Collation: Essays

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Abstract

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This dissertation is a collection of creative essays preceded by a critical introduction that defines what the author calls “The Aesthetic of Friendship.” That essay explores the work of Mary Karr, Edward Hoagland, Patricia Foster, Robert Louis Stevenson, Virginia Woolf, and David Foster Wallace, with particular focus on writer-reader connection.

The ten creative essays that follow explore issues of family influence and empathy (and also love, and chili, and college theater, and nuclear power).

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Introduction:

Let's Be Friends. Please: The Cajoled Connection of Personal Writing

I

I believe (don't you?) that the success of nonfiction writing—personal essays and memoir in particular—relies on the connection a writer can make with a reader, a connection that, in the words of noted personal essayist Phillip Lopate, makes a reader feel “a little less lonely and freakish” (xxxiii). So much, then, depends on the affability of the writer-character. Readers need to be drawn into a deep relationship with this person in order to stomach essays and memoirs that may, at first glance, seem self-centered. Beyond merely relating the story, then—of a death in the family, of a first love, of a religious doubt, of a particular yen for tuna fish sandwiches—nonfiction writers must project, within the telling of those stories, some sense of themselves and some sense that they can offer a small, but necessary insight. This is a tall order.

We all have personalities, opinions, prejudices, quirks, perversions. Who's to say mine, or Joan Didion's, or Jonathan Franzen's, or Bret Lott's are worth a reader's time? Almost everybody's got a family, some inner sadness, a couple of really absurd tales of travel and discovery. Who's to say mine are the ones you should ponder? At least fiction most often has a definite narrative to follow. At least poetry has compact, lyrical language and the surprising jolts that the short-form allows. The knock against personal writing, though, is that all it's got going for it is *me*, *me*, *me*. This is the personal writer's cross. We're all afraid, I think, that, like actors, we'll create a character, go on stage, and

be pelted with tomatoes by our restless audience. We'll navel-gaze and, finding the lint there to be of a particularly vibrant hue, fail to look outward, ever. We'll over-describe those key moments of our lives, those fresh explosions of our consciousnesses, without realizing that what we're writing remains inaccessible to everyone else. While the essayist's question as first conceived by Michel de Montaigne in the sixteenth century was “What do I know?,” the essayist's question now has to be “Who could ever care?” So, we need to be conscious, always, that there is an issue in our essays, something at stake. At the very least, we need to impart a striking scene or an unconventional story. We need to write toward unexpected, hard-earned turns of thought, while including how we arrived at those turns. All of this effort can seem futile, though, if we create a persona that's unlikable, unaware, immature, humorless. Because that persona—as he confronts a troubling issue or a jarring thought—*is* the subject. And he needs to be a skilled tour-guide of his own life for the reader.

Personal nonfiction writing, then, is a performance of the self meeting itself, meeting the world, and shaping those encounters in such a way that he can meet another lonely, freakish person. No other writing is so reliant on the writer-reader relationship, and that's what excites and haunts me about this genre. Like in acting, making the art becomes about being a believable *person*, a person who is, if not likable, then at least compelling. It's about letting the audience empathize. And though we can like performances and essays by people we don't relate to, we can't, I don't think, like performances and essays by people we don't care about. To make readers care, then, we often try to make them our friends.

Writers like Mary Karr, Edward Hoagland, Robert Louis Stevenson, Patricia Foster, Virginia Woolf, and David Foster Wallace seem to create with this writer-reader relationship in mind, and their work exemplifies what I want to call The Aesthetic of Friendship. They invite us into their written lives in many ways—with their senses of humor, their idiosyncratic images, their magnetic curiosity; but in this essay I will focus on three techniques that help them and other writers develop intimacy with readers.

First, Karr and Hoagland, as I'll explore below, use their unsentimental styles to relay the cringe-inducing details of their lives. In doing so they show us enough vulnerability to earn our trust without eliciting our pity. We feel welcomed because of their frankness. Likewise, Stevenson and Foster both welcome us into their thought processes by writing from a position of ambivalence; because they're likably unsure about the topics they address—marriage, race—we can become part of their inner conversations as we feel our own opinions challenged.

Honesty and ambivalence are key stances, then, but I personally feel most invited into an essay when a writer takes up empathy itself as a central issue, as Woolf and Wallace do. While they explore the difficulty of connecting with other people, while they forge friendships within their essays, they show us, I think, how we can try to meet them on the page. These three techniques—appealing honesty, productive ambivalence, and the dramatization of empathy—are the hallmarks of The Aesthetic of Friendship, of the specific tradition that stands as my biggest and most humbling influence.

II

In his essential “Introduction” to *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Phillip Lopate identifies what he sees as the key features of successful nonfiction writing. Foremost among these is honesty. By this, he doesn't mean an adherence to the facts of experience, though that adherence is essential; no, what Lopate means by honesty is something closer to confession. There are different modes of confessions, however: the ones that separate reader from writer and the ones that help reader and writer draw closer, into a kind of friendship. These are tough to distinguish from one another, but I think that the difference between the two has to do with writing style. Take, for instance, the wildly popular memoirs *The Kiss*, by Kathryn Harrison, and *The Liars' Club*, by Mary Karr.

In the former, published in 1998, Harrison tells the almost unthinkable story of an incestuous relationship she had with her father that was based, not solely on coercion, but on mutual attraction. The book is shocking, courageous, artful, and, ultimately, defensive. Despite the fact that we're shown the innermost secrets of Harrison's life, we're excluded from a relationship with her. Her suffering, as she depicts it, is too exquisite for readers who haven't had similar experiences to feel. “We meet at airports,” she begins. “We meet in cities where we've never been before. We meet where no one will recognize us. One of us flies, the other brings a car, and in it we set out for some destination. Increasingly, the places we go are unreal places” (3). Immediately, we see in the repetition and sentence structure a kind of cinematic reproduction of trauma. This opening suggests that there's no other way to tell the story without staring, in the present tense, relatively blank-faced, into the abyss of the past hurt. Later, she writes, “My father

is an absence, a hole like one of those my grandfather cuts out of family photographs" (5). "Absence" and "unreal"? These bits of abstract language help Harrison project a kind of detachment from the events of her own life.

This is purposeful, I think: she's showing us, brilliantly, how the trick of detachment helped her endure the incest. But she teaches us how to be detached from the events of her own memoir, too, for our own self-protection. We witness the suffering and we read on, guarded against the awful sexual dragon that might come around the corner of the next page. She writes that "revelation is inherently seductive" and we feel seduced by the sensational parts of her story—maybe confession in memoir *is* an attempted seduction of the reader; but here we're afraid of the seduction because in this memoir seduction is destruction, not connection. She writes, "My flesh, starved and lifeless under his, how eloquently it says what I cannot: I'm hungry, and I'm dead [. . .] Dead in response to his using his big body to separate me from the world" (187). In a sense, despite a superhuman effort to relate this awful story to the reader, Harrison uses her book, its big body, to separate us from her. She's constructed a persona and that persona's necessary citadel. We're gruesomely entertained by the machinations with which she keeps us at bay.

