yourself in the elusive, feared, wished-for state, playing free.

29.
You were going to lose, soon, eventually, definitely. So you may put aside lose, the word, put aside lost—lost, for the time, has lost meaningness. You have the wished-for state. Being free of anyone else’s story, free of cliché, fear, sadness, self-hate, self-doubt, the past. There is nothing for it but to play free, see what is happening. You have these minutes in happeningness.

30.
And as long as you are sitting here, the window open and birds therefore, the time is 5 a.m. If it is 5 a.m. in May, then—why not, there is a TV. And no one here. No one? You both, here.

You have just remembered that this is the morning of the wedding people have been talking about, waiting for. A ceremony is taking place right now in a castle in a far time zone, is it not? Yes, it is, the wedding is happening now.

Why not then turn on the television. There is no consequence. No one is watching you.

There on the channel, the wedding is unfolding. The camera panning through the space of the chapel, from the young man playing cello in a garlanded arch, past the almost-wife and the almost-husband bowing their heads together and agreeing, across the seated guests. And there, in the third row, is your player. In a finery you are unaccustomed to seeing. Clean and glowing among witnesses simply, not being the story. The camera continues to pan across rows of heads.
Star of a gnathic nightmare, boasting narrow
snout and jutting lower jaw, scissor
teeth and scaled cheeks, a chain pickerel,
in a serpentine weave, parts a cluster
of weeds, spies a fellow benthic dweller,
a molting crustacean, toboggan down
to the verdant velour bog floor. Patterned
like a rock-lined river bottom, part sun,
part stone, the fork-tailed fan of an ambush
waits behind her aquatic curtain, when
the still soft-shelled crayfish catches the light,
inviting the ensorcelled piscivore
to lunge, prehistoric jaws wide and
dreaming of a gorge of minnows and fry.
From myths and the crackle-candy of fairy tales, I was taught to fear night. Once a rain shower shimmered between slats on a roof during the darkest hour, soaked her nightclothes. Two months later, she finds out she has a peach growing inside her and gets locked in a trunk, dumped into the sea. Or perhaps you walk by a pond at twilight and hear a heavy shuffling behind you, so you turn around and the largest swan you’ve ever seen looks you in the eye and down at your breast and back into your eyes again. No blinking. And the swan lunges forward and nips at your collarbone.

I want to talk about how it feels to be brown and free in the woods, to not look over your shoulder anymore. To be able to open your hand to a
gift. To not listen for footsteps or someone other than these mucky beauties: Salamander. Squirrel. Mud puddle squelching under your toes. A titmouse jumping from limb to limb. I want to talk about not needing to run anymore, about learning to saunter, even dawdle in the green.

In Japanese, forest is shinrin. Bath is yoku. Forest-bathing is shinrin-yoku. Names are important. My name is important. I have been mocked for it all my life. I’ll never change it now. I wish people would care to get tree names right. Teach yourself the difference between red maple and sweet gum. Spice-bush and sassafras. Water oaks never ask me, What are you?

What happened to my heart, the blood sloshing through me and behind my wide eyes when I was not able to practice shinrin-yoku for years. What quiet violence that was to take away the green light from my brown skin. And so many other bodies, too.

I am glad to be alone in the woods now because some men are too much like wind. You only notice them when they’ve done too much or too little. Perhaps one will finally find the time to notice red clover, mockingbird wings, or the small toad at the edge of the pond, instead of leering when a woman carrying a notebook walks past. But someone else can wait for that. Not me.

Thank you trees I want to say thank you trees this time to the trees in Mississippi and Kansas for giving me shelter. Thank you to the trees in New Hampshire for letting me walk under you one slow end of summer, when I was three weeks away from my family. I rode a bike and wore a headlamp past midnight in the trails. I haven’t been able to do that since I was twenty-one.

I’ve missed making nocturnes from a real forest, not one from the movies—an imagined song of night.

The first time I was at that retreat in the woods, I got lost. I gathered up light-colored stones in the bucket fold of my skirt like Gretel, and placed them just so and pulled sticks into the shape of an arrow along the trail to the artist cottages. So by headlamp or by moon-spell when I saw the arrow glow and point, I knew to turn left toward my temporary nest.

The others laughed when they saw it, I know (I heard). But they probably didn’t have their wrists held by the campus tennis courts the summer after college. Never had wrists scratched open from being held up against a chain-link fence. They’ve never had to scream with every bit of might from every alveolus and bronchiole, only to have it wasted in the sweaty center of a man’s strange palm.
I know the men who laugh long after the women stop. They laughed at girls with names like mine when they were boys. They still do. I’m just a chuckle to them. But I remember every one of those laughs.

Some called me Gretel for the next couple of days. Gretel, where’s your bike? Gretel, did you save any bread today? So be it. Forgive me if I wanted to return safely. Safety was never given to me. My safety outdoors as a brown girl was never a given.

Of course, the trees give us back ourselves, our tiny cells, the animals and the crocodiles in us. Our fourth crocodile tooth glinting back at everyone who tried to harm us. We are here. We have gifts to give back to you. Trees who have sheltered trees who have borne witness to all the hurts that have been doled out to brown people. To people with brown skin and names that jumble and tumble on a tongue.

Some crocodiles live in salt water. Eighteen feet of lizard leather. People forget crocodiles have the strongest bite of any animal in the world. They don’t even need to chew their food. Sometimes crocs may eat rocks just to help grind the food to bits in their stomach. Sometimes they don’t. Ninety percent of crocodiles will be eaten before they turn one year old. Maybe they know there is no time to lose.

Trees have given these figures some bodies to dance this way, that way. They lift their hips, they prance in the forest, unbothered. Some seem to steady themselves. Maybe the floor that they were given is full of pine needles. Once in that same forest, I saw a pair of eyes study me under the harvest moon. The eyes were almost at my own level. I quietly fumbled for my weak flashlight. I saw the body, the bright white tail. A tall dog? No—a deer—and two more, behind her.

Shakespeare was wrong: crocodiles never cry for their victims. They make tears by having their mouth open too much, too long. Swallowing too much air. Come sit with me under the shade of this basket oak. This sugarberry tree. Open your mouth and taste the air. Let your mouth be agog. Agape. Agape—which, someone once told me, is another word for the highest, purest form of love.
A Male (Sunday Finding), back and front, 2019, tree bark and branches, 13 x 9 x 5".
This spread: *Cocodrilo (Sunday Finding)*, 2019, found branches, $21 \times 35 \times 7\frac{1}{2}$.
Following spread: *Tall Dog (Sunday Finding)*, 2018, tree bark and branch, 16 ¾ x 4 ¾ x 4” (left); *Untitled*, 2020, water soluble pigment block on yupo paper, 72 x 60” (right).
Untitled, 2020, water soluble pigment block on yupo paper, 60 x 40"
Untitled (Sunday Finding), 2019, tree bark and branches, 10 x 6 x 1".
Deer (Sunday Finding), front and back, 2019, tree bark, 15 x 9 x 5"
Sunday Finding (Flying Sheep), 2018, found branches, 7 ½ x 15".
Male Dancer (Sunday Finding), 2019, pine needles, tree bark, and branch, 12 x 17 x 4".
Untitled, 2019, pigment block, graphite, and wax pastel on paper, 11 x 8 ¼".
Роза Надеждина.

Убийство совершено мед - (тетя) Явда Евгеньевна, много, какая-то скука, в душе ощущалось недомогание. Убийство совершено на (место) и задумано. Имени и скрыть невозможно. Убийца был неизвестен. Смерть явилась как наказание. Судя по всему, наказание за преступление, неизвестно, кто и за что.

Положение, в котором оказалась семья преступника, было ужасное. Родители, сестра, родственники, друзья - все это было плохо в глазах. Было бы лучше, если бы она могла уйти из дома, скрыться, пока ее не заметили. Но она, увы, была вынуждена остаться. Она не могла уйти.

Вопрос: Кем же я буду? И что делать? Как быть дальше?

Из этого, вы можете видеть, как важна роль учителя, и Василий Романович, который был важен.

Так что же: Мне было невыносимо. Я не могла передать все эти чувства и чувства, которые были у меня в душе. Я была в ужасе. Я не могла осознать, что я делала. Я не могла понять, что я думала. Я была в полном ужасе.

Надежды было что-то особенное и трогательное - меня было все, что есть. Я была в ужасе. Я была в ужасе. Я была в ужасе. Я была в ужасе. Я была в ужасе. Я была в ужасе.

За этим первым надежды, которые я думала, я не могла. Я не могла. Я не могла. Я не могла. Я не могла. Я не могла.

Или менять, я всегда ужасала, вместо того, чтобы думать, и о чем говорить, а о моем - и о том, что я думала.
Thinking it awkward to stand trial in a formal tuxedo, the twenty-seven-year-old Vladimir Nabokov showed up in a dark blue suit. That night—July 13, 1926—the Union of Russian Journalists in Berlin held a mock trial of Leo Tolstoy’s famous late story *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889). Nabokov disdained such literary trials, which had become a faddish pedagogical tool for the Soviets. Trials were a way to address illiteracy while generating enthusiasm for classic works of Russian literature—and at the same time to promote ideologically acceptable interpretations of them. But the Journalists’ Union appealed to Nabokov’s sense of philanthropy; with these entertainments the émigrés raised money to sustain the Russian literary community in Berlin, which had become home to thousands who had fled the Bolshevik Revolution.
of 1917. Shortly before World War II, Nabokov and his wife, Véra, would continue their journey, first to France and later to the United States. But it was in Berlin, under the pen name Sirin, that he first gained recognition for his literary talents.

In preparation for the mock trial, Nabokov reread *The Kreutzer Sonata*. He found it not to his liking. He had been cast in the role of Tolstoy’s protagonist, Vasilii Pozdnyshev, who in a fit of jealousy murders his wife. Pozdnyshev comes to blame the murder—for which, within the story, he is acquitted—on the inherent violence of sexual desire, a desire inflamed, he thinks, by art, especially by music. To anyone who will listen he preaches the malevolence of sex and the glory of chastity. Irritated by this absolutist condemnation of erotic love, Nabokov set out to rewrite Tolstoy’s tale as a dramatic monologue by the defendant. After the performance, he wrote Véra to boast that he had created an entirely new Pozdnyshev. Nabokov gleefully reports that his monologue had succeeded in persuading the audience, which served as jury, to reverse the original judgment and send Pozdnyshev directly to prison. Nabokov enclosed the manuscript of his speech. The spouses’ correspondence has been published by Olga Voronina and Brian Boyd. The speech itself is preserved among Nabokov’s papers in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library and is reprinted by permission of the Vladimir Nabokov Literary Foundation.

The Nabokov scholar Andrei Babikov previously published part of the Russian manuscript, but this is the first English translation of “Pozdnyshev’s Address.” Though not entirely unknown, Nabokov’s dramatic monologue has received little attention. Its obscurity belies its significance. Here one sees the young author grappling with a trio of themes whose interrelations will become central to his work: egoism, violence, and art. This monologue is among the very earliest of Nabokov’s texts to explore the tragic monomania that would plague his most memorable characters, including *Lolita’s* Humbert Humbert and *Pale Fire’s* Charles Kinbote. It asks if our creative impulses impede our ability to recognize—and respond to—other people’s pain. Although “Pozdnyshev’s Address” takes Tolstoy’s story as its starting point, it becomes in the end a quintessentially Nabokovian text.
THE MURDER I COMMITTED—it wasn’t simply the strike of a dagger, at night, on the fifth of October, in a brightly lit living room. The murder I committed is a phenomenon of duration, akin more to slow poisoning than a flashing blade. I dare to hope that the vast, gloomy remorse into which my life has since vanished will in no way sway the decision of the court.

I assume that you’re sufficiently familiar with the superficial details of my past. Birth year, school, university, career—none of this is very important. It would be much wiser, I think, to ask a person not merely the commonplace question, When were you born? but the question, When and how did you first fall into sin? And to this question, I, Vasili Pozdnyshev, would respond in the following way: I was just shy of sixteen. I still had not known any woman but was already debauched by the nasty whispered jokes and boasts of my peers. Then a student I knew, my brother’s friend, took me to that place—the place that’s so splendidly called the “house of tolerance.” I recall neither the name nor the face of the woman who taught me to make love. But I recall that in this fall there was something special and touching—I felt sad, so sad—and this sense of something irreparable, irreversible, is one I have experienced only twice in my life: when I looked upon that prostitute getting dressed, and many years later, when I looked upon my wife’s lifeless face. After this first fall I lived a bachelor’s life, enlivened by that lawful, healthy depravity recommended to us by doctors. I became a lecher. In my pursuit of women I always avoided the possibility of serious feelings, on both their part and mine, and I was most satisfied with purchased love. I was extremely proud and secretive. Sentimental entanglements terrified me. Over the course of these years I became callous; I felt a mild contempt toward women.

At the same time it happened that I would ponder, not without pleasure, acquiring a wife, a family, and little by little I actually began to look more carefully, to search for a bride. I, a smug rake, demanded from her perfect purity. Back then I did not regard this sexual egoism as a crime. On the contrary, I imagined that everyone behaved as I did. And soon I found a bride. I remember the night when she and I rode out in a boat and I feasted my eyes on her shapely figure in a tight-fitting dress. On that night it seemed to me
that I experienced the loftiest feelings, when really it was just that the dress fit her so well—it was just that her curls swayed so beautifully.

I can’t go on like this. I lied just now. I said exactly what I thought, or rather tried to think, later on when I was irritated by my wife and angrily wanted to assure myself that that night on that lake I had savored only the contours of her figure—that I only desired her the way I casually desired hundreds of women. Was this so? Then why—through all the passageways of my memory—does that evening now return to me as a wave of bliss? Whence the excitement that possesses me as I recollect the smallest trifle of that outing, the color of the water, the reflection of the shrubs? Could it be that I truly came to love her that night? With a love that was constrained, mute, but nevertheless real love?

I don’t know anything. I only remember that I was too full of myself, too prejudiced against true passion, against true, transcendent love, to appreciate and [let loose] the new feeling I felt that evening. She became my bride; and from our first days I was destined to do everything I could to ruin not only the charm of light mutual attraction but even the deepest love. I was destined to act the way one would act if one were determined, no matter the cost, to create an example of the unhappiest of marriages, and so to prove with my own fate that there is no hellish torture, no corrupt and vulgar act, that could be worse than marriage. While still a fiancé, I gave her three or four years’ worth of my journal to read, from which she could learn a little about my past. It was written in that repulsive, vulgar, self-satisfied style that most young men use to write about their sexual escapades. There was truth in the journal, but in addition to truth there was something else—that vile sincerity that in a strange way distorts the truth. I maintain that not only was I not as nasty as I appeared in this journal, but that everything concerning the love affairs it recounted was in fact much simpler, more natural, and even more humane. I regret that I burned that journal. For it could have served now as excellent physical evidence showing how exactly I killed my wife… My God, what could have been more callous, merciless? Wouldn’t it have been better in a different, soft tone, in humane words—and perhaps not right away—to tell her how I used to live? I struck her soul with this journal as though with an ax. No wonder she was so confused, so horrified… Yes, now I’ve hit the most painful spot: words, human words, were absent. When we happened to be alone it was dreadfully hard to speak. You see, in my blindness, I resolved
that I needed only her body, and resolved that she know this. What was there to talk about?

Now I sometimes think she might have been waiting for just those words that I didn’t have, waiting to hear them from me. And maybe if I had found them … It’s frightening to recall! I had the most ludicrous, the coarsest views on women. I believed, for example, in a worldwide tyranny of Woman—Woman with a capital W. Do you sense the vulgarity of it? I believed this the same way some people believe the Freemasons govern the globe … I had a theory that all the world’s luxuries are demanded and upheld by women, and I judged women, thinking nothing of it. But to tell you the truth, I did not know women at all, and I never gave a single thought to a woman’s soul.

And so our honeymoon began. Why hide it—our first night was an abject failure. After all, it shouldn’t be done like that. After all, she was a completely, completely pure girl. Before that night I never once kissed her, I never enveloped her in my tenderness, which ought to be the gradual, glowing path leading toward happiness in love. I repeat that we shared no words, no tenderness. On that night she responded to my passion with horror, with sobbing. It’s unbearable to recall. You see, I thought of her as a crafty enemy, as that frightful, sweet, and slightly despicable force that was embodied, for me, in a woman. With my foolish and boorish theory I ruined the night. Is it any wonder, then, that this was rape and not lovemaking—is it any wonder that she escaped my embrace with disgust? Something sly and wicked in me never forgave her for that. And after some time, we had our first quarrel.

She was worn out. I had worn her out. I asked her why she was sad. I saw in her sadness an affront to myself—my male pride was somehow wounded by this sadness. I reproached her for being capricious. She was offended. We were both gripped by a preposterous irritation … And then our quarrels became more frequent. My pride was always inflamed. And that sadness of hers, those bouts of sadness—oh, if only I had understood then what was the matter …

Do you think that I killed her on the fifth of October with a curved Damascus dagger? Nothing of the sort! No, ladies and gentlemen, I killed her much earlier. I killed her gradually; I didn’t even notice that I was killing her. And now each and every night, with that remarkable smile, with those languid, graceful movements, she walks through my dreams.

I remember that when our first child was born I suffered such pangs of jealousy, because the regular course of life was disrupted. And the quarrels
continued. By the fourth year of our marriage it was completely clear that we could not understand each other. When we were alone we were doomed to silence or to conversations like these: What time is it? Time to sleep. What’s for dinner today? Where shall we go? We had only to step outside these lines by a hair and a quarrel ensued. My God, it sometimes seemed to me that hatred was boiling over in me ... Sometimes I watched as she poured tea, swung her leg, or lifted a spoon to her mouth and sipped some liquid, and it seemed to me, fool that I am, that I hated, hated her. And it was all because the night before, out of boredom, she’d counted the stucco curlicues on the ceiling while I possessed her. Yes, I would convince myself that I hated her. But, my God, what I wouldn’t give now, right now, to see how she lifts a cup to her lips, how she reaches, holding up the lace of her short sleeve, for the sugar bowl ... We went on like that for another two years. She became slightly ill, the doctors advised her against pregnancy, taught her how to avoid it. She was thirty years old. She grew wonderfully pretty. Her appearance was disquieting. And then this man appeared.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, I am a weary and wretched man. But in my very wretchedness there is belated solace for me. I now understand that evil—the terrible evil that I thought intoxicated all of humanity—I understand that this evil resides only in my own soul. I understand that it is not marriage itself that is sinful, but only my marriage that was sinful, because I sinned before love. I understand that human life is a hundred times happier than it seems to someone like me, who quarreled so spitefully, and so vehemently, and who [rebuked] his own reflection. It’s awful when one’s only solace is the happiness of all mankind. My soul is inconsolable. I have dreams. My God, when I stepped into the room where she was dying, the first thing that caught my eye, draped on a chair, was her once light gray dress, now completely black from blood. And it wasn’t the blood that was frightening; what was frightening were those folds of the dress, which so recently were alive with her movements, her warmth. She lay on the bed. I looked at her battered and swollen face, and only then for the first time did I forget myself, my rights, my pride; for the first time I saw in her a human being. And so petty were all those things that had affronted me, all my jealousy. And so significant the thing I had done ... And then I saw her in a coffin. And it was impossible to turn back the clock for even a second, or restore even a single page torn off
the calendar. Oh, how I longed to do this—how piercingly I longed to start all over again and surround her, my darling wife, with that simple tenderness in light of which all jealousy and pride, all those theories of marriage, all that rubbish of an idle mind, would be cause for laughter.

Looking at her lifeless face, I understood all that I had done. I understood that it was I, I who had killed her—that it was because of me that she who had been living, moving, warm, now lay still, waxen, and cold, and that this could never, nowhere, by no means, be remedied.

It’s possible to tell what happened in a few words. This red-lipped violinist, this vulgarian with waxed whiskers, began to frequent our home. From the very first day of their acquaintance I was tormented by unbearable jealousy. There were horrible scenes between my wife and me. Though now that I think about it, I was pacified once by a talk I had with her, and then again after their concert, which out of vanity I arranged at my home; I reassured myself that she could not be seduced by such a vulgar person! With a calm mind I traveled over the hills and far away to a meeting. There I received a letter from her. From this letter I learned that the musician comes to visit her, and this seemed strange to me. In fact, the whole tone of the letter—very ordinary in its contents—seemed odd to me. Unable to restrain my jealousy, I returned home, and that night caught them by surprise, and with one blow of the dagger I mortally wounded my wife.

No. Don’t search for some especially profound reasons for my action. I was possessed by jealousy. More than that, the desperate, pitiful passion that for more than eight years I had felt secretly and mutely for my wife now burst forth in the form of rage. The mixture of hateful love and the heat of wounded pride: all of this was in the explosion, and extinguished by it. And maybe there was also a feeling that everything was falling apart, and the sooner the better. When, at that concert of theirs, after their duet, I approached her at the piano, she weakly, pathetically, blissfully smiled and wiped the sweat off her face... In the same way, my passion for her contained something pathetic. It’s hard for me to explain. I understood it only afterward. Whatever it was, my jealousy was so strong that I could no longer reason. There was no other outlet for my passion. Strange as it is to say. Maybe the murder that I committed was, in its way, the most natural act of my whole life—not only because
bestial cruelty is natural, lawful everywhere in nature, but also because I for
the first time gave full vent to my passion. Sometimes it is through inhuman-
ity that the human being reveals himself. My passion had no other outlet. [It
might have ... if from the very beginning I ... toward my wife.]

No, that’s not it ... I am again trying to absolve myself, just as I absolved
myself through all sorts of theories of marriage that one night on the train
when I fell into conversation with another passenger. It is simpler than all
that. I killed a person. I killed my wife not on the fifth of October in the
brightly lit living room, where the piano gleamed with a certain light of omi-
nous mourning; no, it wasn’t then that I killed my wife. I was killing her
slowly from the very beginning, killing her by depriving her of tenderness,
without which a woman cannot live.

—Translated from the Russian by Tatyana Gershkovich

* Brackets indicate places where the manuscript is not completely legible. In each case, I reconstruct
Nabokov’s text to the best of my ability.
And so it goes, God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was formless and empty; and on its deep face was darkness. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light, and there was light. And God saw the light, and He was pleased. And God divided light from darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day. And light stole the darkness of the night from the paper. And the writer saw the whiteness of the paper and that it was empty. And the emptiness of the paper filled the writer with emptiness. And the writer called the emptiness of the paper the death of the writer. And the writer was sad.
In a neighborhood inhabited by crime, two writers were born. They had scars on their faces that might disappear with the passage of time.

The little boy looks at the big man and sees him carrying a book. He is a writer who reads. The big man looks at the little boy and sees him carrying two blue eyes in a brown skin that will turn bronze under the sun.

He is a boy who plays.

The criminals love the little boy and the big man, who tried their best also to be loved by the criminals.

The big man, who left the neighborhood a long time ago, has returned for a visit. Amid stories about killing, stealing, or other crimes, laughter prevails. The big man laughs loudly over the criminals, who only smile. He tries hard to laugh the loudest.

Laughter brings a smile.

From afar the little boy hears the laughter and holds tightly to the paper.

In waiting there is no difference between shortness and longness. Waiting is long, and the little boy decides to come forward.

The road to the writer is full of kisses from all the criminals, and the little boy walks it. The big man stopped laughing and smiled at the beautiful boy. The little boy whispers to the writer that he should go far away and read the paper alone. No one should see it, other than the writer. And after he is reassured by the writer’s solemn promise, the boy gives him the paper with caution and flees.

The big man put his promise on top of the rest of his forgotten promises and began to read the paper in a loud voice to the criminals. “I hate lying. I want to be excellent. I am shy when a person greets me. Everyone thinks that I am little. I am sad when I see dead birds.”

The big writer read what was on the paper with a smile and the criminals laughed loudly, and they said that this little boy must kill a bird immediately. The big writer began, too, to laugh loudly.

From far away the little writer hears the laughter but it does not bring a smile.

On one of the big writer’s secret papers was written: A relationship between the written and others is what brought death.
ABOUT WRITING

Y: How does writing happen? How does the shift from writing a daily schedule to writing occur?

A: In the beginning I wrote. After that I had a diary to write my daily schedule.