The critic Emily Fox Gordon sees in this type of memoir the instinct toward "grandiose self-representation. [. . .] The memoir [form] tends to deindividuate its protagonist, enlisting him to serve as a slightly larger-than-life representative of the sufferings of a group or community" (qtd. in Lopate, x-xi). In *The Kiss*, though, I see Harrison purposefully constructing a larger-than-life persona who is *too* individual. Her

story is singular and presented with such lovely detachment that she bypasses the connection she might otherwise have made with the reader.

Mary Karr, in her 1998 memoir *The Liars' Club*, works more within what I'm calling The Aesthetic of Friendship. Karr's confession also shocks—she was raped at an early age; her mother tried to kill her by setting a house-fire; she was held at gunpoint by a step-parent; her father's mostly steadfast love shriveled over the years into a kernel of contempt. We never get the feeling, though, that she's competing, in the essayist Scott Russell Sanders's words, "for a trophy in suffering" (734). While Harrison constructs a monument to her pain, Karr's book is as humble as a highway sign. She dredges, like the oil drills of her East Texas upbringing, into her voluptuously awful past, but she has a plainspoken style that helps her develop intimacy with her reader.

In the nineteenth century, William Hazlitt argued that essayists should write as "any one would speak in common conversation who had a thorough command and choice of words" (qtd. in Lopate, xxv). While I think there is a place for heightened language in memoir, it's Karr's vernacular that contributes to her companionability. Describing her cruel grandmother, she writes, "Maybe it's wrong to blame the arrival of Grandma Moore for much of the worst hurt in my family, but she was such a ring-tailed bitch that I do" (41). She doesn't dull her difficulties with that sort of sense of humor; but neither do her difficulties transport her to a distant, humorless planet. The shit that hits Karr's fan truly stinks, but because she's funny and frank, her life seems approachable to us. Later, she admits that her sister doesn't remember events the way she does and continues the down-home talk: "I can see it like yesterday's breakfast, but Lecia claims it never happened"

(61). While the way she stretches the truth allows her to elbow the boundaries of the memoir genre, Karr also wins points with a reader who understands how fluid and revisable the past can seem. Thomas Larson writes, “Writers who work problems of trust into their memoirs are those for whom I and most of us have an affinity. It may sound crazy, but I tend to trust memoirists who embody the difficulty I and others have had in trusting them” (150). For Karr and others, then, frankness about the slipperiness of memory works as a way to build a connection with a reader.

Both Harrison and Karr suggest that there is a hole in their memory, but Karr assures us that she will fill in the sketchy details of her life as best she can. We appreciate the attempt. She wants us to discover her life in the same way that she discovered her painful memories, though, piece by piece; so she reveals slowly, in fits and starts. Her search becomes just as much of a subject as the terrible circumstances of her childhood. She writes,

> Because it took so long for me to paste together what happened, I will leave that part of the story missing for awhile. It went long unformed for me, and I want to keep it that way here. I don't mean to be coy. When the truth would be unbearable the mind often just blanks if out. [. . .] This blank spot in my past, then, spoke most loudly to me by being blank. It was a hole in my life that I both feared and kept coming back to because I couldn't quite fill it in. (9)

As the book continues, though, Karr confronts those blank spots unflinchingly. Like a good essayist, she shows us the movement of the mind on the page as that mind recalls a

painful past, delays reconciliation with it, and ultimately accepts it. She mythicizes events at first, but when the truth finally comes out, we see how Karr herself has evolved from an imaginative young myth-maker to an astute, honest memoirist. The events are central, but so too is the way in which Karr remembers them and comes to understand them. By the end of the memoir, she writes, “[T]ruth was conspiring to assemble itself before me” (311), and we finally get the straight skinny. She's like the friend on the beer-stained couch who's kept us awake until dawn and somehow made the all-nighter worthwhile. With evocative metaphors and a sharp sense of humor, she spins a suspenseful yarn, giving us bits of herself and her secrets in order to keep us hooked. She develops a slow friendship with us by pointing out all her artifice and revealing, finally, her true face.

Confessional writing can lead to a connection with the reader in the shorter form as well, and not just confession of a difficult life. In fact, the honesty that most often compels me is that which allows a writer to cast himself in a negative light. On these sorts of essays, Lopate writes, “The spectacle of baring naked the soul is meant to awaken the sympathy of the reader, who is apt to forgive the essayist's self-absorption in return for the warmth of his or her candor” (xxvi). That statement is put to the test in a piece like Edward Hoagland's “The Threshold and the Jolt of Pain,” written in 1968. Structured to be a comparison of different kinds of pain—pain of death, childbirth, lifelong stuttering, romantic anguish—it turns into an essay filled with Hoagland's endearing, repulsive revelations.

Hoagland's is an aggressive and yet somehow vulnerable persona, but the binding force in the essay is that he seems to cry 'Take me or leave me,' acknowledging his flaws without any false admission of guilt. In an early paragraph, for instance, he admits to some sado-masochistic sexual urges, writing, “I was not an ogre to her, but I did by stages develop the habit of beating her briefly with my belt or hairbrush before we made love, a practice which I have foregone ever since” (663). Not more than a few breaths after that initially alienating passage, he writes of the most anguished experience of his life:

> A couple of years after that I got divorced from my first wife, and bawled like a half-butchered bull for an hour [. . .] I'd announced to my wife, whom I loved and still love, my belief that we needed to separate. The next time we talked she crossed the room to my chair, knelt down beside me, and asked what was going to become of each of us.
>
> That is the most painful splinter in my life, the most painful piece of the past [. . .] Who knows which qualities are godly? Pain probably makes us a bit godly, though, as tender love does. (666)

It's possible that he's gone too far in telling us about the sexual horseplay and that we can no longer care about his loss of love. But we can only entertain letting him get away with his transgression because of the fullness of his honesty. His frankness allows us to see him unadorned. Later, after an emotionally crushing passage in which he describes his father's slow death, Hoagland, by way of comparison, compassionately describes the labor pains of the woman he'd spanked:

> Most severe on the physiologists' scale of pain is that of childbirth. It's also the worst I've seen [. . .] At six one morning I drove her up to a whelk-pink hospital on a breezy hill and sat in the labor room for eight hours, watching the blue grid of stretch marks on her anguished stomach: awful pain. (667)

He doesn't allow himself to be the heroic composer of suffering, though, the great assuager. He continues, “I'm ashamed to say that I'd spanked her a little the night before, not realizing it was the night before: I never spanked her again” (667).

By revealing things about himself that are commonly thought to be abhorrent, Hoagland eliminates any chance that we won't believe him when he's utterly tender, when he admits so much aching vulnerability. He has carved out a space to be sensitive by showing us his own insensitivities, I think. In these discordant passages Hoagland creates a persona who seems cruel, contradictory, real. We may hate him. Or we may side with him, possibly against our better judgment, because he's brash and unapologetic.

“So often,” Lopate writes, “the plot of a personal essay, its drama, its suspense, consists in watching how far the essayist can drop past his or her psychic defenses toward deeper levels of honesty” (xxv). In the work of Mary Karr and Edward Hoagland, it's those deeper, sometimes unflattering levels that inspire me. Here I think of something Hoagland's father once said to him: “[H]e'd often told me that it was my problems he loved me for rather than for my successes and sleekness” (666). Within The Aesthetic of Friendship, writers explore their peccadilloes with a refreshing, possibly repulsive

frankness. They create trust with their vulnerability, and, in so doing, they present themselves as possible friends.

III

If Karr and Hoagland are nothing else, they are unashamed at least, and because they acknowledge their own rough edges, we see them as authentic people. Looking at oneself with that sharp eye is among the more difficult aspects of personal writing, though, and too often the character of the writer stays buried. Virginia Woolf, whose nonfiction I've come to value as much as her fiction, recognized that challenge of self-revelation in her beautiful essay, “A Sketch of the Past:”

> Here I come to one of the memoir writer's difficulties—one of the reasons why, though I read so many, so many are failures. They leave out the person to whom things happened. The reason is that it is so difficult to describe any human being. So they say: 'This is what happened'; but they do not say what the person was like to whom it happened. And the events mean very little unless we know first to whom they happened. (65)

Woolf is right about the difficulty of describing a person, especially oneself. *I was a sensitive teenager, and an oddball who deserved all the punishment I got*, writes the essayist, and we put down the book, unwilling to believe either the self-aggrandizement or self-flagellating at face value. But what if I was? And what if my sensitivity or my oddball nature are essential to the point of the essay? Here we come to one of the most awful, most useful words in the jargon of creative nonfiction: *performance*. Through the

writing, the essayist, needing to establish his own persona for the reasons Woolf has pointed out, *performs* the qualities of idiosyncrasy instead of merely declaring himself to be idiosyncratic. The hope is that, in this performance, he makes himself known to the reader as a fully-fleshed-out writer-character. We can know this person because he seems to be revealing himself naturally, not labeling or posing.

One way for writers to reveal "the person to whom things happened" is to express their own ambivalence about an issue. I value writers who aren't sure at first what they think, who exhibit the movement of their minds as a way to invite us into conversation with them. They model for us the prickliness of our own thinking and reading them feels like having a friendly debate. One of the best at this argumentative engagement with the reader is 19th century jack-of-all-trades Robert Louis Stevenson. The dramatizer of human duality who brought us *Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde,* Stevenson shows us his own brilliant, back-and-forth mind in the essay "On Marriage." He begins by laying out his ambiguity about the institution: "[T]here is something in marriage so natural and inviting, that the step has an air of great simplicity and ease; it offers to bury forever many aching preoccupations [. . .] And yet there is probably no other act in a man's life so hot-headed and foolhardy as this one of marriage" (230). With that, he begins a romping criticism of pairing-up. One's own life, he argues, is so difficult, so complicated. One's own problems are enough to wrestle with: "What! you have had one life to manage, and have failed so strangely, and now can see nothing wiser than to conjoin with it the management of some one else's?" (230). While his comments could be seen as biting, there's a note of self-deprecation that lets him bash the entire bachelor-nation; we nod at our own issues,

knowing that he shares them. His recognition of frailty is attractive, not gloomy, and though he's suggesting that marriage can be a desperate act by which one screwed-up person multiplies the foibles of another, there's still warmth in his hyperbole.

Before Stevenson rebuts himself and argues *for* marriage, his discussions of it give me some insight into the way he conceives the writer-reader relationship. He writes, "Now, when two people of any grit and spirit put their fortunes into one, there succeeds to this comparative certainty a huge welter of competing jurisdictions" (232). Within an argumentative essay, this line seems to have a double-meaning. He describes marriage while also, in my view, describing the combatively cordial discourse I have with him while I read his piece. I—grittily, spiritedly—pit my preconceptions about marriage against his and we have a negotiation.

"For the length of an essay, or a book of essays, we respond to [the author's] persona as we would to a friend caught up in a rapturous monologue" (35), writes Scott Russell Sanders, and I agree with him to a certain extent; but in the essays I highlight here—particularly Stevenson's—the writers invite us into a rapturous *dialogue*, a marriage of the minds. As they reveal their own opinions, they reveal ours too. When Stevenson continues to describe the transition into marriage, then, he writes "[Before], you would recognize your failures with a nod, and so, good-day. But the time for these reserves is over. You have wilfully introduced a witness into your life [. . .]" (231). The personal essayist invites this witness as well, often hot-headedly, foolhardily. One of the great rewards of reading personal essays is that we get to be the witness of this inner life;

and, as readers, we encounter incisive, outspoken writer-friends on the page, becoming witnesses, through them, of our own lives, too.

"Through such a sea of contrarities must this green couple steer their way," (234) writes Stevenson as he begins to steer his own argument from criticism of marriage to praise. I appreciate Stevenson's own submersion in the "sea of contrarities" here. He presents both sides of the argument for and against marriage—plus many of the shadings in-between—and we never get the sense that he's disingenuous in making either case. It's as if he's playing chess against himself, but battling equally hard as both black and white. As he does, we're invited to argue with him and with ourselves. His own match against himself, though, ends in a draw of ambivalences:

> You may safely go to school with hope; but ere you marry, should have learned the mingled lesson of the world; that dolls are stuffed with sawdust, and yet are excellent playthings; that hope and love address themselves to a perfection never realized, and yet, firmly held, become the salt and staff of life; that you yourself are compacted of infirmities, perfect, you might say, in imperfection, and yet you have a something in you lovable and worth preserving. (234)

His idea of "the mingled lesson of the world" seems especially valuable as I consider what I'm drawn to in personal essayists. Stevenson and others gladly address complexities without straining for abstract, pompous conclusions. And his pose as an argumentative moderate makes him a representative of a long line of essayists—from Montaigne to Mamet—who've collegially sparred with themselves and their readers.

Patricia Foster, a contemporary essayist, follows this tradition. In her 2004 essay "Skin" she argues with herself about race relations as she teaches a writing workshop in Tuskegee, Alabama to a group of black students (Foster is, herself, white). The essay fits nicely into my idea of The Aesthetic of Friendship but complicates it, too. It doesn't have the jaunty sense of humor in the face of suffering that Mary Karr's work has, and there's no two-sided argument like in "On Marriage;" but Foster confesses to some uncomfortable opinions about race, and she quarrels with herself in a way that invites us to quarrel with ourselves as well. What's most interesting about "Skin," though, is that, *within* the essay, Foster tells the story of trying to make friends. As she reveals herself to the folks in Alabama, she makes the same gesture to us.

Foster begins her affable essaying with insecurity about the issue she discusses. "I've interrupted something in myself" (1), she writes, and we can tell this piece will be a wavering attempt at answers about race and friendship. This type of wavering sometimes comes across in essays as vacillating, as an unnecessarily weak way of thinking; but in its best form it reveals what Graham Good calls "the changing self in the changing world" (23). "The indeterminacy of both self and world," he writes,

> attains a temporary determination in the essay. The essay aims to inspire confidence not by its authority, not by the mastery of general laws and principles applied to the particular, but by its capacity to record the particulars of experiences and responses accurately as particulars. The essay is an act of personal witness. (23)

In “Skin,” Foster records the particulars of her own changing mind. She is an unreliable, though helpful witness as she shows us her personal hang-ups about race and expresses her futility as “a drive-by visitor dumped in [her black students'] laps” (5).