CONTENT

She wrote. “I am alone and that is that. I wish I were in love, so I didn’t feel like a lonely goat any longer. A goat is an animal that eats everything, even paper.

“Today I saw Munir. I know that I don’t love him, but maybe. He has a beautiful dog. I was returning from school and his dog was sitting under the big tree. He was beautiful. Despite the exhaustion and the hunger and the smell of fried potatoes that filled the street from the house near the big tree, I stopped and played with the dog.

“Its hair is soft.

“Then Munir came and his hair was also soft. He stopped and stood opposite me, I started glancing back and forth between him and the dog, he smiled then whispered: ‘What?’

“I laughed because his whisper made me nervous. I quickly said: ‘Just checking how much you and the dog look alike.

“I told myself that if we met again today or if I caught a glimpse of him, it means he loves me.”

After two days she wrote, “All right, it has been two days since I saw him. So we have come out of the belief that he loves me. But I saw him today at 7:25 riding his bicycle. But I’m not sure. That doesn’t necessarily mean he likes me, or if he likes me, that means he likes me 82 percent out of all possible affection. When compared with love, he loves me 56.5 percent, and even that isn’t certain.”

Nine days later she wrote, “I have noticed that I wrote only about love and boys and such things recently, things I shouldn’t have paid so much attention to.

“Anyway Munir told Muna to tell me that it would be better if I didn’t talk at all.”

I wish to write.
Love of language and love of B cannot live together within A.

B leaves A in the bed with her love of language to write, so she becomes one who writes.

In the evening B returns and draws A out of the bed of language into his arms. She stops writing and becomes one who does not write.

B is nice and warm and harms language when he speaks.

A sits in his embrace, smiling, not able to stand a word he says. B speaks without building any relationship between one word and another, his words do not hold a narrative. He speaks, he puts words between brackets, he opens other brackets, puts between them more words, and so on, endlessly.

A becomes sad because B uses language superficially and only to tell things, emptying language of its miracle. She wants to speak, in order to show him examples of specific uses of language. As soon as she starts, he cuts her off. Her pride will not allow her to quarrel with B, whom she loves over the space of language.

B continues to A: “Are you sad?”

A is of course sad but she shakes her head no, not saying a word to show him any of the curt forms of language. She begins to cry because she can’t say to B that she is sad.

B doesn’t know how to behave when A starts crying in front of him. He goes to the bedroom, leaving her in the kitchen.

A gets mad and laments her stupidity for loving B. From the kitchen she shouts: “Are you asleep?”

B does not reply and he is not asleep. She repeats her question coldly this time: “Are you sleeping, you dog? I wish you were dead.”

She goes to the bedroom.

There is only one pillow in the bedroom. B has it under his head. As A busies herself placing the ashtray and cigarettes on the table next to the bed, B pulls the pillow from under his head and gives it to A. A puts her head on the pillow. B pulls the blanket over her, his hand finding its way to her waist under it.

A sobs, breathless with the thought of how much B cares for her comfort during sleep. B is sad because he does not understand why A is sad.

A and B pretend to be asleep without exchanging a word until they sleep.
Despite his age, twenty-seven as of a month and two days ago, he has never written a love letter.

The white papers are in an orange box, which a long time ago had contained oranges. He needs to go to the box and take out one of the reams he’d bought because he writes a lot and so he thought he would write many love letters.

In the beginning he promised his beloved he would write every Thursday. Wednesday night he started cleaning the house. He called his beloved and said he had become so tired after cleaning the house yesterday that he slept late. The post office closed before he woke up anyway. He promised he would write on Tuesday.

On Monday he packed his suitcase, books, papers, and the orange box, and before he left the house he called his beloved. He said he was forced to move to another place. He would send the letter next Tuesday. Tuesday became tomorrow.

For a week he hasn’t heard her voice. That and missing her are painful for him. He loves her. He could love nothing more, but he couldn’t write love. He has no will, or power, to write her how much he loves her, how being away from her is evil itself, and how evil has become his existence, how her image, her words, her movements, her mistakes, her anger, his shyness of her in front of his friends, her innocence, all these he loves and misses. He doesn’t want to write that her photograph got lost during his move to the new flat, and that he despises his memory, his ability to concentrate, and himself for this. He doesn’t want to write that he never dreams of women, that he dreams only of men. Never. Once he dreamed that he slashed a woman’s vagina. But he dreamed of her, of his beloved, with desire, but a noise from the building behind his woke him up from that beautiful dream. He will not write.

He loves her. It’s not enough to write to her that he loves her, that he wants to be with her for at least two years or maybe four, to ask her how love is born.

But tomorrow is Tuesday.

He could not write and he wished one of them was dead, then there would be no more need to write.
Michel Serres searched for the birth of language. Was it similar to the birth of geometry in the aftermath of the Greek miracle? When Thales determined the height of the Great Pyramid by measuring the length of its shadow at the exact moment when the shadow of a body would be equal to its height.

The birth of language remains a secret.

**MATHEMATICS**

Frege rejects the idea that the birth of mathematics and its foundation in intuition helped validate geometry only.

Numbers are objects, according to Frege. When we say, “There are three apples,” “three” is the object and “apple” is the reference. We can only call numbers, and the relationships between them, objects.

Wittgenstein was a student of Russell. Russell, the opposite of his student, defied Frege.

Frege, the philosopher no one paid attention to while he was alive, lived for mathematics. He refused all full university professorships so he could devote himself to a life lived in the world of mathematics. He wrote only three books, which were published because he pleaded. But that didn’t gain him readers. After volume 1 of the third and final book was published, Russell read it. In that volume 1 Frege presented his logical axioms. Russell discovered a contradiction in the fifth axiom, or Basic Law V. He sent a letter to Frege. Frege, who sought perfection as it is found in mathematics, stopped all research for sixteen years, until his death, and did nothing but try to fix the contradiction Russell had pointed out. Frege never succeeded and did not reply to Russell with a letter solving the contradiction. He never wrote any books again and died neglected, certainly frustrated, bitter, and racist.

Later it was discovered that the contradiction Russell pointed out was foundationally irrelevant. But that was after the death of Frege.

Frege didn’t live for anything but mathematics in its Platonic idealism, as Michel Serres calls it and has wished for language to be similarly treated.

For Frege, mathematics was the only existing truth.
God has not told anyone how he created language to speak, or love to create humans, or mathematics to rest on the seventh day.

—Translated from the Arabic by Nora Parr
9. THE BAD MONK

Long ago cloisters had the sacred Truth of Holy Scripture painted on their walls. These pictures warmed the hearts of men of faith and eased the chill inside their stringent cells.

Back when the Word of Christ was prosperous, more than one famous monk, unknown today, setting his easel in a charnel house, glorified death in a straightforward way—

my soul’s the tomb in which I live and walk forever on and on, bad eremite.
No pictures cheer this miserable retreat.

O lazy monk! When will I learn to make what my hands write and what my eyes adore out of the living vista of despair?
I still recall the little whitewashed lodging where we lived in peace, just off a major thoroughfare. A plaster Pomona and an aging Queen of Love concealed their naked bodies in our garden grove, and the august and ruddy sun, at twilight, shone kaleidoscopic colors through the windowpane. He seemed, a giant eye in the inquiring sky, to watch us as we ate our long meals silently and spread, across the worsted curtains and cut-rate tablecloth, an effulgence fine as candlelight.

—Translated from the French by Aaron Poochigian
Daisy Fried

I HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN

after Baudelaire’s “Je n’ai pas oublié”

i.m. Jim Quinn, 1935–2020

I have not forgotten, neighbor,
our red brick rowhouse, tiny and quiet
with the window always cracked open
even in winter, and us rolling together
into the middle of the dented mattress,
a rooster in someone’s courtyard crowing
in the gray, lording it over his harem
of illegal chickens; where like gods
we couldn’t stop being naked;
those evenings the sun, superbly streaming,
broke its sheaf of colors on the glass,
seemed a giant inquisitive eye
watching our long quiet suppers,
its reflections spritzing like candlelight
on the frugal tablecloth
and on the strewn pages of your manuscripts.
S T R A W  R E F R A I N

Young gray cat puddled under the boxwood,
Only the eyes alert. Appressed to dirt. That hiss
The hiss of the grasses hissing What should
What should. Blank road shimmers. On days like this,
   My mind, you hardly
   Seem to be.
   On days like these.

No, no. See that sidelong silver drum? The hiss’s a sigh
Of that propane tank. Two o’clock, you can smell it.
Don’t breathe that sigh. The creek’s gone dry.
Summer as wide as this wildered sky, days like this.
   My mind, you hardly
   Seem to be.
   Straw-frail, no breeze—

You had a theory that the birds would silence
On a day like this. But the mocker’s keenness
And the kingbird and the vireos commence
To warble on as heat bears down a day like this
   My mind. You hardly
   Seem to be.
   You road, you creek.
As the storm moved in, you marked the night
And later the night marked you. A biblical clap woke
The house to a spray of sheetrock: a powdered sprite
Sprung off the nailheads. Air flavored with ozone.
   On the ceiling in the hallway, a halo
     Grew orange around a fixture, aglow—
   And Dad on the phone

Downstairs, and now shepherding the young ones
Out to shelter in the soaphouse, and Mom, who’s usually
   Sharp as a crack, fumbling in the pandemonium
At the extinguisher—so you, small and spry,
   Someways slither in
     Up the crawlspace, and
   Confront a burning fan.

Not just that fire-fanged attic fan. Wires, floor, rags
Chaff and wall-studs chuckle in the flames.
   A company that almost comforts. Until you gag
On smoke or fear, and jerk the pin and aim
   A sweep of foam
     Blond as bone
   Until it’s dark and you’re alone.

Some say it was lightning in a mineral bisque
That triggered first life. Grandpa says in 1933
   He lost six head—his life savings—to one strike.
And you, in the soaphouse later with an EMT,
   Would sense in the rafters swallows
     Veer, loop, follow
   As if a shadow had a shadow.
Rosemary looked over the party; her parents and her parents’ friends down below on the sod lawn. Seersucker and espadrilles; white cotton dresses; Brazilian jazz; the costumes of their heyday. They drank beer and Long Island iced tea and white wine punch, a recipe Rosemary’s mother had clipped from a magazine. Two pitchers on the patio table, under the shade of an umbrella, and two more, waiting in the fridge. Ice cubes slugged into the ice chest; smell of window screen like rust. There were Mr. and Mrs. Carson; Mr. and Mrs. Wentz; the Pattersons in matching hibiscus print; Patricia, who cut Rosemary’s hair; Lauren’s father and his nameless new wife. Lauren, a classmate, had been invited by Rosemary’s mother. Did Lauren want to come over and watch movies with Rosemary while the adults got together? No, Lauren was busy—she declined. The doorbell rang once, twice; adults Rosemary didn’t know statued
the lawn. Introductions. Scoops of ice; drinks passed hand to hand; a swat at a bee; a tottering heel on the grass. The doorbell rang again. The glasses sweated condensation. The jacuzzi, that vacant lake, threatened to boil over. It was summer, and the clouds had set sail for cooler climes; it was summer, and Rosemary’s parents had snatched up the first party of the season. Rosemary’s mother wore shorts and a bikini top with red and white stripes. Peering navel. Effervescent, she placed herself between an unfamiliar man in a straw fedora and Uncle Bobby, who was not in truth an uncle. Rosemary’s father unbuttoned his shirt; soft, furred stomach exposed to grill. Hamburger or hot dog? he shouted to each guest, spatula in hand. Her mother between two men on the rocking glider. Rosemary thought of a painting she had seen in a book: two men picnicking in suits, ties, hats; between them, a naked woman; her right breast like a full, floating moon. She made it seem strange to be clothed. Then Uncle Bobby unbuttoned his shirt, too. Red, round belly tufted as a nest. Empty beer cans in a bin with a paper sign that said recycle; hollow aluminum clunk. Rosemary watched the party from her parents’ bedroom, the second-floor window that looked out across the fenced yard. The sheer curtains, they were opaque from the outside during the daytime. It was at night, when the lights were on indoors, that you had to be sure to draw the blinds before you got undressed. Rosemary’s mother told her this, and often. The doorbell once again.

Platters of hamburgers and hot dogs; bowls of potato salad, bean salad, fruit salad, jello salad stationed across the tablecloth. A feast. Rosemary descended the stairs and waited behind the sliding screen door, shoulder against the frame. Little napkins like square chunks of seeded watermelon; plastic forks that squeaked; her mother’s sunglasses perched atop her head; bangs pulled back into an upright fringe. She squawked, Come and get it! The guests loaded up their plates. Her father refilled glasses, a pitcher in each hand. Rosemary’s parents and her parents’ friends, they reclined on patio furniture and foldout chairs; they stood around, drinks for the moment at rest on side tables. New mosaic pavers leading to the jacuzzi; new stereo with larger speakers; new rollaway bed for her father to sleep on in his office, but that was hidden in the garage for now. White gerbera daisies her mother had bought and potted the weekend before. Two hamburgers on her father’s plate, and grilled corn. Under her shorts and T-shirt, Rosemary wore a bathing suit, her first two-piece. She wanted to go swimming, not in the jacuzzi, which was
so near the adults, but in the aboveground pool, delivered yesterday, that her father had spent all day filling with water from the hose. Four feet deep, at the far end of the yard, its water yawned. Fridge behind her whirring; sweat on the back of her neck; it was hot inside and out. Rosemary’s father wouldn’t flip on the AC unless outside it breached ninety degrees. Economical, he said, smart. Hon! Rosemary’s mother called. Rosemary had been spotted at the screen door. Come get some food before it’s cold! Rosemary said, The salads are supposed to be cold. Her mother pushed a plate into Rosemary’s hands, put her sunglasses back over her eyes, put a hand on Uncle Bobby’s shoulder. She said, Just get some food. You need another beer, Bob?

A SCOOP OF FRUIT SALAD, a scoop of potato salad, a hot dog with no bun. Whoa there, kid, why you growing up so fast? Uncle Bobby palmed a plate in one hand, held a beer in the other, popped the tab with his thumb. Who said you could change so much? Rosemary said, I don’t think I have a say in it; she dipped the end of her hot dog in mustard and bit. Uncle Bobby with his questions about school and cross-country and choir and friends; then he needed another hamburger. Patricia approached, worked her way through the same questions. And boys? she asked. No boys, Rosemary said. I’ll give you layers next time, Patricia said; she touched Rosemary’s hair, her cheek. Frame your pretty face. Rose! Why don’t you sing something for us? Her father crossed the lawn, beer in a cozy. What was that song you were practicing yesterday? Rosemary shook her head. I’m eating, Dad. Starchy honeydew; bland potatoes. The bean salad was good; sharp vinegar and salt. Rosemary’s mother was dancing samba by the stereo, laughing with her old college roommate. Over the roommate’s swimsuit, a gauzy shift. You could see everything through it. Another drink; another plate; a squeezed bicep; a pinched behind; Rosemary’s parents and her parents’ friends drifted away on other currents. Barefoot, Rosemary crossed the lawn to the pool. She went around to the far side, hidden, to remove her shorts and shirt. The plastic ladder took her up and over. At the apex, she tightened her stomach, elbows across her breasts. She hopped in. Colder than she expected; tiptoes on the bottom. The water came up and licked her chin.

THE POOL WAS FOR HER COUSINS, her mother had said when it arrived. Am I allowed to swim in it? Rosemary asked. Her mother, so often
tired of her: quick sigh; rolled eyes; long gaze in the rearview mirror. Don’t be dramatic, she said. It’s for all of you, to play in. Didn’t you have fun in their pool last summer? That pool on the other side of the country; a real pool; a hole in the ground so deep your ears would burst if you ever reached the bottom. For a week, all they did was swim. Her little cousins: industrious dog-paddlers in water wings and goggles. Days of somersaults, bobbing for toys, Marco Polo. Marco! What? her uncle roared, her real uncle. The little cousins laughed; his name was Marco. Never tired of the gag, they cried for more until the parents took their drinks inside. They went to a lot of trouble for you, Rosemary’s mother said. The little cousins wanted rides on her back; she was the Loch Ness Monster, a mermaid, a dolphin, a ferry. And Rosemary’s other cousin, two years older than her, he wanted to play levitation. Each day, a magician; his hands on her shoulder blades, the backs of her thighs, her hips. Sun in her eyes; she floated. Abra cadabra! he said. The little cousins clapped, flapped their water wings. And now I will make her disappear! She sank herself then, swam along the belly of the pool where the automatic cleaner, strange fish, clicked. Plastic toys littered the depths; how long could she hold her breath? I got sunburned, Rosemary told her mother. Well there’s a thing called sunblock, her mother said. You need to have fun with your cousins. That’s what hosts do.

ROSEMARY’S MOTHER IN THE JACUZZI with her college roommate and the college roommate’s boyfriend. His arm around the roommate’s neck. Bob! Come on in. Lenore, water’s nice. Her mother balanced on the edge of the jacuzzi, shouting out; a splash of water at the man in the straw fedora. Her arched back; her leg thrown up in the air. When she was young, Rosemary’s mother had been a ballerina in local productions. Now, like Rosemary’s father, she showed and sold homes. She liked to say to Rosemary: You should want to be more than you are. Journals; barrettes; makeup; the two-piece; shoes with one-inch heels; she bought Rosemary a posterboard for her room on which to write her goals and the steps she would take to achieve them. Tacked to the wall; her mother handed her the marker. Rosemary uncapped it and asked, Who should I want to be?

ALL RIGHT, ALL RIGHT! The man in the fedora pulling off his polo shirt. We got ourselves a party! Rosemary’s father leaned against the jacuzzi, rubbing her mother’s shoulders; Mrs. Patterson unzipping her hibiscus dress.
Single warm burst of wind; a moth paddling one-winged around the pool. Rosemary grabbed her ankles and sank to the bottom; the lining slick rubber like the underside of a dolphin. She floated up and spit water. Knees to the wall, chin on the rim of the pool; a sparrow on the fence, peering down. Clap of wings; it was gone. No one looked toward the pool. As she had wished, Rosemary was imperceptible. A popped cork; a fallen beer can; a slosh over the jacuzzi rim. Darts plugged, far miss, into the wooden fence. Rosemary’s parents and her parents’ friends. They were so shameless. Mrs. Patterson’s bare foot up on the seat of Mr. Parker’s chair, between his parted knees; Patricia’s oiled legs; Mrs. Wentz’s thighs; her purple spider veins. Her parents were quick to laugh. No one could see them; could they see themselves? The sun was setting; the sky burned; the moon already risen; a low jet sighing; its orange, glinting wink. Rosemary floated on her back and looked for birds in the tree that bowed over from the neighbor’s yard. All the leaves, heart-shaped, pointed down at her. The water lapped her cheeks. While he levitated her, he’d said just to her: I bet you’ll look really different next summer. His wet hair dripping water onto her chest. Somewhere in the neighborhood, someone started up a motorcycle and rode away. Somewhere in the neighborhood, a summer party was winding down. It was the time when animals crept off and settled down for sleep.

**Rosemary’s Father Lit the Tikis Torches.** The cake, pineapple bundt, was sliced, passed around on paper plates. A dollop of whipped cream; maraschino cherries. Mmmm, Rosemary’s mother said; a mouthful of whipped cream from her pinkie finger. Rosemary’s skin was pruned. The scab on her shin gone white and doughy. She climbed the ladder again, tailbone tucked, and hopped to the grass. She had forgotten a towel. Dripping, she put her clothes back on, wrung out her hair. She crossed the lawn toward the house, butt of her shorts wet, shirt clinging to her breasts. Dry, poking lawn; chip crumbs in a bowl; sugar smell of alcohol. Four yellow-jackets, legs and abdomens fretting, claimed the platter of leftover juices and meat. Her parents and her parents’ friends, between flames, reflected in the sliding glass. A shout. Bull’s-eye! Hey, Rose! It was Uncle Bobby. Rosemary had already snapped the sliding screen closed.

**The Fridge, Empty Now** except for condiments; in the freezer, one last bag of ice. The night before, Rosemary and her parents ate TV dinners.
and ice cream to make room. The ground beef defrosting in the sink; such a mound of it. Her mother had said, You could go to the movies tomorrow. We’ll give you money, her father said. Rosemary shrugged. Her mother asked, Why don’t you call Kelly? Aren’t you friends with Meghan anymore? Or Grace? Shrug. Kelly is at her dad’s for the summer. She didn’t say: When was the last time any of them had called her back? Her father asked, What about a boy? Rosemary shook her head. She would just stay here. She would stay out of the way, she promised. Okay then. Her parents loaded the dishwasher, sponged the countertops, hid clutter in cabinets. Rosemary watched her ice cream soften; flecks of peach floating in white.

IN THE LIVING ROOM, Rosemary sat, knees up, on the floor between the sofa and the coffee table. She had shed her wet clothes and bathing suit in her room upstairs, put on pajamas: an oversize T-shirt, long as a dress, that had been her father’s. The evening was blue now; she didn’t bother with the lamp. The TV on low; the fan oscillating; wind in her ear; chin on her knee; knees tented under the shirt; fingernail under the edge of her scab. In one week, her cousins would arrive. She would hug them at the airport; she would levitate in the pool.

ROSEMARY’S PARENTS and her parents’ friends, in her periphery, yellow in the glow of the patio light. The tiki torches; the rock songs her parents had listened to when they were her age; the game of boccie grown competitive, loud. Eeeey! Uncle Bobby chasing a woman around the yard with a fistful of ice. A shriek; breathless; ice down the front of her shirt. The Pattersons singing along to the music, drinks raised; Patricia climbing down the ladder into the pool; her rear swaying above the water; her toe dipping in. It’s so cold! The swimmers staring up at her. Rosemary’s mother, in the pool, sitting across her father’s lap. Lauren’s father’s new wife’s calves rising above the water; a handstand. That’s what I’m talking about! Drumming on the side of the pool. The sliding screen leaping across its track. Uncle Bobby, heavy-stepped, crossed the TV toward the restroom. He didn’t see Rosemary sitting on the floor in the dark. She lowered herself behind the coffee table and lay down, wet hair on the carpet. When he came back out, he stopped at the foot of the staircase. Rose? he called up. Rosie? No answer. He turned back to the party, parted the screen door. Rosemary stood and crept up the
carpeted stairs, back to her parents’ bedroom, black as a cave. She shut the door and locked it. Ceiling fan wafting hot air; itchy bedspread just like lying across dry grass. Rosemary set her head between her parents’ pillows. The movies, how would she have gotten home, anyway?

**His Burned and Peeling Shoulders:** his stringy arms; his big feet and his long toes. His bitten nails on the backs of her legs; his expression like a wet paper bag. He’d levitated her and said, Most other girls pretend to be prettier than they are. He was always tugging at the crotch of his swim trunks, his shorts. Even at the dinner table, where her little cousins ate with plastic spoons. Baked chicken thighs; lima beans; bread with melted cheddar cheese. Grown-ups talking; food mixing in their mouths. Wet sounds of chewing; slurped juice. Eat your food, Rosemary, her father had said. He said it all the time. He’d say it again next week. He’d make Rosemary sing her choir songs. He’d move back into her mother’s room, the rollaway bed claimed by guests. Her mother would show her sister the new daisies; the stereo; the pavers; the pool. Baked chicken thighs; lima beans; bread with melted cheddar cheese. Hamburgers and hot dogs; bowls of potato salad, bean salad, fruit salad, jello salad. The same meals; the same stereo songs; two pitchers on the patio table; spatula in her father’s hand; pool gaping. Unless she ran away. The ceiling fan clicked. Outside: hollow aluminum clunk; a slap of water; her father’s laugh a howl; a brand-new song. Inside: quiet. At least she’d been forgotten. A breeze picked up, brought fresh air into the bedroom. Rosemary closed her eyes. Unless she sprained her ankle. Heat-tired; skin taut and chlorine-dry. She put her hands over her breasts, tender for more than a year, and bigger. She could tell. If she broke her leg. Outside: giggling; humming; low talking; cups plunged into the ice cubes; pound of dart on board. Appendicitis; amnesia. A lit cigar; the bubbling jacuzzi; one boccie ball striking another. If she joined the circus. Cannonball splash; a chair scraped against concrete; cricket song ringing; the sky itself breathing. If she were kidnapped; if she fell down a well; if she disappeared, just like that. Imperceptible, even to herself. If she vanished. Or, if she levitated, truly. Abracadabra; out of the water; up through the clouds; each chin lifting to watch her float. Into thin air; clap, she’d be gone.
Marianne Boruch

FACT IS DREAMS COME IF YOU ARE TIRED ENOUGH

to say yes. I believed as a child.
Meaning I feared. Or I loved.
Or stood in the sun braced for those stupid photos—Easter, Christmas, Fourth of July.