Foster doesn't delve too far into self-consciousness, though, or let her questions overwhelm any attempt at clarity. In fact, her clarity about trying to make a connection with her students helps me better understand the process of connecting to a reader in general. She writes, “Like all travelers, I’ve come here to translate myself, to become someone different, someone new as if the journey itself is an act of transformation. And yet I’m frightened. I don’t know how to act, how to treat black people as friends, as equals, as part of the casual conversation going on inside my head” (1). I love the idea of traveling as translation of the self, but I think her description of traveling is equally effective here as a metaphor for personal writing. Her journey to Alabama and her journey to us are, perhaps, similarly potholed roads. On both trips, she'll adopt a persona. On both trips, she'll offer her ideas to a suspicious audience—students and readers. And, most importantly, on both trips, she'll try to let her interlocutors become part of “the casual conversation going on inside [her] head.” Above all else, The Aesthetic of Friendship entails the attempt to make readers part of this inner conversation.[1]

Essentially, as Foster dramatizes her meeting with her students, she exhibits how a writer draws closer, carefully, to a reader. “When I sped down the interstate on

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[1] I want to address writerly intent here. I realize I'm committing an early-twentieth century sort of fallacy by ascribing motive to Foster and others. So I want to acknowledge the fraught position of the “I” character, even in personal essays. Woolf wrote, “'I' is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being” (4) and Sanders suggests that we merely wear “the label 'I'” (40). Since I'm discussing writer-reader connection, though, and since I am an essayist who tries to use the techniques I'm identifying to connect with readers, I don't have any choice. “I” needs to exist as a person with agency, someone who can make choices on purpose.

Wednesday, high on purple wild flowers and air thick as gauze," she writes, "I thought of this as my big adventure, a kind of prodigal return [. . .] But now I'm cautious, self-conscious, like a person on display" (2). Though she may feel uncomfortable being on display in real life, that display has to be her goal in personal writing. I recall Woolf's admonition that memoir writers fail to show us the person to whom events happened. Foster doesn't make that mistake. She shows us how she felt and who she was by showing us how she shielded herself from her students: "I hide everything that's been difficult, uncertain. I don't tell about my own nervousness, the way anger and tension rises in me like a tide. I don't tell [. . .] about my uncertainty, my confusion over what it means to be a good person, a good white person" (9). And yet she is telling us and showing, as the essay continues, how she overcomes her silence about race and unburdens herself. Honestly speaking about her prejudice, she feels no sunny uplift, but rather a "sense of relief that the worst part of [her] was pushed out into the air" (7).

That attempt to reveal depends on trusting one's readership. Even as I write this sentence, I think about my invisible audience, the people I may never meet (maybe I shouldn't think about them, but I do). Since I'm arguing a point, I only want them to think it's smart and to think differently about creative nonfiction. When I write about guilt, though, when Patricia Foster writes about race, we may want different things—to be loved, to be unburdened, to challenge misconceptions, to entertain, to find out what we know. But at the very least, we want to be considered, and the best way to achieve that is to develop a friendship with the audience.

Foster, though, judging her own writing workshop with her black students, points out the difficulties of that attempt: “[N]obody likes me. I can feel it in their eyes [. . .] And Writing? How could I possibly have thought writing made anything clearer? Writing is just plain hard. It stirs up the water, makes things murky, cloudy, unsettled, all those ideas jiggling fast against each other, shaking loose fuzziness instead of focus” (5). And yet, after her class, she attends a church service with one of her students. Her description of it, which follows, is representative of her entire project of writer-reader connection:

> I feel a sudden spill of tears and for once I don’t try to tidy my emotions, but let them leak across my face. I know that I am right in the middle of a difficult matter of faith. I don’t know what I believe, what I want to believe, what I believe I can want. [. . .] I’m caught in the middle of this when Louisa’s hand moves over to gather up my own. It’s such a simple gesture, I don’t think as our fingers intertwine. (10)

Buffeted by the great Too-Much—religion, race, selfhood—Foster lets her guard down as a person and a writer: tears pour and her repetitions run until she fumbles toward clarity, connection, Louisa's hand. Though it may sound corny, much of the personal writing impulse amounts to the desire for that hand. Wanting it keeps us writing, even as consistent failure leaves most of us grasping for a touch that's not there. Patricia Foster's fierce ambivalence and honesty, though, allow her that connection with Louisa, *and*, I'd argue, with us.

In my favorite essay, “Street Haunting” (1927), Virginia Woolf investigates the possibility of a similar connection with people she glimpses for a moment on the streets of London. Just as Patricia Foster does, Woolf links that possibility to the transformative experience of reading and writing. While in a second-hand-book store, Woolf writes of the shabby-gray volumes, “[I]n this random miscellaneous company we may rub against some complete stranger who will, with luck, turn into the best friend we have in the world” (262). It's my hope that readers of creative nonfiction have the same experience as they encounter personal essays and memoirs. I know, like Woolf, that these connections are “sudden capricious friendships” (262), but the value of those unexpected connections remains.

Of course, Woolf is the most optimistic depressive I've ever had the melancholic pleasure of encountering, and so while “Street Haunting” rhapsodizes about the beauty of transcendent human connection, it includes sad doubt, too, about the possibility of that connection. Both her sadness and her sparkling hope are on display in this passage in which she compares reading books and reading people: “The number of books in the world is infinite, and one is forced to glimpse and nod and move on after a moment of talk, a flash of understanding, as, in the street outside, one catches a word in passing and from a chance phrase fabricates a lifetime” (263). The words on a page, she suggests, can be like a person we try to know. But while we may think we commune with those folks on the street, or with a writer pouring out her personal secrets, that “flash of understanding” is available so rarely. It may, in the end, be merely a creation of the isolated mind. As the near-impossibility of empathy becomes her central topic, though,

Woolf allows us to think that just maybe we can gain access to her mind, that writer and reader can connect.

This question of whether or not we move beyond our own consciousnesses and mingle with others is constant in Woolf, from her novels *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *Between the Acts*, to her critical manifesto "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," to her beautiful personal essay "A Sketch of the Past," which she composed in 1939. In that piece she discusses the mystery of memory, writing,

> I can reach a state where I seem to be watching things happen as if I were there. That is, I suppose, that my memory supplies what I had forgotten, so that it seems as if it were happening independently, though I am really making it happen. In certain favourable moods, memories—what one has forgotten—come to the top. Now if this is so, is it not possible—I often wonder—that things we have felt with great intensity have an existence independent of our minds; are in fact still in existence? (67)

I love the purposefully tentative syntax of that last sentence. With her ambivalence, her wondering, Woolf invites us into the debate. "[O]ne side of me criticises the other" (67), she writes, and we're grateful that she allows us to see her splintered self, and, through it, our own. Lopate suggests that this mode allows writer-reader communion: "Personal essayists converse with the reader because they are already having dialogues and disputes with themselves" (xxiv). In Woolf, those disputes, whether in the minds of her characters or in the thoughtful pose of her personal prose, compel us to engage with her.

This passage is also fascinating because Woolf posits that the past is alive outside of us, and that we have only limited access to it. Interestingly, she seems to feel the same way about the past as she does about books, about other people, about her younger self. Memories, like dusty folios and strangers on Bond St., are possible friends, the best friends we have in the world in fact, but still elusive.

She explores these metaphysical puzzles in “Street Haunting,” too, which, as heady as it is, maintains a champagne-crisp charm. So, as Woolf details her journey to buy a pencil, she also briskly describes London in Winter, the personalities of its inhabitants, the dusk-light, a shoe store, married shopkeepers arguing in a way she knows is friendly, and the paradoxical nature of the self. Within the essay, though, she's actually taking a stroll through the alleys of empathy. As I mentioned above, she talks about linking up with books as though they are other people; and in the following passage, she shows us how she imagines herself *into* other lives:

> We halt at the door of the boot shop and make some little excuse, which has nothing to do with the real reason, for folding up the bright paraphernalia of the streets and withdrawing to some duskier chamber of being where we may ask, as we raise our left foot obediently upon the stand: “What then, is it like to be a dwarf?” (258)

In the subsequent section, Woolf describes a dwarf getting new shoes so expertly that the other woman almost comes alive in her, in “some duskier chamber of being”:

> And as this was the only occasion upon which she was not afraid of being looked at but positively craved attention, she was ready to use any device

> to prolong the choosing and fitting. Look at my feet, she seemed to be saying, as she took a step this way and then a step that way. The shop girl good-humoredly must have said something flattering, for suddenly her face lit up in ecstasy. (259)

Woolf can't know that this was the only moment of fearlessness in the dwarf's life, nor can she know what was said. She extrapolates wildly ("seemed to be saying" and *seemed to be thinking* are two of her favorite constructions). This passage, though, seems to suggest what she thinks empathy is like, the reach and the limits of it. As she reads herself into the dwarf's life—tentatively, brilliantly, falsely, perhaps—we can read ourselves into hers.

By the end of the paragraph, though, the rapture is at an end: "[. . .] the ecstasy faded, knowledge returned, the old peevishness, the old apology came back, and by the time she had reached the street again she had become a dwarf only" (259). The word ecstasy, meaning both extreme happiness and a release from oneself, draws attention to itself as Woolf repeats it. But ecstasy is the tease of Woolf's work. She can project herself so far into others, but she's always reeled back into herself. Later in "Street Haunting," she writes about all the folks she's seen:

> Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others. One could be a washerwoman, a publican, a street singer. And what greater delight and wonder can there be than to leave the straight lines of personality and

> deviate into those footpaths that lead beneath brambles and thick tree trunks into the heart of the forest where live those wild beasts, our fellow men? (265).

For me, this is a passage of deep significance. With her word "illusion," Woolf suggests that we are forever isolated from each other; and yet she celebrates the idea that we can convince ourselves out of that feeling—if only for achingly short, semi-redemptive moments. She puts forward a theory of fiction here, too, one in which writers must attempt to inhabit the lives of characters and write them from the inside out. And, for me, she captures the invigorating experience of meeting another person on the page, of looking into a life via language.

Scott Russell Sanders writes that the essay-composing experience is one in which we "chase mental rabbits," following our ideas until we reach an illuminating discovery. For Woolf, the *reading* experience allows us to deviate and digress away from ourselves until we find—lying in wait like an idea that's been just out of reach—the wildness of another mind. "[S]ince it is impossible to have every experience fully, one can grow something that represents other people's experiences," she writes in "A Sketch of the Past." "Often one has to make do with seeds; the germs of what might have been, had one's life been different [. . .] [L]ike those rapid glances, for example, that I cast into basements when I walk in London streets" (135). Again, to Woolf, writing and reading can be akin to experiencing another life. She's not interested in a stable, unchangeable person encountering another static mind in a text, though. She represents herself as a mixed-up person reaching into other slippery lives: "we are streaked, variegated, all of a

mixture," she writes; "the colours have run" (261). In her most sublime passage, she remembers standing at a balcony months before her present moment, and she asks,

> Is the true self this which stands on the pavement in January, or that which bends over the balcony in June? Am I here, or am I there? Or is the true self neither this nor that, neither here nor there, but something so varied and wandering that it is only when we give the rein to its wishes and let it take its way unimpeded that we are indeed ourselves? (261)

All of this comes, remember, as she walks to buy a pencil.

Woolf's question to herself almost *requires* us to ask something similar of ourselves. Does my past still exist? How is 14-year old David both me and not-me? Am I my consciousness? Or am I, essentially, some instinctive thing that only emerges when I'm experiencing life extra-consciously? Woolf asks these questions for us and with us. She asks us how we relate to each other, how we relate to the person we think we really are, and the result is nothing short of magic. She makes me feel about her how she must have felt about the dwarf: that I can enter a mind and possess (for a minute or two) another person's insecurity and elation, commune with someone who seems—and she *must* be—as complex, as muddled-up, as real as I sense myself to be.

Woolf is no ordinary companion, then. But her lyrical internal conversations put her firmly within the framework of The Aesthetic of Friendship. And by immersing herself in the empathetic moment—with books, strangers, her own past—she makes a path for us to understand *her* personally. To become such an extraordinary intimate, improbable as that success is, should be the central aim for personal writers.

IV

Frankness, ambivalence, and dramatization of empathy all contribute to writer-reader connection, but the late David Foster Wallace reaches for intimacy by positioning himself, in a number of essays, at the center of a group of friends. The tactic is instructive as I attempt to understand essayistic friendship.

Though known for his novels, Wallace's hilarious, ethical, verbose work represents the best of what's been done in nonfiction this century. His essays aren't about self-revelation, necessarily, and yet his persona explodes from his expansive arguments. He amiably appeals to our logic with analogies, jokes, and badgerings, and there's an anticipation of readerly doubts in his work, too, when he argues with his own opinions, as Stevenson did. Even as he seems to show off, in what critics see as self-indulgent swaths of high-brow prose, he makes fun of himself. He slings some sesquipidalianisms and, dontchya know, undercuts them with plain-speak that lets us see he's playing with language for rhetorical reasons. His ethical appeals are sharp but never shrill. He cuts his targets while maintaining a certain reverence for institutions that are often lazily attacked—religion, conservatism, the small town. He doesn't take easy swipes.

But besides the humor, ambiguity, self-deprecation, and complex moral appeal, there's a specific element Wallace uses that draws his readers into closer communion with him: insults. In three pieces—2006's “Big Red Son” and “The View from Mrs. Thompson's;” and the title essay from his collection *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1997)—Wallace shows us both his friendship with one group *and* that group's

strongly-worded distaste of another group, another person, another idea. He levels criticisms that are backed up by other characters, and with his barbs strengthened by this built-in posse, he invites us into a group of fellow-feeling. We find ourselves in league not only with this erudite, frantic, pore-invigorating writer-observer, but with his other buddies as well.

In his essay “Big Red Son,” Wallace explores the personalities and events surrounding the Adult Video News awards, the gaudy, bawdy annual celebration of the porn industry that he's attending. He carefully humanizes some of the porn stars, as when he writes, “Alex Dane is now telling Harold Hecuba about a stray dog she found and has decided to keep. She is excited as she describes the dog and for a moment seems about fourteen; the impression lasts only a second or two and is heartbreaking” (29). The essay isn't just a romp, then, or an attack on inauthenticity, vapidity, venality. That would be too simple for Wallace. He's ambiguous about sex-as-entertainment, and he implicates himself merely by including some background knowledge that only an occasional consumer could have: “It is difficult to describe how it feels [. . .] to have seen these strangers' faces in orgasm—that most unguarded and purely neural of expressions, the one so vulnerable that for centuries you basically had to marry a person to get to see it” (16). That honesty disarms him and makes the criticisms he *does* offer feel surprising; they have the passionate thought that moralizing often lacks.