Redact, redact, erase, cross out, tear it up,
let the wind take it. And wind showers down embers.

That's sleep, isn't it? So many with arms crossing chest in perfect rehearsal for the hit movie that might trade this world for another.

It's that quiet. You think things.

My laptop screen has a tiny magnifying glass leaning in the corner as if universe only gets larger. Next to it—

*Tell me what you want to do*

Tell …

*who?* I thought before falling.
As soon as Heidi arrived at Kim’s condo, she suggested they go meet Lisa ParsonsTwo, Kim’s online crush. Usually Kim was the rule-breaker, the wild girl whose mom let her do whatever she wanted, but Heidi hadn’t been able to stop thinking about Lisa ParsonsTwo since Kim had told her about their messages last week. When Heidi found out Kim’s mom would be out for the evening, she’d invited herself to sleep over.

“You don’t want to make hot dogs?” Kim brandished the package. She’d let it sit out way too long—the protective ice had dissolved and the meat was pale and clammy. Kim pinched a puckered end and winked.

“What’s wrong with you? She’s your crush. Of course you want to go.” Heidi would fluff Kim back up to her normal self, that cool, slouchy tomboy. “You never cook.”
“I thought it was a nice night to stay in and enjoy dogs. I have mayonnaise.”

“Kim. Come on. We have to meet her. There’s so much buildup.”

“I thought you wanted a fun night in.” Kim flapped the hot dogs, puffing meaty air toward Heidi. “Just me and you. Like old times.”

Heidi smoothed her flyaway hair. She was fourteen but looked twelve, and had always been pushed around at school. She liked this new feeling of freaking out someone else—especially Kim, who was the daring one. Who’d found this mysterious online woman in the first place. Heidi needed to go to Boston tonight, to watch Kim bravely charm an adult woman, so that, down the line, she could flirt with one herself. She took a breath. “You mean you’re chicken.”

“Not really.” Kim’s head tilted back, her bottom lip popping out.

“You think you’re so tough,” Heidi said. “But you’re not, are you?”

Though they’d been best friends for nearly a year, Heidi had never spoken to Kim so boldly. She stepped forward, molding a face of intimidation. Kim rolled her eyes, but said, “Fine, whatever you want,” and shuffled into the shadows to make arrangements on AIM. Heidi loomed over her as Kim typed with one hand, massaging hot dogs with the other.

HEIDI COULDN’T STILL HER HEART as they stepped into the snowy night, passing the decorative rock engraved with the name of the apartment complex—Stony Court—and crossing the parking lot toward Mass Ave. Ever since Kim had first mentioned LisaParsonsTwo, Heidi had lain in bed each night imagining their correspondence: the bleak white dialogue box, filled alternatingly with Kim’s blue screen name and Lisa’s red screen name. Kim had been vague about what they discussed, but Heidi was sure their chats brimmed with eroticism and romance. She’d begged Kim to let her see, but Kim had called her a certified perv and only shared choice quotes. Tonight Kim’s seduction skills would finally be on view. Heidi was sick of her dreary life, mildewing into old rugs at her dad’s house, laboring over math worksheets.

“Don’t let that woman drive you anywhere,” Heidi’s father had said of Kim’s mom, Nancy. “Not even to the corner store. And if she starts in on the marijuana, tell her your father doesn’t like funny business. If she doesn’t listen, step into another room. Then call 911.”
Kim and Heidi trudged through the snow, which was stale, yellow foam under the fresh marshmallow layer. Heidi glanced back up at the light in Kim’s living room on the second floor. If Heidi hadn’t pressed for the trip, they’d be in there, her finger filling a burn hole in the couch, hearing secrets from Kim’s old school: how she’d masturbated under her desk during social studies; how she’d seduced her resource room teacher; how she’d skimmed her mother’s marijuana, a speck at a time, and secured it in the rubber belly of her Pillsbury Doughboy. Heidi was sick of hearing about Kim’s experiences. She was ready to be out in the world witnessing them.

“You’ll seduce LisaParsonsTwo, right?” Heidi asked.

“Doy,” said Kim. “I’ll seduce her so hard.”

As they reached Mass Ave., Heidi zipped her puffy jacket, frail armor against the winter night. “How far is the bus stop?”

“This is the bus stop,” Kim said. “Are you blind?”

They hunched in the shelter, where snow blew in sideways. Kim’s chunky black pixie cut collected a dusting like powdered sugar on chocolate cake. Her breasts formed a shelf for the snow, the cotton of her sweatshirt darkening as flakes melted from her heat.

“How do we get to Beacon Hill?” Heidi asked. The name sounded like a lighthouse.

“Doy.” Kim brushed snow off her hair. “Seventy-six to Alewife, Alewife to Park Street, then walk or take the Green Line to Government Center.”

“Cool,” Heidi said, and then, though she’d never been, “I love Government Center.”

“Ew, why? Hey, do you think anyone will die in this storm?”

“Everyone clears their tailpipes now.”

During the last snowstorm a local couple had died in their car, late at night, waiting for their windows to defrost. Their tailpipe had become clogged with snow. They’d lost themselves talking, the newspaper thought, hadn’t noticed they were drifting off, maybe confused the feeling with love. Heidi couldn’t stop thinking about the woman dying first, her bowed head enticing the man into his own coma. They’d met through HistoryBuffSingles.net and the Lexington Minuteman had excerpted their personals. It was wrong they’d died just when they’d found each other. They’d both listed the Hundred Years’ War, Rice-A-Roni, and human tenderness as interests. The couple’s death was the singular most compelling story Heidi had encountered. Until LisaParsonsTwo.
Kim leaned against the shelter post and flipped her hood up. God, if only Heidi could be Kim. She scared herself by acting like her father sometimes: washing her hands three times after using bleach, removing the hair dryer from the bathroom in case it slipped into the tub while she was bathing, quizzing Nancy on the location and condition of the carbon monoxide detector. Kim was the only exciting feature of her life; Kim, whose mom smoked cloves and wore silk scarves as tight as bandages. Kim who used to live by the ocean, who visited the city after dark, who had come out as a lesbian in fourth grade.

It was last year, soon after they met, that Kim came out to Heidi. They were sharing a cushion on Kim's floor, and Heidi asked, “But how do you know? Everyone has fantasies.” In a discussion about President Clinton, her dad had told her that fantasies are for the mind alone. That if you want to think of someone who acts on fantasies, you should think of a serial killer.

“I just know.” Kim worried the frayed edge of the mat. “I get boobs and boobs get me. What fantasies do you have?”

Mean bosses filled Heidi's mind. Female bosses. And, though she’d be humiliated if anyone ever knew, moms. Moms who knew better but couldn't help themselves. Moms with shaggy hair and graceful limbs. “I guess Greg Luce is cute.”

That’s when Kim started in on her stories from Scituate, which Heidi pictured as a cheerful cluster of brown buildings pressed against the Atlantic, though her dad insisted it was a second-rate town with a dangerously defective sewage system. In Scituate, Kim had dated a popular girl named Kelly Stephanie.

Heidi understood that Kim knew Heidi was gay, too, though they’d never discussed it. Kim gave a funny smile when she caught Heidi studying accidentally homoerotic advertisements, like two women plunging their hands into a bowl of popcorn, blue TV light on their faces, pajamaed legs tucked under their hips. The idea of two adult women in a living room at night swept Heidi’s head from her shoulders.

Maybe Heidi could become secret girlfriends with Kim, as the whole school assumed anyway. But her feelings for Kim ranged only from tepid satisfaction to fierce affection, the normal range of feeling for a buddy.

“What will Lisa Parsons be like?” Heidi asked. “Do you think that’s her real name?”
“It’s probably a pseudonym.” Kim crushed a circle into the snow. “Prob-
ably her name is Beef Jessica or something.”

“Why would her pseudonym be more normal than her regular name?”

“Why do you care?” Kim’s eyes glinted, challenging.

“Of course I care. You’re my best friend.”

“You’re not my best friend.”

Heidi frowned, her chest tightening. “Well, who is?”

“My pussy.” Kim laughed wildly, then shoved Heidi with two hands.

Heidi collapsed backward and the snow accepted her with cold, wet arms.

Kim pounced on her and stuffed her leg between Heidi’s, mashing her crotch.

“I’m going to beat you,” Kim said.

Heidi gasped, willing herself to ignore the burn between her legs, the
sweetness of the friction. They wrestled all the time under Kim’s black light
posters: wild, grasping fights that led to a pop of pleasure so deep it was almost
painful. Tonight the snow made the whole world private. Even the air was
white, so bright that the snowflakes were gray against it.

Heidi hooked her chin over Kim’s shoulder so they wouldn’t have to see
each other. They pressed the snow down with their weight, sinking their plat-
form, until rocks and the trash of summer poked Heidi’s back.

“Pretend I’m Greg Luce,” Kim said.

Heidi pretended Kim was the black-haired woman laminated on the
shelter wall, with a sharp nose and crow’s-feet, passing kibble to a Pekingese.
The woman’s hands stroked Heidi’s hips as she spoke in low, firm tones, Heidi
raging all over.

As Heidi pressed tighter to Kim, her thighs and butt numbing against
the cold, the woman on the poster blurring into peach and black and green,
even the Pekingese becoming erotic, with its long, fleshy body, they were hit
with floodlights.

Heidi pushed Kim off so hard that she crashed onto her side, her mouth
filling with snow.

“Chill out,” Kim said, spitting slush. “Why else would we be here?”

Heidi leaped at the bus as it bowed to her. But when she climbed the rub-
ber stairs and faced the driver—bearded, red-eyed—she could tell he’d seen
her grappling with Kim. His chin was set.

“Girls?” he said, and since she couldn’t tell what he was asking, or if he
was asking anything, she paid and took her seat.
As the bus lurched forward, Heidi couldn’t turn from the strip of greenish skin and shiny eyes in the rearview. Had he thought she and Kim were fighting, as they always claimed they were? Nancy might know she and Kim messed around. “Kim’s lucky to have you,” she’d said once.

The driver’s eyelids sagged over his pupils. Heidi squished her face against the freezing window.

**THE COFFEE SHOP** where they’d arranged to meet Lisa Parsons Two was a sandstone block of a building on a hill above Boston Common. A metalwork sign, **peculiar treats** wrought in cursive, hung over the door. With a trembling hand, Kim squeezed a roll of belly and jammed it into her jeans. She smeared cola-flavored ChapStick throughout her hair, lifting her bangs to expose the confetti of whiteheads on her forehead. She claimed the smell of cola made girls horny, that cocktail of tang, caramel, and caffeine.

“Ready?” Heidi was anxious to get inside. “Do you know your first come-ons?”

Kim rubbed off her waxy fingers on Heidi’s shoulder. “We could just hang out, you and me. Like walk around the Common. Find a hot dog stand.”

Heidi took a breath. “Let’s check this place out, since we’re here.”

Inside, a blue-haired girl manned the counter, jelly bracelets bouncing as she foamed milk. Men sat on stools, though they could’ve been stone butches, which Kim had once described as lesbians with off-limits boobs.

“Where’s Lisa?” Heidi whispered.

“How am I supposed to know?” Kim twitched like a squirrel.

“Fix your hair.” A gob of ChapStick had lodged in Kim’s bangs. She scraped at it distractedly. “Are you even ready?”

“Doy,” Kim said, her voice a ghost.

Each step downstairs was danker than the last, the air cold and dense and mildewed. The basement was split into chambers with wall hangings and strings of lights tossed over pipes. The last room was padded with animal-patterned rugs, screenprinted sheets softening the surfaces: desert landscapes, rainbows arching over ponds, geese arranged in formal units in the sky. The room held a group of women who were older than the high schoolers who smoked on Ledgelawn Avenue and younger than the parents whisking by in wood-paneled minivans. The age of no one in the suburbs. One of them had
rolled her hair into twigs. Another wore a bandanna and overalls, feathers dripping from her earlobes. One had balls studded along the curl of her ear, like a wolf tagged for research. Heidi’s favorite was a large woman—older than the rest—with bleary cow eyes and a silk shirt that reached her knees, peacocks glittering from the billowing fabric. Her hands tickled her thighs like nervous spiders. She looked like she’d pull a runaway from the cold or stroke a stray. Unlike Heidi’s father, who was too afraid of fleas to help anyone.

The woman looked at Heidi, cheeks brightening. “Kim?”

“Lisa?” Lisa was at least twenty-five. But she didn’t look repulsed by the girls at the threshold, not even by Heidi’s puffy coat, sagging jeans, and gum boots. In fact, she seemed to prefer Heidi. Her focus scanned all over Heidi’s face.

Lisa Parsons stood up on tiny feet. “I didn’t expect you to be two.”

“I’m not Kim.” Heidi tapped Kim’s chest, signaling her to begin her seduction, but she just stood there, feet planted in the carpet.

“Ah.” Lisa Parsons turned to the real Kim. “Nice to meet you, Kim. I’ve enjoyed our chats.”

“Yeah.” Kim teetered where she stood. Why wasn’t she dashing forward and beginning the great romance of her life?

Lisa blushed. “Would you care to meet my friends?” Women from the group watched on, some with lattes pressed to their cheeks, some flashing large teeth.

“Fine.” Kim spoke so loudly that Lisa turned to Heidi, startled.

“And what’s your name?”

“Um, Heidi?”

“Is that German?” a lesbian asked. “Guten Tag, Umheidi.”

Lisa offered them a corduroy couch, low-slung like a beanbag. Heidi squeezed past the coffee table and took the middle. Kim perched on the armrest by the door, her body tipped toward the exit.

“Everybody.” Lisa spread her hands. “Heidi and Kim, my mentees from the internet.”

Heidi’s face splashed with heat at being included, being placed on equal footing with Kim.

“Aw,” cooed the twig-haired woman. “Lisa’s so generous with the baby bears. You girls probably don’t even know she’s been working with gay youth for, what, three years?”
“Five.” Lisa blushed at the carpet.

“She was at bagly, but now she finds kids on her own, helps them out big time. What do you call it, Lisa?”

“Personal mentorship,” Lisa said, watching Kim and Heidi.

Looming over the girls, Lisa’s proud pancake face could’ve passed for professional. And maybe Kim would imagine someone was in love with her when all they wanted was to help gay youth. But Kim had quoted chats where Lisa made reference to acts more intimate than Kim and Heidi’s fighting. Once, Heidi had reeled to the bathroom, overwhelmed.

Lisa offered Heidi her latte. Heidi took a sip, then flooded her mouth with spit to dilute the heat. “Tastes like heaven,” she said. Maybe she wouldn’t even have to wait for the next mysterious woman. If Kim wasn’t interested, Lisa could be Heidi’s chance. Why not? Bitter milk dribbled down her throat.

The women discussed vegetarian marshmallows and a menstruation aid called the Keeper. Heidi could take the train here every day after school. She’d claim she’d gotten into a play, but really she’d be here, perched on Lisa’s knee, laughing with everyone but pausing to whisper in Lisa’s ear a private jest or a special memory.

“What’s your favorite subject, Kim?” Lisa asked.

“Math?”

“She means English,” Heidi said.

“What do you like about English?”

“This is stupid,” Heidi pitched her voice deeper and less kid-like, “but sometimes we give the books new plots.” Heidi loved the days they spent sitting on Kim’s floor, Nancy at work or out with friends, sounding off without filter. Scout murdered Dill, Holden Caulfield grew up to become a Broadway producer. The kids in *Lord of the Flies* hitched a ride on a Disney Cruise.

“I was creative, too, once,” Lisa said. “Sometimes I wonder how I ended up in medicine.”

“You work in medicine?” Heidi scooted to the edge of the sofa cushion. Out in this world, she could meet people in any profession, not just the same batch of fools at the same dumb school. She yearned for every detail of Lisa’s life. That’s how bonds formed.

“Kim, you didn’t tell Heidi about my job?”
“Don’t remember.” 
Lisa’s face blinked with hurt. Maybe Kim was disappointed with Lisa’s weight or age. The picture Lisa had sent was old, Heidi saw now, maybe even from high school. She’d smiled falsely in the shot, her bangs outdated, her jaw set with awkward enthusiasm. Heidi preferred Lisa now. She wanted to announce that she couldn’t imagine a handsomer woman, but that might’ve been awkward. “What do you do in medicine?”

“I’m an orderly.” Lisa rolled her eyes. “Go me.”

“I’ve always dreamed of being an orderly,” Heidi said, which seemed like the thing to say after someone revealed their job.

“Oh, honey,” Lisa said. “I’m sure you’re smarter than that. I’m just keeping afloat until I can afford a tapestry loom. Weaving is my main thing.”

Heidi’s chest filled with warmth. No one ever called her honey.

“I’m smart, too.” Kim’s voice quivered as though passing through jello. “I get some Bs.” Kim yanked strings from a hole in her sweater. They built up on her lap like a worm colony.

“Attention, please,” announced a lesbian, clapping.

“What is it, Anya?” asked Twig Hair, fondling a scone. “Will you sing a ballad?”

Lisa’s hand dropped on Heidi’s knee under the coffee table. Heidi’s throat closed. Lisa was touching her, fanning her hand protectively. She’d been selected. She catalogued the weight of each finger, the palm’s circle, so she could reheat and enjoy them later.

The woman named Anya stood up in unlaced boots. She was the only one, besides Lisa, who wouldn’t pass for a lesbian anywhere but here. She had silky hair and three dimples.

“We indulge Lisa’s personal mentorship,” Anya said. “But we never hear from the kids. We pat their heads and say they’re cute and isn’t Lisa so great to help, but have you ever thought maybe we’re missing an opportunity? Maybe these kids know something we don’t about this new ‘AOL culture.’ After all, these girls materialized from the internet, and to the internet they shall return.”

Lisa’s palm tightened around Heidi’s knee. “They’re kids, you guys. They’re shy.”

“Bullshit,” said a woman in a moss-colored sweater. “Check out the feisty one.” She pointed at Heidi.
Heidi tried to look normal but she felt like the pointing finger had punched her in the stomach. This was her chance to show Lisa she was mature, worthy of that hand on her knee, that she wasn’t some child like Kim. Shakily, she climbed onto an aluminum stool. The stool was a mistake, she realized, the moment she mounted it. Now everyone could see the bottoms of her jeans, which she’d stamped until she’d shredded the hems.

“Go for it, girl,” called a woman with a tiara and a panda purse.

The stool was unsteady and there was nothing to hold on to up there. Lisa watched with anxious investment, like a mom at a spelling bee. Those fingertips on Heidi’s knee, searching. She stood taller, proud. She was doing so well today. The hand on her knee, the women shouting encouragement. She should pull Kim in.

“Everybody,” she said. “That’s Kim.” Faces turned at the same time, like satellite dishes, toward Kim. Heidi breathed better with their eyes off her. “You guys say Lisa helps kids through being gay, but I don’t need help. I have Kim.” Her voice rolled out smooth and loud. She was killing this.

“Kim used to live by the ocean, far away from here. There was a Coke factory near her house and Kim has this sea glass that’s, like, brown. Kim dated the most popular girl at school, not even in secret. I didn’t believe it at first, but it’s true. And she had this band? Rainbow Rainbow? Their music made other girls gay.” The name of the band, Kim had explained, symbolized two people side by side. The people, who were incidentally both girls, would eventually merge into one rainbow, or girl, but for now were separate ribbons of color, hovering side by side in the lonely sky. “Kim probably helped like five girls realize they were gay with her band.” After all, Kim had helped Heidi realize she was gay, without even an electric guitar or a recorded drumbeat.

These women were decorated and filled out and easy in the world, and then there was Kim, crunched up on the couch, her gray canine exposed. Heidi had told her to get that tooth checked a million times, didn’t get why Nancy didn’t notice. Against these old lesbians, Kim was so funny-looking and shy. Heidi realized what she somehow hadn’t before: Kim had never dated a popular girl or seduced a teacher. She’d never had a band. She probably hadn’t even come out in fourth grade. Heidi couldn’t believe she’d had to stand up on this stupid stool to figure that out. Her voice flattened: “Kim’s neat.”

“That’s damn right,” Anya cried. “Kim’s a freaking figurehead!”
They turned to Kim with blaring love. Kim eased her feet onto the floor and straightened her back. Her mouth ticked. Lesbians beamed at her, and she beamed back. Slowly, so as not to attract attention, Heidi dismounted the stool.

“You’re rad,” Anya said. “I didn’t come out until college.”

“You’re a very impressive young woman, Kim,” Lisa said.

Kim blushed into her shoulder. God, she looked endearing. Heidi wanted to bite the sweet smile off her face.

“How old were you when you came out?” asked the woman with the panda bag.

Kim showed nine fingers, and the lesbians groaned. Anya shot out of her seat. “That deserves a cappuccino.”

Kim followed Anya like a dog, without a glance at Heidi. When they were gone, the room tittered back into conversations. But Kim’s glow lingered. The women’s mouths opened wider, their fingers massaging the air as though it were a substance from which they could pull meaning.

Heidi was abandoned on her side of the room. She pretended, like a little kid, that no one could see her with her eyes closed. If Kim was going to be the cool, charming one again, she’d rather vanish. Kim loudly returned, stamping the carpet and carrying on to Anya as though everyone in the room beyond wanted to hear.

Kim went on and on about Scituate, talking in her strident voice. For the first time Heidi realized this must’ve been her lying voice. She claimed the bathrooms in her old middle school were labeled genderqueer, that Gertrude Stein was the centerpiece of each lit course. Heidi waited for Anya or Twig Hair to scold her. They were adults, they should know better than Heidi, who should’ve been too old herself to have believed Kim for so long. Instead, they seemed to fall in love with Kim more and more by the second. Kim would make friends with these lesbians and leave Heidi behind. Heidi’s throat tightened.

“Are you okay?” asked Lisa, coming over. “You look sad.”

“I’m fine.”

Lisa reclaimed her seat on the couch. Under the coffee table, the hand returned to Heidi’s thigh, higher than a teacher or a mother or a tutor of youth would dare. The hand slid an inch higher. Heidi leaned back against the cushion, nerves glowing from her groin to the tip of her brain. Lisa Parsons plopped her giant handbag on Heidi’s lap.
“Hold this,” she said, in a voice that was mossy and damp. Before Heidi could agree, Lisa Parsons’s hand crossed over Heidi’s crotch and dug under the waist of her loose jeans, fingers worming under the elastic of Heidi’s underwear, and into the cotton crotch, pushing through the few lonely curls of her pubic hair.

Kim yelped. Heidi’s eyes shot open and Lisa Parsons’s hand ripped back like it was on a spring. Heidi had been caught. But Kim was staring at her watch.

“My mom’s coming home in twenty minutes.”

Heidi barely had time for relief before she was flooded with annoyance. “Since when does your mom care about curfew?”

“We have to go.” Kim jumped up.

Heidi could have pushed Kim to the floor. Her crotch was still warm from Lisa’s hand, and Heidi longed for those fingers to be back in her underwear, moving like slow, gentle animals. Kim could just shut up.

“I’ll drive you,” Lisa said.

“All the way to the suburbs?” Heidi asked.

The women laughed. Twig Hair made an “ooh” like a ghost. Kim picked up on it, trilled at Heidi, “Ooh, the suburbs.” Heidi wanted to scream.

AT THE CAR, a compact, rickety model with a strawberry on the antenna, Lisa collapsed the front seat and waited for someone to climb in back. Kim didn’t make a move, so Heidi crawled in like a dog, her butt raised in their faces. She swept aside crushed chip bags and CDs so scratched they weren’t even shiny.

They drove between lit-up buildings, over the Charles and into Cambridge. Kim and Lisa chattered about topics Heidi didn’t follow, referencing stories they’d swapped in their weeks of IMing. Now that Kim had shed her shyness, she had more to say to Lisa than Heidi ever would have, all those hours of raw material, intimacies ready to bloom. Lisa discussed her cat, who Kim called Noodle like he was a personal friend. Lisa fretted over Nancy’s DUI.