The essay is funny, too, and not in the puerile or sneering way we might expect from prudes-out-of-water. He says one actor “looks like a curly-haired and extremely fit praying mantis,” and he characterizes the absurdity of the awards show by writing, “At

one point during a routine on pre-mature ejaculation, Dick Filth actually chokes on a California roll" (7). So with unflinching humor and honesty, a little insecurity, and some necessary ambivalence, Wallace enhances the reader-writer relationship. But then he gangs up in the essays with a group of friends, his opinions take on the force of that group, and we feel what it's like to be in his company.

In this essay, Wallace's partners-in-insult are the aforementioned Harold Hecuba and Dick Filth, industry writers who act as vulgar Virgils for "your correspondents" (this is how Wallace refers to himself, as a plural, and that little detail adds to the feeling that reader and writer are encountering the event as a group, too). Their main target is degradation-impresario, Max Hardcore. When we first encounter Hardcore, we've just entered a party with D. Filth, H. Hecuba, and D. F. Wallace.[2] We're meant to like Filth and Hecuba because Wallace keeps relaying amusing tidbits they've shared with him. They're his entry into the porn-world, he's ours. Together, we all despise Max Hardcore, whose misogyny, self-aggrandizement, and awful fashion sense turn the collective stomach. Wallace writes, "(we noticed that Max never laughs at a joke he hasn't told)" (32), and it's the "we" that's important. As Wallace skewers Hardcore, we read it as the overriding judgment of the whole coterie that includes Filth and Hecuba. "You're either In or you're not," writes Wallace of the porn community. "Performers, being the industry's fissile core, are of course In [. . .] and nonindustry journalists are way, way non-In [. . .]" (22-23). As much as Wallace (along with his reader) is an outsider here, though, he creates an In-group in the essay that includes himself, the other writers, and

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[2] Referring to people by their first initial and last name is a recognizable Wallacian stylistic feature. Another is footnotes. I won't attempt (too much) emulation.

us. Later, Wallace again shows us the group he's created around himself, writing, “Max Hardcore, to Table 189's immense and unkind delight, doesn't win one single thing” (46).

This teaming up happens, too, when Wallace wants to criticize the actor Scotty Schwartz. After the latter tells an obnoxious story in which he's the hero, Wallace writes, “What is the socially appropriate response to an anecdote like this—a contextless anecdote, apropos nothing, with its smugly unsubtle (and yet not unmoving, finally, in its naked insecurity) agenda of getting you to admire the teller?” (33). He continues, “How is one expected to respond? It was very uncomfortable. One of yr. corresps. opted for 'Gosh. Wow.' The other pretended to have had a brussel sprout go down the wrong way” (33). With passages like this, Wallace shows us that he's found people of like-mind within the essay, and he assumes he'll find the same likemindedness in us. We cheer, then, not so much for the keenness of the writer but for the society he's allowed us to keep.

In a very different essay, “The View from Mrs. Thompson's,” Wallace depicts the group of midwestern ladies with whom he watched the news coverage of 9/11. “Mrs. Thompson,” he writes, “is a long-time member and a leader in the congregation, and her living room tends to be kind of a gathering place. She's also the mom of one of my very best friends here, F—” (135). As more and more people come to watch the footage on CBS news, Wallace notices “Mrs. Bracero's normally pretty much useless and irritating son, Duane [. . .]” (137). Duane becomes the foil for the otherwise reverent and thoughtful group. Wallace describes Duane in biting terms, writing that he “has a pager whose function is unclear” and that his “main contribution is to keep iterating how much

like a movie [9/11] all seems" (137-138). He continues, in a telling way considering what I see him doing in many of his essays, writing, "It always seems to be important to have at least one person in the vicinity to hate" (138).

In his essay "Authority and American Usage," Wallace writes "Us always needs a Them because being not-Them is essential to being Us" (103). Though that kind of prejudice has scary undertones, we accept it in Wallace's work, I think, because we feel that his central struggle is in figuring out, complexly, who's acting ethically and who's not. He wants us to agree with him about Duane and be on his side. He has allies within the essay and we're part of that treaty, too. But after he's defined his allies, and after he's defined the foil, he makes a surprise move. He writes, "What these Bloomington ladies are, or start to seem to me, is innocent" (139). He continues,

> There is what would strike many Americans as a marked, startling lack of cynicism in the room [. . .] [W]hat they do is all sit together and feel really bad and pray. No one in Mrs. Thompson's crew would ever be so nauseous as to try to get everybody to pray aloud or form a prayer circle, but you can still tell what they're doing.
>
> Make no mistake, this is mostly a good thing. It forces you to think and do things you most likely wouldn't do alone [. . .] [A]nd it's good to pray this way. It's just a bit lonely to have to. Truly decent, innocent people can be taxing to be around. (139-140)

After he has aligned himself with Mrs. Thompson and the others, he shows us that he's isolated from them, too. Though he creates groups in many of his essays in order to

invite us into his own arguments, that sort of identification seems futile here. Wallace's attempts at empathy feel similar to Woolf's—they are energetic, creative leaps across the void between person and person, between writer and reader that seem partly desperate. Even as he's unified with his in-essay support system and with us, it's the moment of identification with that group that drives home his loneliness. He writes, "[S]ome part of the horror of the Horror [of 9/11] was knowing, deep in my heart, that whatever America the men in those planes hated so much was far more my America, and F—'s, and poor old loathsome Duane's, than it was these ladies'" (140).

If we've identified with the writer's side up to this point—with kind Mrs. Thompson and the others—we're now made to feel that, with Wallace, we're actually more like the reprehensible Duane. The effect is a kind of disorientation. Maybe we've thought the same thing as Duane about the towers looking like a movie, and, hypocritically, we know we've scorned people who've relied on that cliché. So Wallace writes an ending that's affirming and terrifying. We're together with him in a room, as we were together at table 189 with the porn writers; we dislike a person together and so we're part of a discerning group. And yet we're made to feel seriously alone, too, complicit with those whom we've been taught by the writer to hate.

Wallace's most complete depiction of group identification and collective contempt comes in his famous long essay "A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again." The piece, which details Wallace's experience on a cruise ship, morphs into a meditation on entitlement and the discomfort of extreme comfort. But in order to get us to accept his (occasionally unfair) arguments and feel included in his judgments, he

introduces us to both a friendly group, and to the awful teenage prototype, Mona. She is a foil in the tradition of Max Hardcore and Duane. “With the conspicuous exception of Mona, I liked all my tablemates a lot” (281), he writes, so beginning his “anti-Mona alliance” (283). He continues the tactic later, writing,

> Stony-faced Alice and I have tonight established a deep and high-voltage bond across the table, united in our total disapproval and hatred of Mona, and are engaging in a veritable ballet of coded little stab-, strangle-, and slap-Mona pantomimes for each other's amusement, Alice and I are, which I've got to say is for me a fun and therapeutic anger-outlet after the day's tribulations. (348)

These examples might seem like tossed-off Wallacian mischief or even pettiness, but we should remember that Mona has been engaging in snobbish, ungrateful, unaware behavior. She represents the arch self-centeredness that Wallace skewers in many of his essays—pretending it's her birthday to get a cake, taking $100 a night from her grandparents with an eye-roll, complaining constantly. Wallace organizes us against this behavior.

But, importantly, Mona's venality is a banality. We all have these selfishnesses in us, the essay suggests. We might have the tactlessness of a Duane, too, and the base desires of a Max Hardcore. Wallace's villains are not-us and they are the worst parts of us, of him. We know he associated with Duane and felt compelled by the prurience of Max Hardcore's world. So as we're invited to judge with him, we're challenged to see the ways in which we're in league with the foils as well.

One of my favorite stories about David Foster Wallace (and these poured in after his death) is that he once wrote “I hate you” on a student's paper because that student had made the same grammatical mistake over and over again. The student recounted this gleefully. There was some abiding love in that harsh teacher, it seemed. And that's what emerges from D.F. Wallace's pervasive insults. He seems to have such a passion for what's good and right and hale, for what's true. Anyone with that much scorn has to care deeply. In essence, then, when we cut through David Foster Wallace's high-brow talk and his hatred, through his Latin derivations and his footnotes, his essays are simply about who we are in relation to others, what we need to disparage so that we can understand ourselves more clearly, why we should care, and how, tentatively, we can connect.

V

Throughout this essay, I've been attempting to show how nonfiction writers achieve that “deep and high-voltage bond across the table” with readers. I pointed out specific bits of humor and plainspokenness in Mary Karr's work. She gets us to laugh even while detailing her awful childhood, and because of that we're willing to walk with her down a path of painful self-discovery. Additionally, she and Edward Hoagland try to earn readerly trust by risking stark confessions that may be a turn-off for some readers. They reveal their inner-contradictions, their fibs and faults, and, in doing so, generously usher us into their lives. Hoagland in particular carves out space for vulnerable, possibly sentimental passages about love and pain by blending those with other moments of seeming insensitivity. They both achieve what Thomas Larson suggests is one of the

main goals of personal writing. They declare, unafraid, “Here is what it is like to be *me*, to face what I faced, to lose what I lost” (22).

Extending what I see as The Aesthetic of Friendship, both Robert Louis Stevenson and Patricia Foster argue against themselves in their essays “On Marriage” and “Skin.” That ambivalence summons us into conversation with them about our own prejudices. In their sympathetic insecurity, they show the action of a mind at work. If we, too, are the sorts of people who constantly take the temperature of our own opinions, we will recognize them as apt companions.

Their essays are particularly instructive because they dramatize the attempt to get to know another person intimately. Stevenson suggests that two strong-willed people will butt heads productively; Foster laments the uselessness of writing and reading as ways to try to meet another person, but finally has a moment with one of her students that seems to redeem her attempt. We might read these essays and think, What a hot-headed act it is to try to find a like-minded friend in a mass of print. We might think, Writing confuses everything and actually throws up boundaries between people. But the essays offer hope that a connection can occur, that a line can be drawn from within the literature to the reader.

Virginia Woolf complicates this idea, but her essay about empathy, “Street Haunting,” relies on the possibility of some scant human transcendence. As she argues that second-hand books can be lively friends, as she watches a dwarf try on a shoe, we visit her within a book and put on—briefly—*her* shoes as she walks through London. We feel the crispness of the winter streets and the fleeting thrill of transposing our lives

into another strolling consciousness. She shows us how she empathizes and therefore conjures the necessary illusion that we can experience the fullness of her mind, too.

In a similar way, David Foster Wallace reserves a place for us at his roundtable of friends and tries to convince us of his opinions by showing how many people within his own essays are already on his side. It's Us against Them, he seems to say. Like in Woolf's world, we're welcomed so warmly; but we're also made to confront our own loneliness, that sense of isolation even within a group.

I've hoped here to analyze tangible ways writers bring us into their folds. Selfishly, I've also hoped to rediscover some tricks that I can use in my own nonfiction to lure a readership. Of course, essays and memoirs that include all of these features can just as easily fall flat. Humor and honesty are a mere centimeter from glibness and dull sincerity. Arguing with oneself can seem inauthentic or inarticulate. Even composing an essay about empathy, about developing connections with other people—romantic, platonic, familial—often turns into a mush of insularity. But I feel confident that the features I've laid out are important ones for successful personal prose. Whether we're novices or Woolfs, then, we should remember to keep our scenes funny and frank, to leave our conclusions unsettled, and to reach for that connection with another mind even when it seems improbable. “The trick is to realize,” writes Phillip Lopate, “that one is not important, except insofar as one's example can serve to elucidate a more widespread human trait and make readers feel a little less lonely and freakish” (xxxiii). Do you believe this? I think I do.

VI

In the collection that follows this introduction, *Collation*, I've tried to keep in mind the importance of honesty, ambivalence, and empathy. Even though I've learned from the masters I've mentioned, though, I know I have work to do as I continue to develop a believable, likable, (relatively) consistent persona. I hope I'm on my way to cutting through conventional wisdom, and that I'm beginning to display, in my essays, the person to whom things happened, as Woolf calls for. The intense focus necessary to do that can be hard to muster, though. I'm often caught between the desire to tell an easy-going story and the desire to wrestle desperately with an issue that means a great deal to me. I've also thought about whether I should be consciously humorous or ultra-serious. And should I write tightly-focused essays or follow the tradition of digression and braiding that's often seemed so attractive to me, that seems reflective of my thought process and my hyper-linked society? In essence, how can I be most effectively myself in my creative writing?

Collation is my attempt to answer these questions moderately. In the collection, I approach my pressing issues—family influence, the falsehood of memory, my own failures of empathy, the problem of authenticity—but I try to avoid ponderousness. Many of my essays are serio-comic, I think, and while I've worked to structure my pieces coherently, I didn't want to lose the energy of digression, either. As I move forward as a writer, then, I hope to find a middle ground, to be seriously companionable. With that in mind, I want to look at some of the ways I've tried to do that in my essays, and how I've attempted to follow The Aesthetic of Friendship as I've come to conceive of it.

It has been my goal since I started writing nonfiction to be unafraid of my own feelings—those that may appear syrupy and those that may seem harsh or otherwise socially-unacceptable. That type of frankness, which I identified in Karr's and Hoagland's work, emerges most notably in my essays “Bloodlines” and “EB:47.” In the first, I struggle with whether I ever actively loved a particular member of my family, writing,

> I was trying, really, to convince myself that I could love my grandmother, this difficult person who'd embarrassed me with talk of my girlfriends since I was just out of diapers, who didn't much like immigrants, whose “lousy” aches and pains turned *how-are-you* small-talk into *oh-no* discussion of dire suffering, who sometimes seemed desperate for
>
> our affection, and too aware of our reluctance to give it, as we unbuckled our belts and watched “Wheel of Fortune” on her boxy old Magnavox. As she got us more snacks.

In this passage, I point at my own ungratefulness and indulge in some possibly over-harsh criticism. I find that I have to admit to these squirrelly parts of myself in my essays, though. They're what trouble me—how I've mistreated someone, how I've been shallow or callous or hypocritical. Often, this is what I'm trying to work out in the piece, and while I don't like to present myself as swamped by guilt, I do think that it's important to implicate myself in order to create a persona who's honest. No one wants to hear from a writer who always does and says the right thing. Lopate writes, “The enemy of the personal essay is self-righteousness, not just because it is tiresome and ugly in itself, but

because it slows down the dialectic of self-questioning, what E. M. Cioran calls 'thinking against oneself'" (xxx). In thinking against myself, I try to erase self-delusion, self-justification, and I try to build trust with my reader.