“You should tell her how upset you are,” Lisa said. “She thinks you’re so strong.”

Kim picked at the sleeve of her sweatshirt. “I wish I had normal parents.”

Lisa shook her head with pity. No one included Heidi in the conversation, though she’d spent hours talking through the DUI with Kim, holding
her while she cried, arranging rides for Kim when Nancy’s license was
suspended.

Halfway through Arlington it started to snow, or maybe it had never
stopped in the suburbs. Back at Stony Court, the light was still on in Kim’s
den. Heidi couldn’t bear to sleep on Kim’s floor, staring at the cigarette butts
and the gummy dildo under her bed. If only Lisa would drop Kim off and pull
a U-turn back to the city, tuck her hand back in Heidi’s pants.

“Bye,” Kim chirped, leaping from the car into a snowbank. She was half-
way to the complex by the time Lisa had come around to the passenger side
and hunched over the front seat, jiggling it forward so Heidi could get out.
And there was Kim, already a mile away. She was an idiot to give up this close
to the finish line.

Heidi sank into the snow, her sneakers soaking through to her socks. Lisa
looked, through the falling snowflakes, like she was stuck in a fuzzy TV.

“This was fun,” Heidi said. If only Lisa would pull her in. Maybe even
kiss her.

“Yeah,” Lisa said, peering around. “Is this your house?”

“It’s Kim’s.” Heidi tipped her head up so Lisa could reach her for a kiss.
Lisa sucked in a breath, her cheeks reddening. When her voice came out,
it squeaked: “I better go.”

Before Heidi could respond, Lisa had disappeared into the car. Slowly,
Heidi turned and stumbled through Kim’s tracks. She’d praised Kim so
hard, of course the lesbians all preferred her. Her shoulders sagged as she
walked.

When Heidi reached the boulder with the nameplate of the complex,
hands flashed out and caught her ankles. Heidi screamed.

“Be quiet,” Kim said, jerking her behind the stone. They crouched low.

As soon as they were alone the world quieted and became familiar again.
Kim’s loose mouth and fuzzy hair were comforting. The rest of their night
unrolled before Heidi: discussing the café in Kim’s room, in the toxic violet
of her black light. They could still have an okay time.

“Keep hidden,” Kim said, shuffling over the ice until their knees touched.
Kim had laughed with the lesbians, head thrown back, shameless. Heidi’s
chest inflamed. “Why’d you do that?”

“I wanted you to hide with me.” Kim giggled, her dead canine popping
out. “I didn’t mean to scare you. God, you screamed so loud.”
“I mean in the café.” Heidi straightened her neck. “They liked me and you stole all the attention.”

“Who cares? They’re a bunch of old people. And you made that speech. I thought you wanted them to like me.”

She had, at first. She’d pitied Kim.

“I saw your face up there.” Kim picked snow out of her sneakers. “You know I made it up. The band and stuff.”

“I’ve always known,” Heidi lied.

“No, I’m glad.” Kim’s teeth clicked together in the cold. “You know me, Heidi. I love that.” She snatched Heidi’s hand.

Heidi waited one polite second in Kim’s clutches before easing her hand free. “That’s nice.”

“I left my sweatshirt in her car.”

“Yeah, right.” Kim was meticulous about clothes, especially her purple sweatshirt with 1998 emblazoned across the chest. She stored it on a yellow hanger and never washed it.

“So I’ll have to see her again.” Kim looked over the top of the boulder. Lisa’s car idled, exhaust mixing with the flakes. “Should I go now? I should, right? That’s what a date is?” Kim squished her face up like she wanted Heidi to stop her. She inched toward the lot. Heidi caught her by the wrist.

“Don’t.”

Kim puffed air into her cheeks. “Really?”

Heidi wouldn’t be able to stand it if Kim won Lisa. “You have all this mystery. The girl with the stories, who doesn’t need anyone. You don’t want to spoil that. I’ll get your sweatshirt.” Heidi spoke softly. If she sounded kind, maybe she would be. “I’ll tell her I’ve never seen you so happy.”

“One practice kiss.”

“What?”

Kim pulled Heidi in by the cheeks and slammed their mouths together so the whole snowy expanse flashed red and throbbing, like Heidi’s head was wrapped in someone’s giant vein. Heidi shook free, as though escaping from a licking dog. Soggy and irritated, she deserted the boulder.

HEIDI KEPT HERSELF FROM SPRINKLING BACK to the cozy world contained within the glass and steel and rubber of the car. She already missed Lisa’s sleek hair, the soft fold of her mouth, the chance to be free of
this town with its bowling alleys and golden dogs and dads who kept you inside.

She stepped up to the car and peered through the glass of the passenger door. Lisa was slumped over the steering wheel, her hair fanned on the dashboard.

Heidi knocked, loosening ice shards that had formed on the glass. Lisa startled, then reached across the empty seat and opened the door.

“Kim left her sweatshirt,” Heidi said. The purple heap had been kicked down into the footwell. Heidi was careful not to soil it as she slid inside.

Lisa Parsons fell back against her seat. Tears had cut channels through her foundation. This must’ve been how the internet couple felt before they slipped away: staring at the soft white world that was about to let them go.

“I can’t keep doing this,” Lisa said, her forehead bunched like a towel. Her voice turned richer. “I’ve never crossed the line before. You should know that. I get to here and delete my account. I use my name so I won’t be tempted. Something’s wrong with me.”

“Oh.”

“I don’t know if I’d really do it. God, why am I telling you this?” She raked a hand through her hair. “Is Kim okay?”

Heidi nodded, her body floating outside the car.

“She’s not, like, damaged? She seemed off.”

“She’s fine.”

“The stuff I said? It’s not, like, traumatizing her?”

Affection for Kim welled in Heidi. “She already knows all that stuff.”

Lisa wiped her face with her wrist. “Thanks.” She hesitated, staring into her lap. Her voice was so low that it was almost inaudible: “What about you?”

The last word surged in Heidi’s underwear. She was part of this whole drama. “I liked when you touched me.”

Lisa snorted, her cheeks flaring red. “You shouldn’t.”

Lisa had a soft body that begged to be stroked. Heidi couldn’t stand anymore to just sit beside it. She leaned across the console and snatched Lisa’s mouth with her own. Lisa leaned back, and Heidi reached under Lisa’s shirt, meeting breast abruptly, the slippery fullness, the knob of nipple. She didn’t care that rest of the world blinked out. She’d reached the sweaty center of life: a nipple throbbing on her palm.
Lisa pushed Heidi away so hard that Heidi hit the door, which she hadn’t fully closed, and it popped open. The air was freezing, and she thrashed as she collapsed into the snow. Any moment Lisa would dash over, lift her onto the seat, run the heat and mop her face with Kim’s sweatshirt. And there Lisa was: reaching over the passenger seat, her eyes beaming like fat stars. She pulled the door shut, and then, shoulders over the wheel, she gunned the engine and was gone.

Heidi didn’t have the heart to move. Her arms were wobbly and sore, like she’d swum a mile. Maybe Lisa had rejected her because she’d sulked in the corner after praising Kim. That had been babyish. She wouldn’t kiss herself after behavior like that.

Nancy’s silver SUV pulled in. She always parked as far away as possible, so she could sober up on the walk to the door. Heidi stood up and brushed off snow as Nancy crossed the parking lot and through the complex’s front yard with her funny, unmeasured stride. Her hair was down, gray strands swinging. When she reached her building, she leaned against the wall and lit a joint. Heidi walked over and stood beside her. The bricks were ice blocks against her spine. “Taking a stroll, Princess of the Alps?”

Nancy took a drag and offered her the joint, the joke of it all over her face. Heidi was Kim’s square friend, the kid with the annoying father. But this time, Heidi accepted. She drew from the cigarette, holding in a mouthful of smoke until her eyes watered. So what if Lisa hadn’t worked out? Heidi could do anything. She’d kissed a woman tonight.

A sliver of light shone from the living room directly above, probably too steep an angle for Kim to see them. Kim must’ve been waiting at the computer for Lisa to get home and IM her, start the relationship for real. Soon Heidi would have to tell Kim that her sweatshirt was gone, that Lisa wasn’t interested, that she was just some pervert like they should’ve always known. The good news was, Kim wouldn’t mind. They could salvage the sleepover.

“Thanks for having me over,” Heidi said.

“You should come around more.” Nancy extinguished the joint. “Tell your daddy I’m not so bad.”

This was enough, the leftover smoke itching her lungs, hanging out with a grown-up who seemed to care. So it wasn’t romantic. So what? She turned to head to the door.
Nancy pinched Heidi’s sleeve, stopping her. “Kim never told you what happened at her old school, did she?” Nancy frowned. “I think you should know.”

Nancy was dead serious. Heidi’s limbs tensed. “She told me some stuff.”

“Never tell her I told you this, okay? What I’m about to say? I trust you.” Nancy’s mouth twitched. “I can trust you, right?”

Maybe someone had posted a picture of Kim’s vagina on the school bulletin board, or pretended to seduce her and revealed a laughing crowd behind a curtain. Kim must’ve been so different in Scituate: nose aimed at the ground, back curled against not even insults but indifference.

“There was a girl,” Nancy said. “Kim got the wrong idea. She acts tougher than she is.”

The girl would’ve been tall and long-haired, one shoulder listing to the right, teeth blocky and prominent. The friendship must’ve tightened until Kim’s hand strayed one day to the girl’s belly, and then, under her shoulder, to the moist hollow of her armpit. When Heidi pictures Kim and the girl nowadays, she never follows the fantasy to the end: other girls finding out, the best friend ditching Kim, Nancy giving up her own life to move.

Nancy took Heidi’s shoulder. “Will you be careful?”

“I’ll protect her.” She already had, tonight. If it weren’t for Heidi, Kim would be in Lisa’s car now, gliding into an unlit drugstore parking lot.

“That’s not what I mean. She’s fond of you, Heidi.”

Kim’s hands on her shoulder when they wrestled, holding tighter than Heidi ever held her back. The way Kim watched her glassily when they finished. Kim was at her desk now, shoulders hunched, the computer open but her focus on the window, waiting not for Lisa, but Heidi.

If only Kim’s Scituate was real. The resource room teacher with the futon in the closet, Kelly Stephanie, Rainbow Rainbow. Kim should’ve stayed in that world forever, where she was safe and popular and happy.

Nancy straightened up. “Be careful how close you get, all right?”

“Yeah.” Because hadn’t she always known, really? She’d been cruel. Just awful.

Nancy wiped her hands on her sweater. “Meet you inside?”

But when Nancy went in, Heidi crossed the yard and parking lot and headed down Mass Ave. She’d walk the two miles home. She’d give her father a fright no matter how softly she opened the door, but when he saw her, he’d
know she was upset. She wouldn’t be able to hide her red face, her busy teeth that had already chewed a cut in her lip. She’d lost Kim, all the adventures and books read together, back to back on Kim’s dusty floor. She’d curl in her bed with her quilted pig and muffle everything. She’d tell herself this was right, that Kim liked her too much, that she’d only get hurt, that Heidi had to leave. But in all the lonely years ahead, she’d never be sure if she was being cruel all over again.

As she walked down the street she looked as far as she could through the night, squinting so the snowflakes were just motion on the air.
ADMIT IT

A man in a mask and wearing a fat tank on his back is bent to the door of the parking garage. He is spraying and wiping, wiping and spraying. Another man with no mask and no hair shuffle-dances around him, gives a wave, crosses the street, tries to open the door to the hotel, which is locked and closed, darkened for good: Okay, now what? He turns and walks back toward the parking garage. The man with the tank doesn’t look up, he’s all about the door handle now, rubbing it again and again. The bald man is past waving anyway. He’s not happy. He looks down and away. Admit it, it’s always been just a little too hard to live. Here comes the doctor who works in the clinic downstairs. She wears a laminated name tag and carries a big bag. Maybe it has masks in it, maybe oxygen tanks. She limps as she walks. The bag is too heavy and she is in too much of a rush. It’s nearly 8 A.M. I bet her first patient comes in at 8. I bet he’ll have complaints, but try to put a good face on it all. There was a saint once, tenth century, who suggested we do nothing but look into our own hearts and say what we see there. I see fear, hope, despair, and need. Sometimes I’m older than anyone in the world and one foot is out the door, sometimes I’m a baby six months old and my mother is swinging me back and forth like a small sack of potatoes and I am laughing so hard I can hardly bear having been born.
Sunset in the valley,
which is still sometime away
from “official sunset,”
this inland of an earlier
nautical twilight;
but at the fastigium
of the dead central limb
of a York gum
at the southwest corner
of the red shed,
a red-capped parrot
highlights—or is highlighted
to my eye, but sure, not for me
specifically, its cynosure;
I’ve been hearing red-caps
but not seeing them, lately,
their sound
so particular,
even alluring,
an affirmation
of being collectively
alive and present

for all complexities
of “a sighting,”

and yet, there it was, it is,
offsetting crisis,

boiling over
into the cooler

approach of night
as if as if as if.
There’s a certain type of comedy in which the comedian will examine and even dismantle a joke in service of the truth. I don’t think it has once occurred to Roz Chast that truth can possibly exist outside of funniness. To her, the truth, even in its barbarism, is screamingly funny. And, of course, if something isn’t funny, it isn’t true.

One can divide comics artists into two categories: storytellers, who use drawings in service of their narratives, and illustrators, who take care with things like intricate, full-color cityscapes, and whose work is read with the part of the brain used for looking at paintings. Chast lands in the storyteller camp, because the story is what she cares about most. But she is a nonlinear and deeply visual thinker, equally likely to deploy line and color as a string of words.
to tell her stories. Her pictures are not illustrations of the things she’s saying but story itself. Chast’s cartoons—populated by disgruntled men; horrible storefronts; dumb, square-toothed horses; gourmandizing pigeons; bottom-of-the-barrel bourgeoisie in optimistic little hats—are, at their heart, about deeper things: loneliness, family, the impossibility of maintaining order, and the batshit, bonkers ridiculousness of life.

Chast once described William Steig as “not a minimalist”—an artist for whom every sofa, wall, and shirt was a blank canvas on which to explore pattern and color. Chast, who draws with Rapidograph pens and then adds watercolor, is the same way—she is a details person, as delighted by the gratuitous joke in the title of a book in the background of a cartoon as by the slam-dunk punch line in the caption.

Chast was born in 1954 in Flatbush, Brooklyn. An only child, she grew up with her mother—an intensely decisive assistant principal—and her father—a sweetly anxious French and Spanish teacher who couldn’t screw in a light bulb. She went away to college at sixteen, first to Kirkland College in upstate New York, and then to the Rhode Island School of Design, where she studied painting and was benignly ignored by her peers and professors. She came to Manhattan after college with a portfolio full of cartoons and no backup plan. I imagine her wading through a sea of older Jewish men, the career gag cartoonists, many of whom had cut their teeth writing for Charles Addams and now traveled the weekly cartoon circuit—The New Yorker, Playboy, there were others. I doubt these men knew what to make of young Roz and her drawings. Most cartoonists have specific-looking characters. Chast’s are defined, if anything, by their amorphousness. They are blob-faced, with bad posture and changeable features. Awkward, out of place, in the way. There is a 1997 video clip of a crowd of these men milling about, with a small, fearful shape making its way behind them, toward the exit. That was Chast, who has been faithful to The New Yorker ever since she sold her first cartoon there.

After her parents died, Chast published a graphic novel, Can’t We Talk about Something More Pleasant? (2014), about the awful experience of caring for them in their decline and about who they were, as parents and as people. Created in a startlingly intuitive mixture of handwritten blocks of text, comics, and cartoons, it catapulted Chast to a new level of acclaim, reaching the top of the New York Times best seller list and winning a National Book Critics Circle Award. It has been followed by three other graphic novels—Going into
Town (2017), a loving and funny book about what to do in New York City, and two books cowritten with Chast’s old friend and collaborator, the humor writer Patricia Marx.

I met Chast for this interview uptown, at her studio apartment, which she started renting when she won a Heinz Award and uses to escape Connecticut. Chast has the watchful air of someone who grew up surrounded by elderly New York Jews: like Max in Where the Wild Things Are. Manhattan is still her refuge. Her apartment is small and nicely spare, and contains some beautiful outsider art (why is it even called that?) involving birds, and a pair of slippers, like the room in Goodnight Moon. The first time we spoke, Chast was in the middle of a tour to promote You Can Only Yell at Me for One Thing at a Time (2020), a book of accurate marriage vignettes she’d written with Marx. The tour doubled as a musical junket for their extremely serious ukulele band, Ukular Meltdown. We had the first half of our conversation in person in the apartment, and the second half on the phone during the COVID-19 lockdown.

—Liana Finck

INTERVIEWER
What are some things that always make you laugh?

ROZ CHAST
Sometimes it’s dumb things, sometimes it’s a stupid, pratfall-type thing—like, some Buster Keaton comedy. Or sometimes it’ll be The Office, the original British series … Certain sitcoms, but not the scripted sort of laughs, the punch line thing—God, I hate that! I hate when I feel the construction of a joke. It makes me sad.

INTERVIEWER
Oh, interesting. Do you not like Seinfeld?

CHAST
Oh no, I like Seinfeld. It’s more like when you watch some sitcoms, and you can feel it—setup, setup, setup, punch line, setup, setup, setup, punch line. I
cannot bear it. And I don’t know why, but things that are very, very earnest—
immediately, I want to make jokes. I don’t know what it is.

INTERVIEWER
Do you want to make jokes because you’re angry and want to pinpoint the hy-
pocrisy of it all, or because you’re genuinely amused by things like earnest people?

CHAST
I think there’s probably … deep down, there’s anger, but usually it’s because
really earnest things make me laugh—and it’s like that song, “I am woman,
hear me roar,” and I think [high-pitched], I am woman, hear me squeak. It’s
very hard for me to be very serious. It makes me sort of embarrassed.

INTERVIEWER
Cartooning feels like the one of the least “hear me roar” of the arts. How, if at
all, is being a cartoonist different for a woman than for a man?

CHAST
I had to make up my own way of making cartoons. I knew that I didn’t want
to imitate male cartoonists—and they were almost all men at the time—
whether they were traditional cartoonists or underground cartoonists. I don’t
know whether this was because I am female, or whether that was just my per-
sonality. A friend of mine has a kid who is an artist. The mom is an artist, too.
Sometimes my friend would try to show her kid a more efficient, better way
of doing something, and her kid would say, No, I want to do it the child way.
I completely identify with that.

INTERVIEWER
How does empathy enter into your art?

CHAST
Maybe empathy is a way of acknowledging that whatever feelings you have,
other people are feeling those … they don’t necessarily feel the same way, at
all, but they have feelings. And maybe, if you’re a person who wants to be as
truthful as you can, empathy is also a way of trying to figure out how to say
something difficult without making somebody feel awful.
Being funny can be complicated. I don’t want to accidentally make somebody feel bad. On purpose, I might want to make somebody feel bad. But I wouldn’t want to do it accidentally.

INTERVIEWER

When you make cartoons, do you feel like you’re channeling a persona? Like a comedian’s persona—it’s them, but kind of exaggerated?

CHAST

I don’t know if it’s exaggerated, but it’s a little bit of a pretending. But it’s not a different person.

INTERVIEWER

Where did that voice come from in you? Did it come naturally, or did it take work?
I drew from the time I was a little kid, since before I could write. It’s always been a part of me. Putting together a cartoon always takes work, especially if it’s multipanel and there are different threads going on. But the part of me that suddenly finds the idea of omelet stations hilarious, I don’t know where that comes from.

INTERVIEWER
What do you think the relationship is between words and pictures?

CHAST
In my case, they are conjoined twins. They’re interconnected in a primary way. When I was at art school, and a painter, I missed the words, and when I write, I miss drawing.

I sometimes wonder—is it just that I’m so lazy that I haven’t become a better artist? You know, better at drawing cars, better at drawing this, at drawing that. But then I think about Sam Gross, who once told me that he had sold a cartoon about sheep, and so he looked up photos of sheep, but when he drew them from the photos to make them more realistic, they weren’t as funny. I don’t think a cartoon is just an illustration of a funny idea. The drawing style has to go along with the words, and be funny also. Like with George Booth’s drawings—they were really funny—his line is funny.

INTERVIEWER
I wonder whether what some people call “good art” is drawings of things as they are, rather than drawings of ideas. A realist painter will paint a person realistically. Whereas you draw the idea of a person. I’ve always felt way more connected to what you do than to what, say, Ingres does. Or a more florid cartoonist like Peter Arno, for that matter. I think your drawings are much more accurate, in the ways that matter in a cartoon. In other words, I think you are a very good artist. Is your refusal to follow “the rules” a form of honesty?

CHAST
I don’t know about “honesty.” I value ideas—which is a broad category, since it’s not just the joke, it’s the whole thing, the voice, the world it’s coming from, what the artist is drawing and why—more than craft-skill. Maybe that’s bad.
I’ve seen lots of work that’s beautifully drawn but I’m so bored. It’s like someone has performed a difficult trick and now I’m supposed to applaud. Cirque du Soleil art. Wow, it must have taken years to learn how to twirl that hoop with your foot while you’re hanging upside down fifty feet in the air!

INTERVIEWER
Do you consider yourself part of a tradition of nonrealistic, feeling-driven artists? My—not very educated—mind jumps to Modernist painters like Matisse and Picasso, or the emotional, cartoon-like people in Chinese scrolls or on Greek vases. Then there are the messy indie cartoonists, Lynda Barry, R. Crumb, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Diane Noomin. What’s your lineage? Do you have one?

CHAST
I don’t know. I think I’m part of the messy lineage, though. Feel free to insert a smiley-face emoji, please.

INTERVIEWER
What tends to interest you most when you’re drawing a person? Or a thing?

CHAST
I love to draw interiors. I love detail. Pattern, little objects, a bowl of sucking candies on a table, the clutter of life … And I love to draw people, but they always look sort of schlubby. I don’t know why this is.

INTERVIEWER
Something I have noticed and love so much about your drawings is that your faces don’t necessarily have a shape, and your people don’t necessarily have a shape—they’re neither skinny nor fat. Those decisions leave room for expression.

CHAST
I’ve tried many times to draw glamorous-looking people, and it’s impossible. I have put fashion drawings on a light box and traced them, and the people still come out looking schlubby! This interests me.
INTERVIEWER

Have you ever tried to follow “the rules”? In art school, did you try to be an artist?

CHAST

It was a very funny time in the art world... Minimalism, Conceptual art, Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, video art, this kind of serious stuff.

At RISD there was a group of boys that had started a cartoon magazine called Fred. I was the only girl drawing cartoons, as far as I knew, and I was so excited, and I submitted, and they rejected me. And then I cried—cried like
a baby because it was so hurtful. I knew deep down that making cartoons was all I really could do. And I had tried to show a couple of teachers my work, to no avail . . . I wasn’t happy at RISD, but I’m glad I went, because I think it made me so angry—not just the Fred thing, but the whole experience of art school. By the time I got out . . . actually, by my senior year, I didn’t really care what any of them thought. I fulfilled my requirements to graduate, and I painted, but I didn’t care about my paintings. I was starting to draw cartoons, but after Fred I didn’t show them to anybody.

INTERVIEWER

How about the rules of cartooning? As a New Yorker cartoonist did you ever try to do a quick gag?

CHAST

I have, yeah. I sold one or two gag kind of cartoons. But there’s some very stubborn part of me that wants to do things my way. Maybe it has to do with having grown up where I never got my way, or because of being female, or whatever. I don’t take it for granted that I’m going to get my way, or that what I think is of any use to anybody, or of any interest. Just give me this tiny postage-stamp-size area. And I’ve been incredibly lucky that I have gotten—knock on a million pieces of wood—the opportunity to at least explore that, and to find out where it goes, and what am I interested in, and what is funny. To not have to conform to all the ways that people say, This is what’s important . . . And now you’d better . . . You need to do it this way.

INTERVIEWER

The risk there is that the rules change.

CHAST

Suddenly, the thing that you have learned to do perfectly—Conceptual art, Minimalist art, Josef Albers’s color theory—is out of fashion, and then you’re totally fucked, and you’ve forgotten what you wanted to do in the first place. The only thing I want is to figure it out my way, and to figure it out myself. Because it’s not like I’m a brain surgeon, where somebody’s going to die if I make a mistake. If something goes really wrong while I’m drawing, I’ll throw it away.
INTERVIEWER
Do you make multiple finished drafts and choose the best one, or do you throw things out midway when you realize they’re not working?

CHAST
Midway. Midway, or even a quarter or a tenth of the way. I think, No, no, no, this is wrong.

INTERVIEWER
Where do you feel it? This is very Alexander Technique, but where do you feel it in your body, when something’s not working?

CHAST
This is going to sound really corny, but in my heart, in the middle of my chest. I feel like leaving the desk and never ever coming back to it.

INTERVIEWER
You’d been out of college for two years when you first submitted cartoons to *The New Yorker*?

CHAST
Less time than that. I graduated in May ’77. I took around this illustration portfolio, and it was terrible—the experience and the portfolio itself. I got a few illustration jobs, but not a lot. I was drawing cartoons for myself and by myself, but didn’t think I could sell them. They didn’t look like underground cartoons and they didn’t look like traditional cartoons. I was just compelled to do them. The illustrations were awful: a pastiche of styles that were popular at the time. What I thought would sell, because I knew I had to make a living. At some point, I couldn’t bear doing the illustrations anymore and started taking the cartoons around. To my great surprise, editors were more interested in the cartoons. I started doing cartoons for the *Village Voice*, and for *National Lampoon*, and then in April ’78 I dropped my stuff off at *The New Yorker*, never thinking they were going to take anything, because that was not how I thought this was going to go. I thought, if I was extremely lucky, I would maybe get a regular space at the *Voice*. And then *The New Yorker* bought something from me, which floored me. And Lee Lorenz, who was the
art editor—he did everything at that time, he did covers, he did spots, he did cartoons—told me to start coming back every week, and not just to drop off work, but to actually come in, in person, and that was very exciting.

INTERVIEWER
Did you keep submitting stuff at the *Voice* after that?

CHAST
I did. But then, at the end of that year, *The New Yorker* put me under contract. It was “first refusals,” so everything had to go through *The New Yorker* first.

INTERVIEWER
Did your work—and your life—change after you got the contract with *The New Yorker*?

CHAST
I didn’t consciously change my work, but I’m sure there’s an inevitability of influence. Especially back then, my stuff really stood out. Oh, you’re the person who does those drawings that don’t look like anyone else’s! I really hate/really like them! But my work didn’t change a ton. I have tried, my whole life, to stick to drawing what I think is funny or weird or interesting, or something that “reaches” me. There’s no other reason for me to do this. It’s certainly not the money or prestige. Haw haw.

INTERVIEWER
When you started at *The New Yorker*—and for a long time after—the cartoonists were predominantly male, and mostly older than you. What was it like being a young woman in that crowd, with a punky art school background?

CHAST
It was very strange. I felt a little like an alien, but I’ve always felt a little like an alien. I think there were many things that were weird about me for the old guys. Female, twenty-three years old, I did not draw like them and had no interest in drawing like them. I didn’t have a bone to pick with them or their work. In fact, I liked many of their cartoons and styles. I wanted to, needed
to, do it my own way. Mostly, they ignored me. But eventually, some of the younger ones—Jack Ziegler, Mick Stevens, Bob Mankoff—befriended me. I thought of them as older brothers. They were all about ten years older than me, and also tall!

INTERVIEWER
Let’s talk about your relationship with Lee Lorenz. What was it like?

CHAST
He had basically pulled me out of the slush pile, and it was so unexpected and life changing. I felt incredible gratitude and awe. And I was intimidated by him. We would come in individually and meet with him, and the minute I said anything I would turn it over in my head and think, I’m such a fucking idiot—why did I say that? I’ll never sell another cartoon, and he’ll probably tell me to get out. He was all of, whatever, forty-five, and he seemed old, old, old. And I was so shocked that they wanted me to be part of the staff, of the staff such as it is at The New Yorker.

INTERVIEWER
Did you go to the famous cartoonist lunches?

CHAST
I did, and we had wonderful afternoons, after the art meetings. We would go to these weird divey sorts of places in the West Forties. Irish pubs. And there’d always be these red-faced businessman types at the bar having their midday shots or whatever.

INTERVIEWER
Who was there?

CHAST
It was the group that Lee brought in, pretty much. It was Bob Mankoff, who succeeded Lee as the cartoon editor. It was Jack Ziegler. Liza Donnelly. Sometimes Victoria Roberts. Michael Maslin very rarely came in. Mick Stevens. Michael Crawford.

I really liked all these people. I was never, ever part of a group growing
up, either as a child or as a teenager. This was the closest I had ever come. And it wasn't too intense or too close. We just wanted to spend time with each other after going through a week of working on batches in isolation, and then going through the awfulness of finding out whether you'd sold anything the previous week or not. And someone would say something that was so incredibly funny. Not “Ha ha, that was funny,” but where you cannot breathe. Jack Ziegler and I once had a laughing fit about the word bolus, which is a lump of chewed food. We laughed until tears. He drew me a cartoon about it, which I still have.

We would smoke. I would go through a pack of cigarettes. We would have drinks. We would hang out all afternoon. We would go to these places probably because we never knew if we would be four people, or six, or eight, or whatever. And it was Wednesday, so it was matinee day and the nicer places were full. The worst was probably a place called Kenny’s Steak Pub, on like Forty-Fifth and Ninth or something. It was really grim. Linoleum on the floor. And they had a radio station playing in the background. You could tell it was a radio station because in between the songs, there were ads. It was really bad.

INTERVIEWER
Where were the older guys? Did they get lunch separately? When I went to the cartoonist lunches, it was always Mort, Sid, Sam, sometimes George.

CHAST
There used to be the Tuesday group, which was the older guys, and the Wednesday group, which was us. The youngs.

INTERVIEWER
Did you grow up reading The New Yorker?

CHAST
Yeah.

INTERVIEWER
What was your favorite part to read or look at?
CHAST
Cartoons. The cover. Later, Shouts & Murmurs and Talk of the Town, before it became more about current events or celebrities or semi-celebrities. Before the pieces were signed. Sometimes they were completely off the wall, stories about a weird conversation a person had with someone who lived in their building. I loved those.

INTERVIEWER
Did you always want to be a New Yorker cartoonist?

CHAST
No, no. And it wasn’t that I didn’t want to be a New Yorker cartoonist, it was more that they liked this kind of cartoon, and they liked a cartoon with a gag line, and they liked cartoons that look a certain way, like Dana Fradon or Bob Weber.

INTERVIEWER
You mean a slick line and shading with ink wash—less of a focus on being funny, more on depicting a kind of imaginary everyday life of some middle-class, white, straight, non-Jewish American, like a John Cheever story.

CHAST
The work was more illustrationy, more like they knew how to draw cartoons. That’s why I felt I could not be a New Yorker cartoonist, because I didn’t know how to draw like that. So, when I submitted, I was not nervous, because I was sure they weren’t going to take anything. I did it thinking, Well, they use cartoons, and so, why not?

INTERVIEWER
You met your husband, Bill, at a cartoon meeting, right?

CHAST
He brought in this group of funny postcards. I remember there was one with a bunch of clowns water-skiing. They were, like, in a pyramid. [laughs] I don’t know! It was just an odd thing. And it was funny. And then we went out to see Eraserhead, a midnight show.
INTERVIEWER
What was it like having young kids and also being a cartoonist?

CHAST
It was hard. When they started school it became a little bit easier. But I did a lot of cartoons about being a mom, and about having kids. For me it was another source of material in a way. I don’t know if that sounds very cold—probably.

INTERVIEWER
Not to me. I’m thinking of having kids, but only for that reason.

CHAST
They are funny. Kids say the darnedest things. And babies have big round heads. They’re just like bowling balls, big old bowling-ball heads, and you have to support the head or it’ll, like, snap off, and you’ll be walking around saying, What happened to that baby’s head? I guess it fell off.

INTERVIEWER
Did you find humor in being a new parent? Or did you force yourself to find humor because the alternative was too dreary and grinding? Sorry, I’m projecting my own fears onto you.

CHAST
That could be said about everything for me. That if I didn’t draw cartoons, everything after getting out of bed would be too dreary and grinding. “What T-shirt shall I wear today? . . . I’m so glad we still have Muenster cheese in the house . . . And so to bed!” Aaaagghhh. Not that I draw cartoons every day, because, a, I am lazy and avoidant, and, b, in these COVID days, the day goes by very fast and sometimes it’s dinnertime and I realize I have done nothing but check my email. But in general, making cartoons is a way of avoiding feelings of pointlessness and despair and still not being too upbeat.

INTERVIEWER
In what particular ways is it hardest to balance life and work as a cartoonist with kids?
The truth is, I’ve blanked out some of the earliest years with kids. Sometimes it felt like I was just putting one foot in front of the other. Get the kids through their week of school, get a group of cartoons—“the batch”—in.

Did you draw with your kids?

Yes. Not as much as I should have, probably. I had constant mother guilt. But yes. We always had plenty of art supplies around. If I wasn’t in the middle of a deadline panic, it was fun, because they come up with odd stuff. Sometimes I would interview them and ask them questions and write down the answers. “What do you think is inside the body?” “It’s like pipes.”

You moved from the city to the suburbs when your kids were young. Did your cartoons change a lot with the move?
I had different subject matter to write about. Learning how to drive, for one. I still draw about the strangeness of living outside of the city, even though I’ve been living in Connecticut for thirty years. Recently, I drew something about being in the backyard. Well, you’re in the yard—now what? I often feel that way.

You can dig a hole.

Yeah, I guess I could. I could dig a hole, or I could walk to the edge of the yard and then walk back. I mean, I don’t even know what to do back there.

Forage.

There are no berries in our yard.

There are worms, I bet, if you dig.

Yeah, I guess I could dig for worms.

I’m making you sad. I can see that you’re becoming sad.

I just don’t belong there. And it is sad, because I’ve lived in Connecticut three decades, and I still feel very out of place there. It’s not my habitat.

Your habitat is New York?
CHAST

Yes, yes. E. B. White had so many great things to say about New York in his book *Here Is New York*. And he talks about—not the gift of aloneness, but he actually uses the word *loneliness*—the gift of loneliness. And being in New York ... that brings me back to my childhood of being alone, and realizing that I am alone—but better. If I don’t feel at home on the Upper West Side, I will not be at home anywhere on earth.

INTERVIEWER

What do you like about New York, besides the loneliness?

CHAST

I like walking fast, and I like walking in the city. Probably, if there is actually such a thing as an endorphin, I feel endorphins from being in the city.

I like looking at people when I walk. I like going in and out of stores and looking at stuff. I like discovering things, and wondering about things. Like, on Columbus Avenue there’s this little shoe-repair store that’s this tiny little storefront that’s jammed between two big apartment houses, and I like the way it looks. It’s so interesting. You look down the street and you see two giant buildings. But between these two giant buildings is a six foot gap, and in that gap is this little one-story storefront and—

INTERVIEWER

Like a fairy tale.

CHAST

—it’s just so strange and so wonderful. And that’s why I like walking around in New York, because I see that, and then you can take the bus, or you can take the subway and have a weird conversation about Roman architecture or something with somebody. It’s really different from any other place I’ve been.

Like, once not long ago I was coming home on the subway, and I had this great conversation with this older guy, and we were talking about the subways when we were kids, and I thought, This is so funny, because I’ve felt this in the past few years—it happens rarely, maybe, almost never ... *camaraderie* is too strong a word, but when I see older people on the subway, we’ll look at each
“I’m finding things funny that other people are not finding funny, and I don’t really understand how I’m supposed to be.” Washington Square Park, New York City, 1966.

other, and it’s something that transcends color, it transcends gender. It’s kind of like, Oh good, you’re all still here, too. Or maybe I’m making it all up, it’s all in my head.

INTERVIEWER
You wrote a book about New York—it’s sort of like a guidebook.

CHAST
I wanted to write a book about New York, but also I didn’t want anybody to think, This is going to be a definitive guidebook, where there’s going to be tons of information. I did not want to do that, because there are a lot of books like that out there already, and people who do it much better.

INTERVIEWER
When did you start to love Manhattan?

CHAST
I’ve loved Manhattan since I was a kid. Back then the idea of living somewhere
not with my parents was too abstract, but as soon as I understood that at some
point, I would live away from my parents, I knew that was where I wanted to
live. Everything I liked was there, people on the street, museums, apartments,
diners, stores, the park if you needed nature but didn’t want to deal with bears
or hateful hiking trails where your alternatives are, a, walk on this trail or, b,
get lost and die.

INTERVIEWER
How is city humor different from suburb humor?

CHAST
There is no suburb humor.

INTERVIEWER
Can I ask you about how you work? Where do you work? When do you
work? How long does a cartoon take?

CHAST
I have a studio in my house in Connecticut. I find it hard to work in the city.
I mean, I write stuff down, but I find it hard to sit and work. So when I come
back to Connecticut, I will putter a lot. I putter, I procrastinate, I get my
coffee and I go upstairs and take out my ideas, and I look at my ideas, and
hopefully something gets me excited enough that I start sketching. But it’s
not always clear. Sometimes you can sort of see it right away, and other times
you have to do it like this, and then you try it like that, and then I try it with
panels, and then I try it with a single panel, and then maybe the title needs
to be changed, and there’s all these different iterations, and—I have to draw
it several different ways to figure out the best way to express what I thought
was funny.

INTERVIEWER
Do you have an idea and start drawing it immediately, or do you have an idea
and think, I’m going to come up with six ideas before I start drawing?

CHAST
Monday is the day when I draw, so sometimes if I have an idea I’m very
excited about, I’ll write it down, and then on Monday I’ll start with that one. Sometimes, if I’m excited about an idea, it’s almost, like, too excited. I have to calm down, because the drawing gets so fucked up . . . It’s ridiculous. But that’s better than not having an idea.

INTERVIEWER
You’ve told me that you keep ideas on scraps of paper in a box.

CHAST
Yeah. I have an idea box in my studio. It’s a shitty shoebox, and I think it says fedex slips on it. I mean, this will probably go in the idea box when I get home.

INTERVIEWER
You’re showing me a ukulele with legs and a face, and it’s very voluptuous, but not in the way one would expect.

CHAST
I’m not good at keeping a notebook. But I will keep the pieces of paper where I’ve had ideas and put them in the idea box.

INTERVIEWER
Do you clean out the idea box and take out bad ideas, or do you leave them all to stew?

CHAST
Periodically, the ones at the bottom I’ll toss, or I’ll look at them and say, No, no, no.

INTERVIEWER
Do you pencil before you ink?

CHAST
I do. But I pencil differently for roughs than I do for finishes. I’m still figuring everything out when I’m penciling a rough. There’s a ton of sketching and erasing and sketching and erasing. When I pencil a finish, most of that
thinking has been done. I try to get everything where I want it to go before I do the inking. Also, for the rough, I might not put in every last detail ... I’m thinking of the drawing in *The New Yorker* where the woman is sitting on the sofa in the hazmat suit, and there’s the TV in front of her, and there’s shelves and everything like that. I’ll rough in where the couch is, where she is, and then I’ll put the TV in approximately where it is so it doesn’t fall off the end of the page.

INTERVIEWER

How does color fit into your drawing?

CHAST

I love working with color. I like watercolors, I love watercolors, actually. I don’t really know how to use them. It’s that weird, stubborn part of me that doesn’t really want to learn technique.

INTERVIEWER

Watercolor feels completely out of control, and like some ... kind of like jazz or fast dancing. Some people can harness the out-of-controlness, but I can’t. Do you feel that way?

CHAST

I have to really push myself to accept things. I’m doing the sky, and there’s this watercolory blob thing going on. I had to learn to not just accept that, but to love it. Because my instinct is much more about control, and about coloring in. And, in many ways, for me, coloring is coloring in—it’s like being a kid. I really use watercolors the same way a kid would use a crayon. With watercolor, you’re never going to be completely in control, but I like that. I enjoy doing the color digitally when I draw on my iPad, but sometimes it feels a little too predictable and slick. Also you can keep endlessly refining things and get too caught up in minutiae. “I need to spend the next three hours making this chair exactly the right shade of green.” No, you do not.

INTERVIEWER

How is working on a book different from working on cartoons?
They’re similar to cartoons, but they’re also really different, because, cartoons, it’s like you get an idea, and then you draw up the idea, and then you’re done. And even doing a one- or two-page thing, I can sort of see the arc, and I can plot it out—I can hold it all in my head at one time. But with books, I don’t know where they’re going to go. They take a long time, and many, many wrong turns.

INTERVIEWER
When you’re working on a book, do you work in order?

CHAST
For me, it really is about having this idea of what I want to know. I have these ideas, but I don’t know how it’s going to all come together, and the only way to do that is to follow the thread, and sometimes the thread is going to go in one direction, and sometimes it’s going to go back and then it’s going to go forward again, and then sometimes it’s going to be in a terrible knot and I’ll want to run away from my desk, screaming—and I will. And then I come back, and I have to unpick the knot, and I’m still following the thread.

INTERVIEWER
Did you map out the book about your parents?

CHAST
No.

INTERVIEWER
It’s so tight. That was just life? That was a story that existed?

CHAST
I had an idea in my head of where it began. And where it ended. But then, when I was working on it, it changed. I mean, in my head, I felt like it began when my mother fell off the ladder. Which was my fault.

INTERVIEWER
No, it wasn’t.
I know it wasn’t. And yet a part of me feels like it was. And I knew where it ended, which was my parents’ ashes in my closet. But it turned out, even when I was working on the book, that that was not the beginning of the story. And then the ending, it wound up, even after the book came out, was not the ending. Because then there was an epilogue, which ran in The New Yorker. So now my parents’ ashes are in a niche in a cemetery. A Jewish cemetery.

But because the story sort of existed, I think there wasn’t a framework for it, in a certain way. Which is different from other books where you don’t really know. There’s not a story arc. It’s just, like, I want to write about this.

**INTERVIEWER**

Did you think of the book as a graphic novel, or did you tell the story how you felt it needed to be told, and the subject gave rise to the form?

**CHAST**

I don’t feel like it was a “classic” graphic novel. I told it in the way it needed to be told. A mix of writing, comics, single panels, photos, cartoons that had been submitted to and rejected by The New Yorker, and the more realistic pen sketches at the end. I’m not good at conceiving of things in advance and then following that decision to the end of the line.

**INTERVIEWER**

You’re writing a book about dreams—which sounds tricky, like catching a moonbeam in a jar.

**CHAST**

There are so many really serious, well-researched dream books, but that’s not what I want to do. It’s not that. It’s a book about what dreams mean to me, and why I’m interested in them, and why I’ve always been interested in them, I mean, since I was a kid. The mystery of them, I guess.

I’ve been listening to The Interpretation of Dreams, because I realized I couldn’t proceed without at least knowing a little bit about what Freud said about dreams, and not just reading a Wikipedia article about it. But it’s weird,
because I’m not an academic, and I’m not trained in psychiatry or psychology, so I feel like I need to put a disclaimer—“These are the opinions of not anybody who really knows anything about this.” After this I want to read Jung, because he had a whole different interpretation. And I have a couple of books that my son told me about that I loved, by a Jung scholar named Harry Wilmer.

INTERVIEWER

How do you revise your work?

CHAST

I read. I read it over. I read it. I read it over. Endlessly, endlessly, endlessly. And I make patches. That’s … If you saw the originals of any of the pages of my books, they have a lot of Wite-Out, a lot of patches.

INTERVIEWER

With editing, does a cartoon get more funny or get less?

CHAST

I think it gets better when you edit. I hope. I’m aiming for what I found compelling to write about, for that idea, to be as clear as possible. And if I want it to be funny, for it to be as funny as possible. And also to take as little time to communicate that idea and that humor as possible. With cartoons, there’s a lot of compression. I get pretty wordy. And I am afraid of being boring. So, I edit. I edit like crazy.

INTERVIEWER

But I don’t think of your stuff as sparse.

CHAST

No, it’s not. But it’s been edited a lot. I recently turned in a full-page thing—which they won’t take, I’m sure—it’s patch city.

INTERVIEWER

What if you need to revise something twice? Would you make two patches?
SLICE of LIFE

Oh, GROSS!! There's something quite disgusting in this refrigerator.

And, if I may ask, what is this bizarre item?

Oh, that's my homemade wheat asparagus paste, it has to ferment for two months.

Oh, it's loose-leaf notebook tea.

These things are also unknown to me.

BLECH!! Old, defrosted chicken!!

This fruit looks like bread too.

Is this from MARS, or what???
Scratching the Surface

Here's a picture of Little Mary Popovets.

That was before she married Bill Flanteck, back in '59.

They went to live in New York and haven't been heard from since.

This is her little sister, Frieda.

Oh! and here are her lovely parents.

Their favorite food:

JELLO-1-2-3!

Favorite color:

BLUE!

T.V. Show: My Favorite Martian.

Ending: No big letdown!
I have patches that are, sure, a patch on top of a patch. It’s really 3-D. If it’s ever so slightly not in the same focus, nobody will notice. The idea is always what matters most to me.

INTERVIEWER
Can we talk about left-handedness? What does it mean to you to be left-handed?

CHAST
[laughs] What does it mean to you to be left-handed?

INTERVIEWER
It feels kind of like an identity to me. And I notice that a lot of people I admire are also left-handed—like you. It often corresponds to a weird brain. But then again, many righties are weird as well.

CHAST
That’s true. I do think that there’s something that’s unusual and maybe a little bit off about being left-handed. I have a few friends who are left-handed and I feel that we have certain things in common that are maybe hard to put into words. A slightly different way of processing information or something.

I’ve always been a lefty, since I was a kid. And drew from before I could write, as most kids do, but I guess I just didn’t stop.

INTERVIEWER
Do you remember learning to write?

CHAST
Yes. I do. I remember learning to write letters.

INTERVIEWER
Did your parents teach you?
CHAST

No. My mother said that I taught myself how to read. She used to read to me when I was little, and she said that when I was around four, I asked her to point out the word that said *sometimes*. And she pointed it out, and I was like, Oh, okay.

I was young for my grade, because I was born in the end of November—so when I started first grade, I guess I was five. And that was when most kids were learning how to read. But I already could read. And Dick, Jane, and Sally—that was, like, absurd. And this may actually have made things worse for me, because, God knows, I did not need another thing that made me stand out from other kids. But I was bored silly. My mother had a conference with the teacher, and after that the teacher would let me sit in the back of the classroom with a pile of paper and crayons and I would draw while the rest of the class was learning how to read.
INTERVIEWER

Were you a good student?

CHAST

I wasn’t a great student, but I was afraid to not get good grades, my parents being teachers. So I managed to keep everything above ninety. But I hated school. I had a couple of teachers who were wonderful, but mostly it was boring, and I didn’t know how to listen. I probably would be diagnosed with something these days.

INTERVIEWER

What did you like to read when you were a kid?

CHAST

When I was very young I read a lot of Beverly Cleary, *Ramona the Pest*. And I loved, of course, *Harriet the Spy*. I loved the Eloise books.

Comics were forbidden. My parents, who were schoolteachers, thought they were garbage and would rot your mind. They bought me Classic Comics, which were abominable. So I read about Archie and Veronica and Betty at the apartment of a girl who lived in my building. I didn’t love them, but at least they were more interesting than Classic Comics which were dense and boring and visually unpleasant.

I’m trying to think of who I liked when I was around eleven or twelve … I think that was when I was reading a lot of *Mad* magazine and stuff. I think when I was around thirteen, I got very pretentious and I started reading a lot of poetry. Allen Ginsberg. I thought of myself as sort of beatnik-ish. I don’t know … Alienated stuff. And then when I was around fourteen, I discovered Zap Comix, and all that underground R. Crumb stuff. I was mesmerized by them, even though I knew it wasn’t my world—I was a little young, and there was something repulsive about them. They seemed to be done by and for guys who called having sex *balling*, a word that is … Ugh. Still, I liked the “let’s just make stuff up” aspect.

INTERVIEWER

Were you reading comics all along, or did you take a break after being a kid?
I read comics, I read lots of things. I liked stuff that was funny. I read *National Lampoon*—the comics in *National Lampoon*, the ones in the back. They had a whole section, I think it was called the Funny Pages, and they had tons of artists—Shary Flenniken, M. K. Brown. Do you know her stuff? She knocked me out. I adored her stuff, and still do. Ed Subitzky.

**INTERVIEWER**

What did you like about these comics? What about them did you learn from, as a cartoonist?

**CHAST**

I liked how idiosyncratic they were. There wasn’t just one style. People got to draw how they wanted to draw. And that the humor was not punch line, sitcom humor.

**INTERVIEWER**

And these were strip comics?

**CHAST**

Yeah, strip comics. Of course, Gahan Wilson did a whole strip cartoon for them called *Nuts*. It was sort of a takeoff of *Peanuts*, but it was wonderful, and it was all about being a child who was very fearful, very phobic, and I totally related to that.

Loved *Mad* magazine. I loved Don Martin. I loved the caricatures, although I knew it wasn’t something I was talented enough to do, or really that interested in. Mort Drucker, right? But they had all kinds of parodies that were great. They were the first magazine where I really saw American culture being made fun of. And it was weird. Maybe when I was in third grade I could watch stuff like *Bewitched* and love it, but as I got … eleven, twelve years old, I was already thinking, This is horrible and stupid.

I can remember being in seventh grade and by that point I know I’m not a regular kid here. I’m finding things funny that other people are not finding funny, and I don’t really understand how I’m supposed to be.
INTERVIEWER

Is that when you figured out that drawing was a good way to parody the world around you? Did the things you drew change at this point?

CHAST

Drawing was, and is, many things for me. Parody is a big part of it. Responding to things that I have no idea how otherwise to respond to. I’m no good at direct confrontation. I make a little note to myself—“Draw this up.”

INTERVIEWER

You’ve had various crafts practices over the years. Pysanka eggs, rugs, and lately, embroidery. You’ve shown them in galleries and had embroideries on the cover of *The New Yorker*—among the few nonillustrated covers *The New Yorker* has had. Do you think of these as a fine art practice?

CHAST

One good thing about going to RISD was that after four years of asking myself whether or not something was art, I didn’t seriously ever ask the question
again. I approach the crafts as if I were painting. Just using thread, wool, pysanka dyes instead of paint. Idea, drawing, color and composition. Same stuff. Also, one thing about embroidery, if you saw how much picking out of embroidery and reembroidery was involved—the tiny scissors, the seam ripper, the tweezers—you’d barf. And one other thing, I don’t care what the back looks like. Some crafters are proud of neat backs. The backs of mine look like madness.

INTERVIEWER
Do you think there’s a hierarchy in art—like with fine art as more serious than cartoons? If not, does it annoy you that many people feel that way?

CHAST
Cartoonists and craftspeople—we sit at the children’s table. Don’t get me started about a lot of what people call fine art. So much of it is horrible, horrible art school bullshit. “Komidou’s twenty- by eighty-foot canvas, with its multitudinous chromatic biomorphic forms, condenses the picture plane into a totality of architectonic textured cacophony. The sixteen basketballs that tentatively adhere to the surface are an ironic nod to . . . ” On and on. Fucking hate it. Endless pages of circle jerking.

INTERVIEWER
You told me you loved editing the 2016 Best American Comics, that you discovered new comics from editing it and it made you read differently.

CHAST
Yeah. I think I got way more curious about stuff. Until I did that book, I didn’t know the variety of comics and cartoons that were out there. I was living under a rock.

INTERVIEWER
When you like a comic . . . how do you know you like a comic?

CHAST
Me Tarzan. But seriously, when I want to keep reading it—that’s the main thing. When I did that collection, it was interesting once I had all the pieces
sorted, because I felt they were very varied stylistically, and some of them were funny, some were quite serious, almost somber. There were black-and-white ones, there were color ones, there were ones that were very meticulously drawn, there were ones that were more loopy or casual. But there was something in all of them that kept me reading. I think they all felt sort of personal—not necessarily autobiographical, but I didn’t feel like the person was showing me how well they had mastered a certain genre. I felt like they were things that the person who created them really wanted to say, and really wanted to draw, and wanted to keep reading.

INTERVIEWER
You’ve collaborated on several books with Patty Marx, and you’re in a band with her. What’s the collaboration like?

CHAST
It is a lot of fun. My relationship with Patty goes back several decades. We actually first met through work, where we didn’t really know each other, but we were both starting our careers. She did a humor piece for *The Atlantic Monthly* and they asked me to illustrate it. Her mother said to her: I liked your piece, but I really liked the illustration, and you should call that girl up. So Patty called me up. It’s the only time that has ever happened—that somebody I’ve done a piece for has called me up and said that they liked it.

The other thing about collaborating with Patty that I really like is that it’s not like she hands me a manuscript that’s done, and then I do the drawings. There’s a lot of overlap. It’s a little bit Venn diagram–y, there’s an area in the middle where she can give me suggestions for drawings and I can give her suggestions for ideas. This ukulele thing is another kind of collaboration, which is really fun. She’s so funny, and she’s great at lyrics, and I can figure out the chords, and ... Basically, it started because we wanted to make each other laugh. And, so, I think we’re continuing to do that, just trying to have fun—and it’s not serious, it’s ... Patty has quoted a doctor, saying, It’s like a vaccination—it’ll be over in a second.

INTERVIEWER
Speaking of seconds—we have a very uncertain profession. We’ll be on top of the world one month, and then the next month afraid we’ll never sell a
cartoon again. Does that affect how funny you are able to be? And how do you work through that?

CHAST
I have tried different tactics. The only constant is that when I sell a cartoon, I feel great. When I don’t sell a cartoon, I feel like shit.

INTERVIEWER
For readers unfamiliar with *The New Yorker*’s process, each week cartoonists submit a batch of sketches—the usual number is ten. The comics editor, now Emma Allen, and what they call the A-issue editor choose a few from each batch, then, later in the week, the magazine’s editor in chief, now David Remnick, will look and they’ll choose maybe twenty cartoons in total. Then fact-checkers make sure the chosen cartoons aren’t too close to anything that’s already been published. Cartoonists are notified on Friday if one of their cartoons has made it through this gauntlet.

Do you have a number of cartoons that you make yourself make each week?

CHAST
Yes.

INTERVIEWER
Do you want to publicize it?

CHAST
Sure. It has to be at least six. It might be eight on occasion. I mean, I might submit eight, but I can get six cartoons that I can submit. I mean, I will generate more than that. But six doesn’t seem too low. And too *many*, that worries me on the … Because then I think, there’s so many people submitting cartoons, why would I want to burden them with more than … I don’t think it has anything to do with anything. Because, as you said, our profession is, as Lynda Barry once said, “very rickety,” which I think is a perfect word for it. So we make up all of these kind of … the lucky number.

And sometimes, you can also get to this point where it’s like, well, I’m not going to sell anyway, so I’ll do what I want to do. Like recently, I wound
up taking a screenshot of this funny list of searches about inflatable hot tubs. I mean the whole idea of an inflatable hot tub just cracked me up. Where do you put it? Do I put it in my apartment? A kid’s wading pool is already risky enough. But I could see having, like, a tiled . . .

**INTERVIEWER**

It’s like hot water . . . [both laugh]

**CHAST**

Right, and it’s *boiling away!* And you have it in your apartment? And the wiring! I’ve already had enough paranoia with a regular tub falling through the floor, that, I don’t know . . . It cracks me up, the idea that anybody would get this. And the pictures, even, with this inflatable hot tub. Plus, plus, there’s a giant electrical motor sort of perched on the side next to all this water. And then there’s these four people inside of it. I’m like, This is nuts! This is the most insane thing I ever saw.

So, who knows if they’ll take it or not. I hope they do. But that’s an accidental thing—I was not googling inflatable hot tubs. It just popped up, and then it happened to make me laugh. And I followed that thread. And that is my favorite thing. When something accidentally happens. It’s very hard for me to set it up so the funny thing pops into my path. But if something does pop into my path, I’m very happy I can say, Okay, that’s what I’m going to do. That’s the cartoon.
Elena, his sister, was going to stay with him all August. Maybe it would bleed into September a little, she warned, and Andrés said that was fine. What else could he say? The house in Almería was as much hers as it was his, on paper—they’d inherited it from their father twenty years earlier. Andrés and Elena were French (they grew up in Paris), but their parents had been Spanish, Spanish exiles. When it had become possible for their father to go back to Spain, he’d bought a house in his hometown, a few blocks from the sea, and Elena had taken up the habit of visiting for a week every summer, with her husband and her daughter. Andrés would come as well, stay longer. After their father’s death, Elena had kept treating the house as a vacation home, but then she divorced, and her daughter grew up, and what the daughter, Sofía, didn’t tell Elena was that she found it sad now, coming to Almería to “explore her Spanish
roots” without her grandfather around. After she graduated high school, no one went to Almería for a while. Andrés often daydreamed about retiring there, but one evening, after a tedious parent-teacher conference (he taught high school Spanish), he had an epiphany, as he called it (Elena, when Andrés wasn’t around, called it a breakdown), and decided not to wait, to quit his job right there and then and move to this sunny place where a house was paid for, where he could live on his savings for a while.

Moving from Paris to the south of Spain in the middle of the school year, he felt like he’d won the lottery. Off-season was for the rich, wasn’t it? Except he hadn’t won the lottery. His savings ran out after two years and he now worked remotely for a French publisher, cranking out schoolbooks and conversation manuals for French people traveling the Spanish-speaking world. Every two years, he had to update his manuals, come up with new dialogues, keep them fresh. This was more work than people imagined, and more creative, too: he had to come up with situations, with characters. Well, he didn't have to come up with characters exactly, but he wanted to, and so he did. People, even his editor, didn’t notice their existence, they weren’t named, but Andrés knew who they were: the horny exchange student, the overachieving dad who wanted to make the most of his only week off and ruined the vacation for the whole family, the gregarious pilgrim on his way to Santiago. There were specifics, and an order to respect—you couldn’t get around the “Where Are You From?” section, for instance, the “Book a Hotel Room” or the “Car Accident” bits (even though he couldn't imagine anyone taking out their conversational Spanish book in such situations), the essential “At the Bar” (a dialogue in which the horny student shone bright)—but within these compulsory sections, provided he included a few mandatory vocabulary words, Andrés had some freedom. He could give his characters a voice. Or that’s what he told himself, at least.

He had to complete his least favorite section that week, “Flirting.” You had to have a “Flirting” section in conversation guides. To fuck abroad was one of the main reasons people traveled. Andrés always felt a little uneasy when he reached that point in the process: he, the overeducated Baltasar Gracián scholar, putting himself in the shoes of a twentysomething French idiot trying to get laid in San Sebastián. He'd tried to turn it around every possible way, to have a woman character initiate the flirtation, to have it happen in a museum. He’d tried to make it a lesbian thing, tried to make it a
thing between older intellectuals, but that was even worse. And his editor
had said no. He wanted a douchebag and a pretty girl to resist that douche-
bag. “But if she resists the douchebag,” Andrés had said, “we’re admitting
that our vocabulary and compliment suggestions are insufficient.” “Well of
course they are,” his editor had said. “You’re not rewriting The Game here.
Just a pedagogical tool to learn a little Spanish.” Andrés hadn’t gotten the
Hadh’t flirted in years. Last dated in the eighties. Would’ve taken holy or-
ders if he’d believed in the thing. The monastic lifestyle had always appealed
to him, was indeed very close to his own—small meals, a lot of contemplat-
ing, a lot of silence. Andrés did like women, but he’d decided it was easier
to do without them. One had broken his heart long ago, and hadn’t even
noticed, didn’t know it to this day (she was still Elena’s best friend). The way
Andrés saw it was, he’d tried love and it hadn’t worked out. He’d tried sex
without love, too: not for him. So he just lived his life without either. Writ-
ing from the contemporary French douchebag perspective was a personal
challenge.

Some mandatory words or concepts for the flirting section were: flirt, love at first sight, clingy, hot, condom.

Elena knocked as Andrés was considering deleting the sentence
“How are you doing?” He deleted it.

“Still haven’t fixed the doorbell,” Elena said.

Elena and Andrés never said hello or exchanged pleasantries. They hadn’t
seen each other in months, but they emailed often.

“When I win the lottery, I’ll fix the whole house,” Andrés said.

Elena left her suitcase near the door and helped herself to a beer.

“Speaking of which,” Andrés said, “I should go get my EuroMillions
ticket before Rafa closes. Should I get you one? The jackpot’s at eighty-seven
million euros.”

“I’m good,” Elena said.

“You don’t want eighty-seven million euros.”

“I can’t play that stuff,” Elena said. “The chances of me winning are about
the same as my plane had of crashing today, and I prayed it wouldn’t. Seems a
bit hypocritical to ask for the same numbers to rearrange themselves and act
in my favor now.”
“You prayed?”
“You know what I mean.”

Andrés wanted her to try the lottery, up their chances of becoming rich. He believed in beginner’s luck, that Elena had a better chance of winning than he did. She would share the money with him if she won. He knew that. She might even give him most of it.

“Maybe you should buy a hundred tickets, then,” he told her. “You’ll never be on a hundred planes at once, so that wouldn’t be tempting fate.”

Elena didn’t say anything, and Andrés took it to mean that she was considering the idea, but she was just exhausted from the plane and the Xanax. Half her beer was gone already. She was half gone herself.

“Well, I’m going,” Andrés said. “Only ten minutes before they draw. Sure you don’t want me to buy you a ticket? Turn that two-euro coin into eighty-seven million?”

The two-euro coin in question was the Greek one, Europa abducted by Zeus.

“Think of your offspring,” he insisted. “Think of Sofi.”

“She’s doing just fine without me,” Elena said.

**Andrés played the European lottery** every Tuesday and Friday, and the charity lottery to benefit the visually impaired on Mondays and Wednesdays. He played the national Christmas lottery every Christmas, too, but that didn’t mean much: everyone in Spain, even the king, played the Christmas lottery. Most every Spaniard, too, could be guilted into buying a ticket from a tired blind man once in a while—they were all around, these blind men, hamming it up by wearing socks that didn’t match, bumping into your café table while they tried to sell you your lucky number, or stationary behind their street kiosks, their long faces not easy to ignore when you were having a good day. But the European lottery, that was Andrés’s little guilty pleasure. The Spanish were a little dubious of it, because the lottery, in their country, was a communal thing—you played as a group, you won as a group. That was what made the Christmas lottery so popular. If you won, it meant your friends won as well. Andrés, however Spanish, had been raised in France. Was closer to the Northern European every-man-for-himself sensibility. A sensibility that had, apparently, begun to spread: every week, more and more Spanish people played the EuroMillions.
He wasn't the only player around with a last-minute fetish, either. Six men stood in line before him, two-euro coins in hand, glancing at the clock above Rafa's register. Four minutes to nine. At nine, they drew. If you managed to convince yourself and people around you that playing had been an afterthought, something you almost forgot to do, then you upped your chances of winning, these men felt. Because it made for a better story. And luck seemed to have a thing for good stories, to leave alone the guy who'd played the same numbers for the past thirty years. Real players let the machine pick their numbers. They didn't waste any time, and the line to Rafa moved like an escalator, quick and steady.

Andrés didn't like Rafa much. Rafa always made fun of him for not giving up—Andrés had absolutely never won anything, not even the two euros that chance routinely threw back your way after a certain number of losses, to keep the hope alive and fund your next ticket. Also, Rafa was an Argentine, and Argentines always thought they were better than you. Rafa didn't play and didn't smoke, just sold lottery tickets, scratch games, and cigarettes to addicts for whom he had contempt. Really, he was an artist, he'd tell you. At night, he wrote songs. Andrés had tried to show interest in the songs, to befriend Rafa, but Rafa had told him that at this stage, he only wished to share his work with professionals. He was concerned people might steal his melodies. He said it had happened before, someone stealing a song of his, making millions off of it. He wouldn't say who, or what song. He was wary of professionals, too, but if he didn't show his work to them, then he would never get the fame he deserved, so he had to take a chance there. One had to take risks. Andrés thought about that joke whenever Rafa talked about himself, the one where the kid asks, “Daddy, daddy, what is the ego?” and the father answers, “The ego is the little Argentine we all have inside our hearts.” He'd tried to sell his editor on the idea of inserting a note, in the cultural pages of their conversation guides, on the complex web of hatreds within the Spanish-speaking world (Uruguayans hated everyone, everyone hated the Argentines, Argentines hated Peruvians, Mexicans hated the Spanish, the Spanish hated the Portuguese—and yes, sure, the Portuguese didn't speak Spanish, but the animosity was still worth mentioning to travelers of the Iberian Peninsula), but his editor had said no, to stick to soccer and flamenco and Antonio Banderas. He'd okayed a sidebar on the Spanish Christmas lottery, though, because the Spanish Christmas lottery was such a beautiful idea.
Andrés was the last to buy a ticket that night (making his chances to win even greater, he thought). Rafa took his two euros and made a comment on how they would go straight to thickening the next jackpot.

**What will I do** with €87 million? Andrés asked himself on his way home. The question was philosophical. He wasn’t interested in drawing up a list of products and experiences (and perhaps emotions) that money could buy. He wondered what actions and obligations this kind of cash could buy him *out of*. What will I be able to *not* do with €87 million? is the real question, he thought. He would still be required to shower and eat, no way around that. He wouldn’t hire a cook, no. He liked cooking, just not eating. You couldn’t hire someone to eat for you. Would he hire a cleaning lady? He doubted it. He cherished his solitude, didn’t like having people around. People came with their little habits and their ways of doing things. Elena was going to do the dishes a certain way, for instance, he knew this already, he knew it would bother him. Letting the glasses dry next to the sink, open mouths up… who did that? He wouldn’t hire anyone to do anything.

He waved at different neighbors on his way back, people he didn’t really know but heard all about from the baker. Mauricio, Teresa, Antonio … he knew who was having money trouble, whose children hit whose at school, whose wife had left him, and for whom. It was all a bit boring, but he kept track. Those were the people he played the Christmas lottery with, his neighbors. Would he still write conversation manuals? With all that money? Probably not. But then who would he talk to? Other than his sister and his editor, he didn’t really talk to anybody. He wrote emails to his niece once in a while, but she rarely wrote back whole sentences. Would he travel the world? He didn’t think so. He realized people would wonder what was wrong with him, if he suddenly had all this money and his life didn’t change. Maybe he would just not tell. Not telling anyone was the key. All he really needed to do was hire a team to rehab the house, and that would be what, 50K, tops? People could believe he paid for it with his earnings from conversation manuals. No one knew how much authors made. Elena knew, because she’d lent him money the past few years, but if he won the lottery, he would tell her.

The house was getting old. New cracks had appeared in the walls since Elena’s last visit. Andrés expected to find her staring at them in silence, and the chipped paint, the swollen wood floor from Easter’s water leak, the broken...
tiles. She never said a word about the collapse, only commented on the doorbell. The broken doorbell was code for everything else that had fallen apart.

When he came home, he found she’d retired upstairs, to the less decrepit of the two guest rooms. Andrés went to check on her, see if she wanted some dinner, but the door was shut, no light filtered out from under. He could hear the fan: a sucking more than a blowing sound. She was out for the night.

He worked on the “Flirting” section some more. If he could write the whole dialogue without thinking about the lottery results, if he could come up with all the lines without checking the EuroMillions website, he would increase his chances of winning, he thought.

“Is your father an astronaut?”

Did that pickup line even still exist?

The internet confirmed that it did. It also offered a link to 120 other “funny” pickup lines. Nothing wrong with clicking, Andrés thought, nothing wrong with looking for inspiration there.

None of the lines were funny, of course. They couldn’t be. Maybe, if we knew more about the speaker, the context, maybe if we were given a scene in which a geeky youth goes out for the very first time in his life, and he happens to have an obsession with magnetic fields and iron alloys, then perhaps the lines “Did you swallow magnets? Because you’re very attractive!” wouldn’t be so terrible. Perhaps there was a way not to cringe at “If beauty were time, you’d be eternity.” Perhaps. But a blunt list of such lines didn’t amount to comedy. Andrés imagined a lonely man looking at those lines in earnest, memorizing his favorites, trying to learn something about women. How far removed from reality some people could be, he thought, going down the list. Seeing the bad lines accumulate, Andrés started worrying for the women receiving them.

“My parents always told me to follow my dreams. Can I follow you home?”

Who wanted to hear that?

He emailed his niece. Had she ever heard a decent pickup line in her life? he asked. He also wanted to ask if she’d gotten more creepy lines than corny ones, on average, over the years, but then he would have had to think about that, so he didn’t. Certain things he didn’t need to know. Sofi answered immediately. She was in a bar right now, in fact, not having a great time. But it so happened that someone had just walked over to tell her that she looked like Lionel Messi, and it wasn’t exactly a great line, she said, but at least it was one
that she’d never heard before. Andrés tried to work with the Messi line, but he realized, like his niece had a few minutes earlier, that there was nothing to do with it, nothing a woman could say in response, and no good follow-up for the guy, either. That pickup line had been dead on arrival. He checked the EuroMillions website. He hadn’t won.

HE WENT DOWNSTAIRS and cooked some rice. He was careful not to make too much noise. The house was full of echoes, any of which could wake up Elena. After dinner, while he did the dishes, he reminded himself not to sing. He wasn’t really in the mood to anyway. By the time he finished cleaning up, he was sweating heavily. Under normal circumstances, he would’ve done the dishes shirtless, but with a visitor in the house, he favored modesty over comfort. Also, Elena’d seen him shirtless many years before and told him to take care of a mole on his back that he had yet to attend to. It had grown bigger. Another one had sprouted next to it. He stepped outside, onto the sidewalk, to see if the air was any lighter. Purita spotted him from across the square. Purita waitressed at Casa Juan and always waved at neighbors from over her trayful of drinks. That evening, however, she brought the drinks to those who’d ordered them and walked all the way to Andrés, ran to him, almost, her empty tray dangling at her side like a hoop.

“Did you win?” she asked Andrés before she even reached him. “Is it you?”

“EuroMillions?”

“Shit, it wasn’t you? The TV says the winning ticket was printed at Rafa’s!”

“The whole eighty-seven million?”

Purita tucked her tray in her armpit to light a cigarette. Andrés understood she didn’t believe he wasn’t the winner, which made the situation even worse. He wouldn’t have told her if he’d won, but still.

He had the losing ticket in his shirt pocket and showed it to her. Purita, who’d committed the winning numbers to memory, sighed enough smoke to hide the entirety of her face.

“We all hoped it was you,” she said, her nose reappearing first through the cloud. “You play so much. God, I hope it’s not one of those Erasmus assholes.”

Every waiter and bartender in Almería despised the Erasmus students. It wasn’t clear to Andrés what their crime was, other than having a good time studying abroad and drinking too much. They couldn’t possibly be louder than the local youth, nor worse tippers.
“That would be terrible,” he said.

“If an Erasmus guy won, I’ll kill myself,” Purita said, exhaling more smoke.

She glanced at the bar. Rafa was entertaining a table of regulars, making big hand gestures, miming, it seemed, strong waves followed by giant explosions.

“Doesn’t Rafa know who won?” Andrés said.

“He says if he knew what time the ticket was printed, he could tell us, but the TV didn’t say. We’re taking bets over there, if you want to join.”

“You’re betting money on who won money?”

She nodded. He followed her back to the bar.

“Wasn’t him,” Purita told the group.

“Of course it wasn’t,” Rafa said.

Andrés asked Purita for a beer and sat at Rafa’s table.

“They’re going to come film my shop tomorrow,” Rafa said. “For the news.”

“I heard it’s the first time a Spaniard wins so much money,” Jaime, the baker, said.

“Even if it wasn’t,” his wife said, “they would still come and film Rafa’s shop. They always film the shop. And the winner. There’s a guy whose job is to go all around the country and film lottery winners.”

“Must be one bitter man.”

Andrés regretted saying this. His beer came.

“Your sister is visiting?” Jaime asked him. He was pointing his chin at Andrés’s house, where a light had gone on.

“She arrived today, yes. Staying all August.”

“Good for her.” Jaime was a bit drunk already. “Everyone should come to Almería. All the worries: gone.”

“Everyone?” his wife said.

“You’re welcome to host her if you want”—another thing Andrés said and regretted saying.

“Don’t start speaking ill of your sister,” Jaime said. “Maybe she won the lottery.”

“She doesn’t play games of chance.”

“She played a scratch game last year,” Rafa said. “I remember, she won six euros. I told her she was lucky, not like her brother.”

Purita came with little plates of octopus and Russian salad. Rafa stared at her cleavage as she bent down to place them in front of Jaime.

“Something you want to say to me, Rafa?”
“No, no, I was just thinking,” he lied, “whichever the winner is, he should share with me. Not fifty-fifty, but give me some, maybe a million or two. I’m the one who prints the tickets, after all, I’m the one who presses the buttons. If I wait one more second, another random set of numbers comes out.”

“Is that so?” Purita asked.
The lights had gone off again in Elena’s room.

“Whoever it is, he should give you a million because his winning probably sank your business,” Jaime said. “Who’s going to play there now? The jackpot fell there once already.”

“People are dumber than you think. The win will only bring more customers. I’m ready to bet on it.”

“Whoever it is,” Purita said, “I probably had to call his sorry ass a taxi at some point, or cover for him one way or another, with his wife or mistress or whatever, so he owes me.”

“And he owes every loser who played at Rafa’s, for playing a bad combination of numbers when they did and getting the machine to line up the winning numbers when it did.”

“Yeah, right, he owes us all . . . You guys are reinventing the Christmas lottery here,” Jaime’s wife said. “This one is for selfish assholes—no offense, Andrés. He won’t share his millions with the neighborhood.”

Andrés hadn’t said anything since his jab at Elena. He’d been observing Rafa observing Purita, waiting for him to say something inappropriate to her, or corny, or creepy, or—who knows—beautiful. But Rafa never built up the nerve. Just glanced at Purita’s ass and tits whenever he believed she wouldn’t notice. Andrés thought about his niece now, in some hipster bar in Paris, being told she looked like Lionel Messi. That was not what he’d hoped for her. He remembered the day she was born, thirty-five years earlier. A wonderful day. Everyone still alive then, his mother, his father, and then this new person coming along, yes, a person already—he hadn’t expected to feel that way about an eight-hour-old baby. It wasn’t so much that she’d had toes, a little hat, fingers that clasped around his, it was how she’d winced at a light being turned on next to her face, how offended she’d looked, This is unacceptable—how quickly she’d turned against her surroundings. He’d laughed about it with Elena’s husband, and his father, while his mother and Elena—still in her hospital bed—whispered things to each other a few feet away. Serious things, Andrés assumed. The women always talking about important matters in low
voices at one end of the room, the men at the other, giggling, protected. It was too much, of course. You couldn’t just add new people and expect the old ones to stick around. Andrés and Elena’s mother had died six weeks later.

**WHEN ANDRÉS WOKE UP** the next day, Elena was gone. Downtown to buy rosquillas, he thought. Andrés wanted to pretend she was disturbing his solitude, but really, Elena was a trained loner herself, and her routine didn’t impinge much on his. She’d even left her coffee cup and spoon in the sink, for him to clean the way he wanted.

Andrés had dreamed of strangers that night, of people he’d never met. Not neighbors, not movie stars: random nobodies. This was happening more and more. He’d been amused by it at first, taken it to be a symptom of his unleashed creativity, but it worried him now. What did it mean when you didn’t know the people in your dreams? Were they men and women he’d seen on the street without having noticed but whose lives his brain, in its dark little shed, had drawn hypotheses about? Was it a brain tumor? Was he having someone else’s dreams? Had the wires gotten crossed? Was he just too lonely?

He took his coffee upstairs. An email from Sofi was waiting for him. She’d actually sent it minutes after the one about the Messi pickup line.

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i realize mom is staying with you these days & that's prob why
you're askin about me. if she's trying to spy on me thru you, please
don't play ibto her game. she needs to learn boundaries.
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Andrés didn’t make much of the message. He was aware of constant storms brewing around him—that’s what family was—but he usually managed to stand clear of these, to not ask for, or encourage, the sharing of details. To not take sides, if it came to that. Most of the time, the storms would pass in the distance, and Andrés would only realize they’d dissipated after not hearing the rumble for a while. He was still occasionally curious to know how certain issues had resolved, but the downside of not participating in a crisis was that you didn’t get to ask questions about the outcome. He’d spent a year, years ago, answering Elena’s complaints about her then husband with old proverbs and Gracián quotes concerning lying and dissimulation. Not a word against the husband, not directly. Once the divorce had been pronounced, he couldn’t reasonably have started asking about the petty things, like who’d kept the painting he loved so much, the small one they’d had in the hallway,
with the midget and the elephant. He still wondered about it, though. He hadn’t seen it in Elena’s new apartment, the few times he’d visited.

He’d heard about his niece’s affair with a married man, but never followed along on Elena’s dives into the psychology, the drama of it all. When she’d told him about Sofi’s trip to Madrid to freeze her eggs, all he’d said was, “Science fiction.”

He wrote a few bad lines about dreams, some idiot in a bar telling a girl he’d never met before that he’d dreamed about her last night. The Spanish didn’t say “I dreamed about you,” though. It was “I dreamed with you,” which Andrés suddenly found a little menacing. The “with” seeming to imply that the woman being dreamed of had willingly participated in the fantasy.

He heard the scrape of the front door against the tile then, Elena coming home. He typed more, and more furiously, when Elena was around, to give the impression that he was working hard, in case she walked into his office. He had no idea what to type, however, so he imagined a conversation between two boring people about the lottery. Faced with the dullness of the resulting dialogue, Andrés typed: “I can’t believe I’m writing such shit. I can’t believe what happened to me,” then jumped to third person, to escape the house of mirrors of the first, the jump happening without him thinking about it, in an instant—he was still giving the impression, if anyone had been watching, that he was writing in great inspiration. He typed the first few lines of this story.

Elena, his sister, was going to stay with him all August. Maybe it would bleed into September a little, she warned, and Andrés said it was fine. What else could he say?

But then quickly, what he wrote started diverging from what we’ve seen, and Andrés went into a different story, exactly as true as this one, but from longer ago.

Why did he resent her presence so much? His sister had always been on his side.

Their parents had told them not to speak Spanish at school, that their last name, with all its o’s and a’s, was already enough to get them bullied by all these French kids with the silent letters in theirs, the Henriot, the Durand, the Chaussoix, and Pineault (e+a+u+l+t equating here, as far as he could tell, to the final,
single, vulgar o in their own name). Andrés had had to become André for school, drop a letter, while Elena had moved up the ladder and gained a silent one, plus accents, to become Hélène.

In the sixties, they left your last names alone but still Frenchified your first. Hélène et André. They were two different people out there, at school, and young Andrés had blamed the silent b for the rift in his and his sister’s relationship, though the truth was, they hadn’t been close before the b, either. Elena, four years older, was already used to her b by the time Andrés started school. She had no problem sliding into Hélène in the mornings, whereas Andrés/André played marbles alone at recess, far away from the others. When they came for his bag of marbles one day, the French boys, he was going to let them have it, but Elena, who from a distance always kept an eye on her brother during recess, came over and started talking to him in Spanish.

“Hit one,” she said, pointing at the group of French boys who’d come for the marbles.

Andrés reminded Elena that they weren’t allowed to speak Spanish at school. He did so in Spanish, of course (he wasn’t stupid enough to publicly undermine the only person to ever be on his side), but he whispered it.

“Hit one,” Elena repeated.

“Which one?”

“The one with the ears.”

“He’s too big.”

“They’re all too big for you, it doesn’t matter.”

He hadn’t hit anyone, but the boys with the silent letters in their names hadn’t hit him either, had gone quiet, fascinated by the sounds of Spanish. Later, they’d asked him to teach them some words, thinking it could become a secret code between them. Andrés had refused. He’d said it was a secret code between him and his sister, but the truth was, he’d never said anything secret to her.

He kept writing and writing, disjointed episodes from his childhood, quotes he remembered from Gracián, but mostly, he wrote about Elena, because that’s who he was performing inspiration for. He wrote things like:
She traveled with a small suitcase, at least. He appreciated that.
You always thought maybe she wouldn’t stay as long as she’d said.

and

Even his sister, more diligent, not as good in school as he’d been,
had achieved more than him, had had a better life.

Occasionally, he got carried away and used the first person again, but mostly, he stuck to the third. He described a few of the objects lying around, a ceramic pencil holder from Nijar, his father’s ashtray, in which no one had ashed since he’d died, but which was still there, still waiting. That got him sentimental, the ashtray. He could picture his father carrying it to the garbage can when it was overflowing. The truth of it was that sometimes, at fifty-nine years old, Andrés still missed his mommy and daddy, gone thirty-five and twenty-one years ago, and he was both grateful for it, for not having gotten over their deaths, and a bit ashamed. He believed that maybe, if he’d had children, this wouldn’t have happened, and he thought that the reason Elena didn’t miss them, their parents, or didn’t seem to, was that she’d prepared for their death by having a child of her own. Could he be holding it against her? Andrés wondered, and wrote. That she’d moved on? Or could he be holding it against himself, that he hadn’t? What did “moving on” mean now anyway, at fifty-nine? At this stage in his life, he was only interested in moving back, to when he was eight years old, perhaps. That had been a good time. He hadn’t been eight years old for fifty-one years, he wrote, and then because that was too depressing to think about, he wrote more about his sister, whom he called Hélène now (he always thought of her as Hélène when she annoyed him), he wrote everything that annoyed him about her, he wrote mean things until he couldn’t help but find nice things to say.

Elena never came into his office, and after about an hour of fake working, Andrés joined her in the living room. She was reading La Voz, the local newspaper.

“In case you’re wondering,” Andrés said, “it wasn’t me. I didn’t win.”

“I know,” Elena said. “That’s the one thing the whole neighborhood seems to agree on.”

“They still don’t know who it was?”

“No, but Lucille texted this morning, to ask if it was you.”
Lucille was the woman who’d broken Andrés’s heart.

“How does she know someone won in Almería?”

“She plays it, too, when the jackpots grow that big. She always knows where they end up getting hit.”

She was silent for a few seconds, and Andrés thought she was debating whether or not to say more about Lucille (Elena knew it to be a sensitive topic, and Andrés knew that she knew, even though they’d never actually talked about it), but she was, rather, gathering strength to ask about something that mattered to her.

“How have you heard from Sofi lately?” she said.

Andrés never engaged in drama, but he never lied, either.

“She emailed,” he said.

“What did she have to say?”

“Nothing much . . . Is everything all right between you two?”

Elena looked over her paper and up at Andrés, trying to figure out what Sofi might have told him about their rift. The mystery of the lottery winner had made the front page, of course, but there was also a narrow rectangle, above the numbers that had made someone rich, news of a dolphin washed up dead on the beach. Andrés wondered if the dolphin would’ve taken the whole front page, had a local not won €87 million.

“We had a fight,” Elena said. “We’re not talking these days.”

“A fight over what?”

“I had this surgery,” Elena said. “Sofi found out, and she got upset. She thinks I should tell her everything.”

Elena gestured toward her lower body when she said the word surgery, and Andrés assumed she’d had surgery on her feet.

“But you’re all right now?” he asked.

“Yes.”

Andrés could’ve left it at that, let her say that Sofi had overreacted, let Sofi say the opposite, or whatever it was that Sofi had said in her email, that Elena spied on her, and perhaps on another day he would have, left it at that, but there was something about not having won €87 million, about having nearly won €87 million (which is how he would think of the event for the rest of his life, that night he nearly won €87 million), that pushed Andrés to inquisition. Maybe he wanted to hurt Elena a little bit, also. Or maybe he wanted to understand what it was like to have children, the lies you had to tell yourself to make it bearable.
“Sofi didn’t say anything about that,” he said. “About you hiding things from her. She seemed to be mad . . . to suggest that you were intruding on her life. Or something.”

“Well I think it’s all one and the same,” Elena said. “Two faces of the same coin. She got upset at the imbalance. Not so much at me intruding on her life as at me closing full access to mine. She got upset because I always ask her about her, and give her advice that she sometimes hates hearing, and meanwhile, I didn’t tell her important things about me, and she felt betrayed or something. Played, I think she said. But I’m the mother. Children think they play their mothers all the time, with the weed and the cutting school, but really, it’s our purview. We’re the players. We decide what they can and cannot know.”

“What did you say that she hated hearing so much?”

“That she should leave that lawyer asshole.”

“The married guy? She’s still seeing him?”

“She froze her eggs for him. For when he’s ready.”

“Did he ask her to?”

“No. She says she’s thinking ahead. She doesn’t want to try for a baby while he’s still married. She’s giving him time.”

The newspaper was closed now, Andrés thinking of frozen babies, and Elena on a roll. She’d needed to talk to someone about this.

“She pretends everything is about her,” she went on. “Because she wants a baby now, or soon, she thinks I should tell her everything about my health, about problems I might have down there”—she gestured again to her lower body, and Andrés realized that she hadn’t been talking about her feet—“but it’s my business, it’s private. You don’t talk about that with your children. Our mother never told us anything.”

“Different times,” Andrés said, not sure why. Not sure either which was better in this case, the older times or the newer ones. “But you’re all right now?” he asked again.

“I think so,” Elena said.

The window to the living room was open on the sidewalk, Elena had even drawn the thin dirty curtains to the side, and when Jaime walked by and peeked inside (something that, in Almería, any passerby would’ve done), it was almost as if he was in the house with them. He let them know he was on his way to see the dead dolphin on Zapillo Beach.

“They haven’t taken him away yet?” Andrés asked.
“It’s the weekend.”
Andrés didn’t want to see, but Elena told Jaime she’d join him, so he tagged along. He didn’t want to be the guy who didn’t have the guts.

Jaime asked Andrés the question he’d probably asked all his customers that morning at the bakery, what he would do if he ever won the lottery. Andrés didn’t even have time to make something up.

“He wouldn’t know what to do with that much money,” Elena said. “He’d just establish a new lottery, on his lottery earnings.”

“That would be smart, actually,” Jaime said. Then he asked if Andrés was working on a new Spanish manual, and Andrés said he always was, that when one was finished, it was time for another to be updated.

“What lesson are you on?”

“Flirting,” Andrés said.

“Ah! The best one! If there’s one thing we know how to do here in Spain, it’s flirting!”

Elena said the best opener was still “Can I buy you a drink?”

“I mean, I guess in this day and age, a woman might take it badly,” she added. “Like it’s assuming she cannot buy her own drink.”

“Right.”

A few minutes later, they were on the beach. Fifty yards ahead of them, a clustering of people indicated the dolphin’s location. Jaime said that maybe, nowadays, what a man in a bar ought to do was ask, “Can you buy me a drink?” to put the woman in the position of power.

The dolphin had not only been hurt by a shark, or some other predator, but someone had carved out letters in his flesh, forming the word zorra, which meant “fox,” but also “slut,” “bitch,” “whore.” Elena brought a hand to her mouth when she saw this.

“You didn’t read the article in La Voz?” Jaime asked. “They talk about this.”

“Who would do something like that?” Elena said. “See a dead dolphin and take out a knife to cut it and . . . write that?”

Andrés couldn’t tell if she was more shocked by the cutting itself or the word the cutter had chosen. Would it have been different if the criminal had decided to write a nice adjective? A clever maxim?

“Actually,” Jaime said, “they think someone did that out at sea, maybe on their boat, and then threw the dead dolphin back into the water.”

“How is that better?” Elena asked.
“I didn’t say it was better.”

“And the shark bite?” Andrés asked.

“They think he got bit after he was dead.”

That’s some stream of bad luck, Andrés thought.

The letters were wide and dug deep into the dolphin’s body, you could see the white layer from under the gray skin, then the flesh, not pink or beige exactly, but the color of worms. People were taking pictures.

“Is it a female dolphin?” Andrés heard someone ask.

Elena knelt by the dolphin, motioned to pet its head.

“What are you doing?” Andrés said. “Don’t touch it!”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know, it might carry diseases.”

She moved her hand toward the dolphin again.

“Hélène!” Andrés said, something he couldn’t remember doing since childhood, calling her that, but it seemed appropriate—they’d called each other by their French names when they’d wanted to be heard.

Elena wasn’t shocked to be called Hélène. That’s what most people called her, in fact, back in France. She laid a hand on the dolphin’s forehead and left it there a few seconds, before moving down to the nose. A child asked his father if he could touch the dolphin, too, and the father said no, that it was dangerous.

“Why is she doing it, then?” the boy asked, and Andrés thought he recognized them, the boy and his father, from the previous winter, when there’d been that nasty gota fría and all these things—chairs, toys, bikes—that had washed up on the shore, all coming from a flash-flooded town many towns over. Most of it had been ruined by prolonged contact with water, but a few pieces had still been viable, and the neighborhood had treated the beach as a flea market that morning, gone home with plastic chairs and small objects. Andrés himself had thought of taking home someone’s collection of shells, kept in a Tupperware—it had seemed wrong to leave trapped shells so near free shells—but he’d left it there, in the end. The second he’d decided against taking it, a boy had seen the box, begged his father to bring it home. It was the same boy, he realized, the same father.

“Why is she allowed to pet the dolphin?” the boy asked again. “Why?”

“Because the dolphin had a very hard life,” the father ended up responding, which answered nothing at all.
Elena wanted to stay until someone came for the dolphin. Andrés insisted she at least wash her hands in the sea, that maybe the salt would kill some of the bacteria the dolphin might have carried. He was ready to wait with her as long as she wanted, but Purita joined their group then. She’d been looking for Jaime.

“We found him!” she said. “We found him!”

No one had found the EuroMillions winner, of course: he’d made himself known.

“Who is it?” Jaime asked.

“I don’t know, they’re going to interview him at Rafa’s in a minute, you should come over!”

“Do we know it’s a man? Do we know anything?”

Of course it’s a man, Andrés thought. Women never win, or know not to tell anyone if they do.

“How, you coming?” Andrés asked, but the new multimillionaire having been discovered didn’t alter her resolve to keep watch over the dolphin. Except for her, all who’d been gathered followed Andrés and Jaime and Purita to Rafa’s store, eager for a new adventure. It was not every day that two different things happened in Almería. Purita repeated that she would kill herself if it was an Erasmus student who’d won. “I’ll slit my wrists,” she specified.

They arrived at the shop as the TV crew was doing their cutaway shots—close-ups of the counter, the scratch-off games trapped under the glass, the wall of cigarettes, the tabacos sign outside. Andrés could already hear the narration they would record over the images: *At first glance, this tobacco shop resembles any other. But today . . .* The winner was in the back of the store, holding his winning ticket, talking to Rafa. Andrés had never seen him before. It was an Erasmus student, of course. A twenty-year-old French man. Thibault Lefèbvre was his name. He had to spell it out for the interviewer. Four silent letters, Andrés counted. A lot of people had crowded in front of the store, but Andrés managed to get closer when they started filming the winner. He’d come with a French-to-Spanish conversation manual for the interview (not one of Andrés’s), but he didn’t need to look at it. He’d prepared a list of phrases in advance, to describe his level of happiness. He was very precise in his choice of vocabulary. It seemed important to him, to find the right words. He was sweating. It was the first time he’d played, of course. He’d just reread Borges’s story “The Lottery in Babylon” for one of his classes, and
had bought a ticket just for fun. Andrés assumed he was making this up. Rafa entered the frame there, to say that Borges was an Argentine, and that he was an Argentine, too, so it had all come full circle. The interviewer told Rafa to step away, that he would be interviewed later, one on one.

What was he going to do with the money? the winner was asked. He would have a more beautiful wedding than planned, he said—he’d proposed to his girlfriend the month before. He’d pay for a nice honeymoon. A new house for his parents.

Andrés left before the interview was over. He wasn’t even mad that the money had gone to a young guy, a French guy, a guy who’d seemed to have been happy even before winning. He almost felt relieved that it hadn’t been him, that he hadn’t had to explain to anyone that he had no one to spend the money on, really, that he’d never had a wife, children, that his parents had died before he could buy them anything nice, let alone a house, that he was in fact letting his own father’s house crumble over his head.

Back home, he had a new message, from Sofi. She’d remembered a good pickup line, she said. He responded, “You should call your mother, I worry about her,” and told her that she’d touched a dead dolphin. He sent another email a few minutes later, to explain about the dolphin, what had happened to it. He felt a bit stupid, telling Sofi to call Elena, when Elena was a ten-minute walk away from him, over there on the beach, alone with the dolphin, and he could go and check on her himself. That would make more sense. But what? What would he say?

Andrés opened a file on his computer, in which he kept all the dialogues he’d ever written, and copied the “Flirting” section from his 2006 manual into the document he’d been working on the past few days, the one he’d send to his editor next week for the 2016 manual. No one would realize it was the same, he thought. Word for word, the same scene. No one.
Michael Klein

THE ANIMALS THE ANIMALS

Here I am  I’ve been watching the animals
  I watch them in the afternoon
that seems to drop my being  lower into time

bullfrogs singing from the long grasses
  horses captured in a video
  Wild is a horse’s word  They are running

wild on an island & turning sharply  as if stopped
by something that isn’t there  I’ve been watching
  the animals move through sudden predicaments

  or work-like joy from a habit  as with the sea turtle
pulling her anvil body down to the continent of ocean
after leaving her eggs in the upper sands  She is returning

  to single life & the sequenced minutes of light breaking softly
on the surface of the water  How delicate it is below
where the daylight doesn’t reach

  all the wet & green  one world brushing up
against the slippery gardens of another
I’ve been watching the animals with more knowing

  than childhood’s secret knowing  secret gratitude
for animals & my spirit seems to make music I can hear
for each animal like a theme for staying  Only once  did the dog

run away  I’ve been watching them with a sense of circling
  back into myself through their restlessness  feeling
their nature take the wheel of what’s on-again  off-again
in my own life  The life of human stories beginning
in deliverance & ending up torn from reaching the eventual

There is nothing in the world to confirm or not confirm

the fear I will stay like this  Disillusioned with everything
that isn't animally connected or unconditional  I will always
regret not staying with someone only for love  & will remain powerless

over the photographic grief of empty stations that once held people
I will always be just this  The human boy  The human man
who goes to the animals  The animals  To check  To see
On the evening of the accident Ganesan was on a bus from the office in Fort, heading in the direction of the National Cancer Institute in Maharagama. The bus was making its way in starts and stops, accelerating and braking as the driver tried, ruthlessly, to overtake on the crowded roads, and Ganesan was gazing out through the half-open window, at pedestrians waiting impatiently at traffic lights and bus stops, at passengers in other vehicles staring silently into their phones or out at the monotonous evening. The light hadn’t yet begun to fade but the day was coming to its end, the city’s commuters all lost in the long, mindless journey from place of work to place of sleep, their last remaining obligation to the outside world. Ganesan squinted out at the passing street signs now and then to see whether he was...
nearing the hospital, but unable to decipher their wording from afar, in no
great hurry to reach his destination and not especially concerned about getting off too early or too late, he soon forgot what he was looking for and let his eyes glaze over, the few sharp edges he’d managed to summon to his field of vision dissolving back into peaceful ambiguity.

Ganesan had known for several years that his eyesight was less than perfect, had been finding it harder and harder to discern house numbers and street signs as he drove around the city, but it was only a couple of months earlier, in order to get his license renewed, that he’d finally consented to having his eyes examined. He’d never visited an optometrist or an optician before, had sat uncomfortably on the stiff leather chair as the man placed a pair of heavy steel frames over his nose, as he flicked a switch and asked him to read out the series of small English letters that appeared on the lit-up screen, starting with the left eye, then the right, and finally both together. Ganesan felt sure he was confusing the names of some of the letters but the man made no comment either way, inserting a thicker pair of lenses calmly into the frames with every set of answers that came back. He went to his desk, scribbled a few notes, then turned and announced that Ganesan would have to start wearing glasses, that he was significantly shortsighted and that his tendency to squint would only worsen his vision in the long term. Annoyed by the man’s presumption but aware that there was nothing he could do, Ganesan took the prescription and left without a word. He hadn’t had an accident in thirty years of driving, had never had his license suspended for any reason, and he didn’t see how an optometrist could judge his vision without knowing these details or indeed anything else about his life. Even if he missed the occasional turn or made the occasional wrong turn, even if the technicians he ferried around the city sometimes complained about the slowness of his driving, his frequent equivocation, he was still without doubt one of the company’s most reliable drivers. Even if it was true that there were limitations to his vision now, he could see no reason to make such a drastic change when he’d managed without issue for so long, especially when he had only a few years left before retirement.

He had tried on his new glasses two days later and been taken aback, despite his initial skepticism, by the world’s sudden vividness, its hues and textures and outlines resolving into lustrous clarity, its new lengths and depths stretching out into something far vaster. He’d worn them almost every day
at first despite the headaches, startled by the novelty of everything, by how much of the life around him he’d been unaware of till then, and it was only over the subsequent weeks, as its sheen wore off, that his enthusiasm for the world’s new sharpness began to diminish. He was self-conscious being seen in glasses, it was true, since he knew no one else who wore them, but his reluctance had less to do with vanity than with how overwhelming the world became when he put them on, its every small and trivial detail forced upon him like someone on the bus discussing personal matters too loudly on the phone, its unwanted intimacies intruding into his thoughts even when he tried to concentrate on other things. He’d become accustomed to the world gliding past without constantly compelling him to acknowledge it, had learned to take pleasure in the uncertainty of not knowing what lay in the distance ahead, in the minor drama of obscure objects coming slowly into focus as he drew closer. As soon as his license was renewed he’d decided to give up wearing the glasses altogether, and though he still took them to work every day, just in case someone at the office asked about them, it had been several weeks now since he’d even taken them out of their hard plastic case.

Ganesan was looking out through the window once more, squinting in an effort to find out how far they’d come, when suddenly the bus screeched to a sharp, unexpected halt, throwing the weight of his body up against the seat in front. The bus’s loud horn began blaring in rage, and looking up Ganesan saw the driver swearing violently, gesticulating at someone who was, presumably, passing in front of the bus. He couldn’t make out the source of the obstruction from where he sat but the driver continued pushing down furiously on the horn, the muscles of his forearm bulging as he clutched the gearstick, each moment of the interruption making his body more tense, as though he would explode if he could not keep moving, as though he were caught up in a matter of life and death. The vast, flattening sound of the horn continued for some time before coming to an end, the driver cursing under his breath and sending out two honks of residual vexation as he pressed down on the accelerator, which, like a narcotic, seemed to calm him down at once. The bus pressed forward a few feet before coming to a stop, its momentum swallowed up again by traffic, and leaning forward Ganesan looked out the window, curious to know the target of the driver’s imprecations. Making his way or trying to make his way across the next lane, moving at an almost nonexistent pace, was an improbably tall, thin, birdlike old man in faded shirt and sarong, holding
a small portable radio in one hand and in the other a long walking stick that he was using to scan the ground in slow, wide arcs. The man probed and felt the path before him for several seconds before lifting his back foot cautiously into the air as if to step forward, then stopped mid-motion and simply stood there, inexplicably still in that liminal position, his foot hovering midair in a feat of remarkable balance. There was an expression of concentration on his face, as if he were meditating or praying as he stood poised like a stork in the middle of a tumultuous river, appearing, in his stillness, to make himself the center of the world, the stationary point around which everything else revolved, the traffic swirling and eddying in violent confusion, the cars, vans, and buses blaring their horns relentlessly, the three-wheelers and motorcycles skirt ing murderously close to his tall, stooping body.

The man finally brought his raised foot down, slowly and deliberately, and when it made contact with the ground he seemed to push down harder against the tarmac, as though to make sure the ground was truly solid. The focused symmetry of his features dissolved into pleasant serenity, and as though enjoying the dependability of that piece of ground too much to abandon it immediately, he stood there for a few seconds before gathering himself in preparation for his next step. He advanced in this way with radio and walking stick, his movement calm but painstaking, totally at odds with the traffic around him, his imperviousness to the anger and frustration being hurled at him from all sides only further enraging the drivers. Pedestrians stopped to watch with bewilderment, too caught up in their own journeys and destinations to go and help the old man before he was run down, fixated, at the same time, on the incongruity of his presence there, the sight of him so tall and unaffected and somehow noble in the middle of the road, almost mythical in that scene of everyday city traffic.

Ganesan continued watching the old man as the bus edged forward in short episodes, reluctant to abandon him as he receded into a hazy figure that the traffic was on the verge of engulfing. Returning his gaze at last to the front windshield he made out, on the left side of the road, the distinct red and blue signage of the Fashion Bug outlet where Moulana, Fahad's second cousin, had told him he should get off. Ganesan had heard from a couple of people at work that Fahad was sick but it was Moulana, who worked in the office as a peon, who'd told him a few days earlier that Fahad was being treated in Maharagama, who'd informed him about what Fahad's condition was like,
what the visiting hours were, and how to get there from Fort. Other people
from the office had inquired about Fahad but nobody had gone to see him,
Moulana had said, and he knew that his cousin would be pleased if Ganesan
stopped by. The cancer was in Fahad's stomach, he had warned, which meant
there was no point taking him anything to eat or drink—simply going to see
him would be enough to cheer him up. It was hard for Ganesan to think of
Fahad as anything less than cheerful or energetic, but he noted what Moulana
said, the earnestness in his voice, and had decided to make the visit the fol-
lowing week.

The bus came to a stop just after the Fashion Bug, and as Ganesan got off
and waited to cross the road he remembered Fahad's account of how, a few
years before, mobs had attacked and destroyed one of the franchise's shops, on
the pretext that its Muslim owners were giving out candy laced with a steriliza-
tion agent, their intention allegedly to bring down the fertility of the island's
Sinhalese women. He could no longer remember how the topic had come up
but Fahad had told him about the incident in a low, conspiratorial whisper,
his voice trembling with an anger he didn't seem sure whether or not to ex-
press. It was the first time he'd seen Fahad worked up like that, and though
Ganesan usually did his utmost to avoid political conversations outside family
and especially at work, he'd nodded in quiet sympathy as Fahad went on to
describe other incidents that had taken place during the riots that year, how
Muslim homes had been attacked and robbed not just by thugs from out of
town but by neighbors who'd been welcomed into those homes all their lives.
The only other time Fahad had brought up the state of things in the country,
Ganesan remembered, had been after the Easter bombings earlier in the year,
when he'd mentioned, not with anger then but a kind of resignation, that his
cousins, who ran a butcher shop in Pettah, had had to shut down after all their
knives were taken away by the police, whose only justification was that they
were expecting more attacks by Muslim extremists and had to confiscate all
potential weapons.

Ganesan wasn’t close with Fahad, exactly—they never saw each other
outside work, weren’t particularly alike in character or temperament, and
were separated in age by almost twenty years. On the few occasions Ganesan
had been driven by Fahad he’d been struck by his playfulness on the road, the
way he was always trying to move past or squeeze between other vehicles, not
in aggression or frustration or anxiety but almost as a kind of game, his eyes
skipping happily across the road in search of entrances and exits. It was their shared language that lent intimacy to their interactions, an intimacy Ganesan generally avoided with all the other drivers, with whom he was cordial but reserved. The fact that the two of them spoke to each other in Tamil separated their conversations from those of their colleagues, allowing them the possibility of speaking simultaneously in public and in private, of maintaining a secret line of communication, like clandestine lovers who'd learned to interact in public spaces with a private language of the eyes. Ganesan had been unused to speaking his mother tongue at work when Fahad first joined the company, and uncomfortable initially with Fahad’s attempts to approach him in Tamil he’d tried to redirect their conversations into Sinhala, to take shelter in the camouflage it gave. Fahad had been insistent and eventually Ganesan conceded, lowering his voice the same way he did when speaking with his wife on the phone, though Fahad himself, he noticed, made no attempt whatsoever to modulate his volume in front of others. There was something defiant in Fahad’s insistence on speaking Tamil in front of their colleagues, it was true, but Ganesan couldn’t help seeing it as coming from a kind of youthful naïveté, a kind of ignorance about how they’d be perceived. It took a while for him to see how speaking at a normal, reasonable volume, without hesitation or qualm, actually made their speech seem less suspicious, how it actually had the effect of reassuring the others in the office that they weren’t trying to conceal anything, no malicious secrets or violent plots, no collusion between the covert Muslim radical and the covert Tamil separatist that everyone probably suspected them to be. His relationship with Fahad had gradually freed Ganesan to speak Tamil at normal volume in public spaces more generally, something he’d never felt at liberty to do earlier, not even after the end of the war, and he came over time to take pleasure in this minor transgression whenever they were both at work, even if it was mainly Fahad who spoke and he who listened.

Their conversations consisted at first of Fahad volunteering stories from his own life, sharing details about his older daughter’s marriage proposals or his middle son’s studies, his expressive eyebrows arching, furrowing, and straightening over his bright eyes as he spoke. Ganesan had listened with bemusement, not quite understanding what Fahad wanted from him and why he was sharing so much, nodding in response but seldom sharing any details of his own. Fahad didn’t seem to mind that he offered so little of himself
in return, sensing perhaps that his reluctance came more from caution than anything else, from some old, painfully learned instinct for privacy. He continued approaching him with his easy smile whenever their time at the office overlapped, and perhaps because of the pleasure of listening to the rhythms of Fahad’s dialect, perhaps because of his coworker’s disarming innocence, Ganesan accepted these conversations as a new fact of life. He found himself smiling in response to Fahad’s quick, mischievous sense of humor, getting caught up in his stories of family disputes and alliances, and against his usual tendency he soon began asking Fahad questions of his own accord, connecting new threads in their discourses with old ones, listening with curiosity and also sometimes a kind of amazement, as though genuinely surprised to see himself getting close to someone at work.

Ganesan reached the hospital road without much difficulty, and as he neared the tall blue gates he wondered what it would be like to see Fahad outside the office for the first time, what they would talk about when they saw each other. He hesitated briefly in front of the security guard, who was sitting on a stool and looking at his phone, then seeing that the other visitors were coming and going without paying the guard any attention, he began making his way toward the large oval lawn at the center of the grounds. The premises of the hospital, he noticed at once, were far quieter and stiller than the roads of the city just outside, hushed in almost religious silence. A magisterial bodhi tree rose up from the lawn’s center, its massive trunk like the interweaving of several smaller ones that meandered in and out of each other, its broad branches reaching up and arching out into long boughs that sustained an enormous canopy of surprisingly delicate leaves. At the base of the tree, sealed inside a glass enclosure, sat a large white Buddha with his hands folded in his lap, and on the grass in front of him a few people were sitting cross-legged or lying prostrate in supplication, the tear-shaped leaves dancing gently above them in the breeze.

The path divided around the lawn, and going to the right Ganesan studied the people sitting on the short, evenly spaced benches just outside the path, mainly groups of two or three but also the occasional solitary figure staring at his hands or looking up at the pale evening sky. The patients were easy to tell apart from the visitors, not just by their dull, hairless heads and their far more casual dress—they were dressed as if at home, as if they’d just gotten out of bed—but also by the faint affectlessness in their faces, the slow-motion
movement of their mouths and limbs. There were several children among them, some sitting with other children and others with family members, all of them deeply restless and at the same time deeply fatigued, reminding Ganesan of the strange contradiction of energy he’d often sensed when he happened upon child monks. The curiosity and liveliness in the eyes of young monks, though, was only slightly muted by the uniformity of their shaved heads and maroon robes, the strict discipline that ordered their daily lives, whereas the eyes of these children seemed almost lifeless in comparison, as if they’d given up the worldly attachments still so evident in the faces of the little monks.

Ganesan left the path and headed somewhat nervously toward the ninth ward, wondering as he drew nearer whether Fahad would be in the same condition as the patients he’d passed, subject to the same deep exhaustion. Entering the small reception area he approached the nurse at the desk, who asked him with an air of distraction what he wanted and directed him inside. The long, rectangular room was lined with tall iron beds on both sides, and though the windows were open the air felt painfully still, its motionlessness only emphasized by the slow, uniform grating of the fans above. The first few beds were occupied by children gazing lethargically at a mounted TV, apparently unmoved by the cartoon figures running exuberantly across the screen. Their bodies were thin and soft, lacking musculature, and Ganesan noticed with unease that a few of them lacked not only hair but also eyebrows, which was partly responsible, perhaps, for their appearance of impassivity. He passed a young woman, a couple of middle-aged women, and several older men as he proceeded tentatively through the ward, looking from bed to bed to make sure he wasn’t walking past Fahad. He caught sight of him, or someone who looked like him, near the end of the hall, then noticed, sitting on a chair beside him, a relatively young woman with a rose-colored veil drawn over her head, gazing out in silence through the window.

Fahad was wearing only a sarong tied loosely around his waist, lying on his back and seemingly staring at the ceiling, but approaching the bed Ganesan realized that he was asleep. He introduced himself quietly in Tamil to the woman, who stood up with a quick smile and told him she was Fahad’s wife. Despite Ganesan’s protestations she turned to Fahad, shook him gently till he murmured something and opened his eyes in disorientation. He blinked at his wife and then at Ganesan, who remained standing awkwardly by the foot of the bed. He didn’t smile or speak, merely looked
at Ganesan for a while before pulling up his sarong and raising himself onto his elbows. His head was almost as hairless as the children’s, his eyes darkly circled, missing their brows, his cheeks gaunt but his lips and throat swollen. Doing his best to assimilate his friend’s new appearance Ganesan hesitated for a moment before smiling and asking him how he was feeling, trying to muster a kind of casualness in his voice. Fahad didn’t say anything, simply motioned at his bed and at the length of the ward. There was no surprise in his face regarding the visit, Ganesan couldn’t help feeling as he moved closer to the bed, as though who came and went wasn’t something Fahad cared to keep track of, the events in the outside world that led to one particular visitor one day and another the next a matter of total indifference to him.

It took effort for Fahad to speak but he grew more personable as they talked, as if slowly remembering from what part of his life they were acquainted. He explained the progress of the illness and the course of the treatment, pointing to a scar on his stomach where the operation had been done. Taking Ganesan’s hand he drew his fingers along the length of the incision as he explained how part of his stomach had been removed along with the cancer, how he couldn’t eat much as a result and still had one round of chemotherapy left. He continued holding Ganesan’s hand after the explanation, their linked fingers hovering in the air between them, and this unexpected intimacy along with the shock of Fahad’s appearance left Ganesan not knowing how to respond, unsure whether to say something comforting or to ask more questions about the treatment. To his relief Fahad’s wife joined the conversation, telling him that for now Fahad could eat only a kind of mush that the hospital gave him, but that soon they’d be allowed to bring food from home. Turning to Fahad’s wife while continuing to hold his hand, Ganesan asked whether she, too, was staying in the ward. She was, she nodded, pointing to a rolled-up mat beside the bed, and wanting to continue this secondary conversation with her as long as possible, to avoid the recognizable but also unfamiliar face on the bed before him, he asked how often the children visited, who was taking care of them now that she was here. When he turned back he saw that Fahad’s head had fallen back on the pillow, his eyes once more closed, his browless forehead quietly, peacefully calm, as if his duties to the outside world had been satisfied by his brief attempt at conversation. Gently placing his hand back on the bed and extricating his own, Ganesan spoke a little longer with Fahad’s wife then took his leave.
Outside the sky was a pale, rose-tinged blue, the breeze still blowing quietly through the finely veined leaves of the bodhi tree. People were still sitting in silent groups on the benches around the path, walking across the lawn to make their brief entreaties. A wrinkled old woman with unruly gray hair was sitting on her knees on the grass, her eyes closed and her face slack, her upper body rocking rhythmically back and forth as she mouthed words from a prayer booklet she held in both hands. Ganesan watched her as he walked back along the path to the hospital entrance, past the security guard, and through the gate. There was a tea stand by the side of the road where he decided he would stop, and leaning back against the wall he took small, measured sips of tea from the little paper cup. The sound of vehicles honking and a lottery-ticket seller reciting a list of lotteries on a loudspeaker drifted down from the main road, and Ganesan thought how strange it was that so many different worlds could coexist beside each other in physical space, how you could slip, without warning or preparation, so soundlessly between them.

He finished his tea and began making his way up toward the main road, heading back in the direction of the Fashion Bug. He felt pleasantly impervious to the noise and traffic as he walked, insulated from the scenes of impatience and frustration he’d reentered, and it was only as he neared the main junction that he noticed a commotion, saw that the traffic had stopped and that a number of people were standing in the middle of the road. A couple of men at the center of the commotion were shouting, their hands raised and their fingers pointing, the object of their anger a man standing next to a van, its front door ajar and its passengers all alighted, standing uncertainly at the rear. The man being scolded was silent and uneasy, his face alternating between a childlike contrition and a somewhat defensive expression, and Ganesan understood immediately that this was the van’s driver and that there’d been some kind of accident, though the van didn’t seem damaged and there was no vehicle nearby that it might have hit.

More and more people were gathering around the scene, crowding the driver and the men who were berating him, one of whom had now grabbed his wrist in a viselike grip as if to prevent him from running away. There was a carefully demarcated space on the ground in front of the van, Ganesan noticed, a space everyone was taking care to keep their distance from, their eyes returning to it obsessively even as they watched the unfolding altercation.
It took him a moment to realize that the section of ground must contain a body, a person who’d been knocked down by the van, a person who’d almost certainly been killed on impact, for there was no reason otherwise for the crowd to maintain its distance so rigorously. Ganesan’s first thought was that the victim was the blind man with the radio and walking stick, that while he’d been in the hospital the old man had managed to walk by foot to the junction, where at last he’d been struck down. Filled with a vague foreboding, he took a few steps forward, stood on his toes, and did his best to get a look at the body, but the crowd around it was getting larger every moment, everyone trying to inch closer, and the body itself remained concealed.

Ganesan turned and looked at the people beside him, as if they might explain what had happened, but nobody returned his gaze, all of them totally engrossed in the scene, their eyes keen and unblinking, their brows furrowed in a combination of curiosity and anger, their bodies tensed in a kind of expectation or anticipation. A voice came from somewhere saying that the driver should have been keeping his eyes on the road, followed by a different, louder voice saying the man ought to be taught a lesson, and someone near the front of the crowd darted forward and pushed the driver so violently that he was thrown back against the side of the van. Two policemen had shouldered through the crowd and one of them was trying to pacify the increasingly agitated men, to keep them away from the driver, the other to clear more space in front of the van so he could bend down and examine the body, which seemed, from the glimpse Ganesan got as the crowd briefly parted, to belong not to a man but to a woman, and either way was too small to belong to the stooping old man as he’d feared.

His relief was mixed and in any case short-lived, for he was jostled forcefully from behind by a couple of young men trying to get closer to the accident, and turning around saw that he was surrounded by people on all sides, that he’d become caught up without realizing it in the surging crowd, an anger now visible on all the men’s faces, in their clenched jaws and creased foreheads, an anger that seemed to come out of nowhere but which Ganesan had seen before in his life, an anger that had been waiting inside them and which the accident, their interrupted journeys, the defenseless driver, and the dead body had all released, given object and direction to. Ganesan felt suddenly afraid, began finding it a little hard to breathe, he’d seen such groups before, seen what they
could do, how each man’s rage justified and provoked that of the others, knew it was best to leave the area as soon as possible. He was intimidated by the sea of glaring faces, by the iron conviction of their anger, but sidling forward he navigated through the mob, past the tightly balled hands, the distended veins on muscular arms, past the brows deeply, tensely furrowed, pushed down to the edges of foreheads, managing finally to make his way to the pavement where, standing with his back to a shop, worried for the driver’s life, he turned back around.

The scene was becoming even tenser, the men at the center pushing and shouting, the outnumbered policemen trying to stand guard around the driver. Someone managed to break through and slapped the driver across the face, the resounding smack followed by shouts of approval from various parts of the crowd. Ganesan didn’t know what was going to happen, what the hundreds of men now packed around the body and the driver wanted to do, and he watched, mesmerized, as the dark rage continued to grow in their faces, appearing at each second to reach a climax before intensifying even more the next, their eyes roving the scene as if for something to latch onto, something they could turn into a tool or target of their wrath. Their bodies were possessed by a throbbing, wave-like rhythm that was reaching its crescendo, a crescendo that seemed now, really seemed, like it couldn’t be pushed further without exploding into some act of irreversible violence, and watching from where he stood, unable to move or look away, Ganesan could feel everything around him beginning to slow down. He watched as the crowd’s merged fury gathered and then peaked almost in slow motion, as their jaws clenched harder and the veins on their temples bulged, as the already furrowed brows above their eyes deepened and contracted, pressing down so tightly against the precipice of their foreheads, becoming so violently creased, that there was nowhere left for them to go, watched as all at once, soundlessly and without warning, the eyebrows fell from their faces, dropped down onto the road like dead weights.

The crowd became still, the movement ceased, and there was silence. Everyone remained held to the spot, as though aware all of a sudden of the tension in their bodies, the tightness of their breathing, the rage on their faces giving way, slowly, to confusion. They looked at the driver, who was cowering against the side of the van, looked down at their eyebrows, which were littering the road like fuzzy black caterpillars, then looked with
uncertainty at each other’s faces, at the strange, browless expressions they all wore. Raising their heads they looked up at the sky, which had grown darker over the city, at the moon now softly visible on the horizon, then gradually, as if remembering themselves, they turned, looked at watches and phones, and began to shuffle away, dissipating into the wideness of the night. Ganesan remained where he was for a while, his body too tense to move, then breathing out, collecting himself, he sighed with relief and made his way quickly back to the bus stop.
Penicillin was discovered in a moldy petri dish in 1928 and by the forties was called a miracle drug and by the fifties had become both widely available and cheap, which is to say that penicillin arrived in time for me, who without it would have died a child on more than one occasion, but didn’t and grew to see the things around me die instead. My first cat was struck by a car on Daniels Lane, I was five. My father’s mother died when I was six, my mother’s three years later, then a godmother, an uncle, a favorite aunt, and then the floodgates opened as generations passed away in the way of the world, my parents, my in-laws, eventually my brother, and meanwhile the world around me seemed to abide, but let’s not be fooled by that. The fireflies I loved to trap on summer evenings and leave in jars to flash till dawn like captured starlight at some point blinked their final blink, I haven’t seen one in ages. The phosphorescent algae that set waves on fire off Gibson’s Beach and dressed a midnight skinny-dip with ribbons of liquid flame have dwindled through the years and all but disappeared, and now every dip is dim. The glacier at Entrèves, in whose chilly atmosphere I hiked from bar to bar to sip aperitifs, retreated up its valley at modern glacial speed, one decade, and with it went the primulas and alpine edelweiss. The birds and bees and dogwood trees, the frogs, the reefs, the plentiful fish nonetheless fished out, creatures great and small are rushing to extinction.
in the Anthropocene apocalypse that will surely be our signature, our sign, the fossil record of our era. A generation arrives, a generation departs, and you can’t take it with you, but ours has certainly tried, and what world will we bequeath to our posterity as suns rise, winds whirl, and rivers run to the sea? What is ours to leave but guilt and mute regret, whose scientific progress proved a devil’s bargain, whose each advance was a next step into oblivion? Annihilators, executioners, poisoners, assassins, our time on earth has been the most destructive ever, albeit the only one possible for me, who in any other would have felt no need for mourning or remorse but might have remained an innocent always: young, blameless, and dead.
Matthew Zapruder

THE EVENING MEETING

finally the hour has come
it is time for the long journey
I say to my wife and child a last farewell

and click the blue button
my face appears across from my face
it is the day we will virtually discuss

the unpredictable resolutions I am sure
obscurely will decide my fate
the ostensible chair begins to speak

thank you for your electrons
I hope you are well in these days
or at least surviving

I touch the hem of a book
someone says that’s a lot of togetherness
someone says the asymptote of dusk

the chair mutes us all
it’s so good to see all your faces
thank you for availing

this interstitial convocation
to consider these extraordinary times
I put on my educator mask and stare

into the unsmiling grid
trying to look as if I understand
the one named after a star
she has mastered this new technology
she shares the document of potential paths
through the forest

into uncertain autumn
we talk and wander among them
we must decide but cannot stop

a great blanket of acknowledged despair
silence threatens until the one
with all the hidden power speaks

his eyeglasses catch the light of an Akari
it is my sad role to remind you
yes there are bodies piled in the streets

but don’t forget the learning outcomes
then the most mordant of us says
if I may quote my accountant

all solutions are suboptimal
laughter ripples through the proximate squares
for a moment we sit sensing

vital decisions
faces keep speaking
they dissolve and become

shapes on my screen
more and more they resemble
lonely ships

carrying vital protocols into the distance
the voices get further away
at last the endless meeting ends
I begin to recite
the ever more infinite list
of things I do not know
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