In my essay "EB:47," a piece about my interaction with an Iraq war sniper, I target myself because of my "righteous feeling that I could help him if he needed it;" but I go on to say that "I was also way too attracted to his incredible life-story." The essay, which details his experiences with violence and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, becomes just as much about my unsavory curiosity about him. I attempt to be as honest about this as I can, mentioning my own violent fantasies and my hope that he will be good material for my writing. In the following passage, I explore my unexpected contempt for this wounded person, and I think that helps me be a trustworthy presence in the essay:

> I've gotten myself in this position of mock-therapist, mock-friend, and I have to sound impressed by how nonchalantly this student of mine can look back at the precision of his murders. I don't want him to be secure with himself, though. It's my job to get him to reflect. If he wants to write, he'd better be in crisis, but he says he doesn't think that way about the war. In order for me to justify him, though, in order for me to see him as the complex person I think everyone should be, he needs to hurt in front of me.

Again, frankness—about violence, or sex, or selfishness, or discomfort—allows essayists to drop past their defenses and connect with readers who are eager to see a person

struggling with himself, speaking his mind, and changing it, which I seem to do pretty often in my essays.

That kind of ambivalence is certainly a prevalent feature of my work, and, like Patricia Foster and Robert Louis Stevenson, I try to foreground it in order to let the reader in on the conversation in my head. I find myself most unsure when writing about family and empathy, as in the essays “Kin,” “Nuclear Family,” “Bloodlines,” and “Collation.” In “Kin,” I'm arguing that our memories are both a part of us and separate from us, much like members of our families seem to be. It's an idea I'm only trying out, though, one I'm ambivalent about. I attempt the argument by depicting my relationship with my mother—moments when we were separate and moments of connection during which I could sometimes convince myself that we were very similar people:

> I think I feel my mom in me especially when I'm transfixed by water, mostly the ocean. She's my precedent; but then it's up to me to imagine what else she experiences, up to me to pretend. I can give it my best guess, just as I do when I'm restructuring the setting and dialogue of some shadowy past. But while both my mom and my memory can seem to take me over for a few seconds at a time, I find myself making them up, no matter how close I feel them to be. Memory is kin, mom a flash of neurons.

My idea here owes its life to Woolf. Within this essay, I'm trying, like Woolf did in “Street Haunting,” to show how we can sense ourselves to be empathizing, how glorious that can seem, and how illusory.

At the end of my essay “Nuclear Family,” I attempt the same identification with my father—an overworked nuclear engineer—even though the rest of the piece explores how distant I sometimes feel we've been from each other:

> As I hear his voice in mine (we sing “Silent Night” two octaves down), as I sense my face hardening into the stone of his perennial disappointment, as my jaw locks with grievance and unlocks again with unexpected glee, I feel the unmistakable weight of his settling. That, it turns out, is not all bad. And what a strange moment it always is to finally recognize my father, not through any of the hard attempts at understanding him, or his job, but through the natural onset of my own grown-man moods: my half-lives, the waste of them, the gloom and glow of our back-and-forth heart.

I think of this moment as akin to Woolf's inspection of the dwarf in “Street Haunting.” She projects herself into that person, empathizes deeply, and in doing so lets us into her own life, her own way of seeing the world. In describing my father and the way I sense his life seeping into mine, I hope I make a space for a reader to relate to me, too. *I'm capriciously despairing, capriciously joyful, and I try to understand myself in terms of other people. It's possible, maybe, to connect with another person through deep contemplation of oneself.* In suggesting that, I try to invite a connection. If a reader senses that she feels the way I do, then she's been able to “put on briefly” my life. Just as I use humor and candor as entryways into my essays, I try to depict my identification with other people—as Patricia Foster did, and as Woolf did much better—as an offer of textual friendship.

In “Bloodlines,” I write about my mother's feud with my grandmother, and I debate myself to figure out where I stand. My grandmother, a powerful force in our family's life, criticized my mother's parenting style, but my mother never seemed to be able to forgive her in-law. She held a long, destructive grudge. I've never been sure how I fit into their fighting, but, in the essay, I explore my role:

> [H]ow can my mother not see why she wanted to be a part of her grandchildren’s upbringing? Wasn’t [my grandmother's] “more children” prayer at Christmas really a personal plea? Didn’t my grandma want to baby me the way she would have babied the kids she couldn't have? Then again, I don't know what it was like for my mother to have her role as a parent challenged, to be kept on the outside of a family.

“There's so much you don't know,” she told me, and she's right. Very often, trite conclusions hurt this kind of meditative essay. Because I've witnessed that, I prefer to be undecided at the end of this piece, as many of us are when we litigate the long-simmering complaints of our families. Ambivalence and questioning lead to dialogue, though. So I seek out subjects that seem murky. I try to come to a better understanding than I had at the beginning of the piece, but I rarely let the conclusive music swell, as I hope you'll see in my essay, “Collation,” about my own in-laws and a death they endured.

In that title essay, I'm straining to know both myself and another family all the while inviting readers (hopefully) to know me. I've tried to maintain an essayist's most

useful pose, that of being productively muddled-up. The following passage shows that pose. Here, I'm working through what I've wanted from my wife's parents:

> I wondered if the closeness we were inching toward would affect me too much. Could it determine where Megan and I might choose to live and how we might raise our own kids? Would their standards and traditions subtly (or not-so-subtly) mold my future? Would I ever really paddle my own canoe?
>
> Each off-hand comment or small event with them seemed to me to be a portent of how my life would unfold. *Too much snow to drive*, the Sheehans say? I'll live a cautious existence and die having never been bold. *Time to re-do the kitchen*, they decide? We will be eternally dissatisfied with what we have, kitchens and otherwise.
>
> *Just thought we'd call and say hi*, they say on the phone? Megan will always act the way they do, always be theirs, never be mine.

I'm able to be serious in this passage while exaggerating for comic effect. I think that "We will be eternally dissatisfied" as a response to people wanting to re-do their kitchen is both sincere and self-effacingly funny. Sometimes—and this is one of the key challenges of being a nonfiction writer—we have to present our whole selves and our ridiculous, even immoderate feelings. In this essay, I hope my love for this family comes through along with my early doubts about them. I've warred with myself about how I fit in with my in-laws, whether I wanted to be one of them or whether I wanted to make my own way. These are the kinds of internal conflicts (sometimes minor) that I explore

throughout the collection. It's not a groundbreaking attempt, perhaps, but, as I've tried to show here, I work within The Aesthetic of Friendship as I've defined it in order to reach readers who have similar concerns, readers who will appreciate critical questioning, a sense of humor, and small explorations of empathy.

If I'm an essayistic friend at all, though, it's mostly because I've tried to follow the advice my parents always gave me: I've tried to be myself. This introduction has been an attempt to flesh out that hard-to-live-up-to cliché, to show how a writer emerges as himself in a way that's even more difficult in writing than it ever was in grade school.

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Co-Stars

Act One:

While I was trying to figure out how to be a different person, I met my wife. I was in a flagging relationship at the time—my college girlfriend, Margaret, lived on a separate continent—and I needed a distraction from our long-distance unhappiness. We'd been fighting in all the usual ways, about abstract things and about what, if anything, we meant to each other. I'd stopped being funny; she'd stopped being flirty, and our phone talks felt patterned, like we were rehearsing a scene from an outdated play—stilted dialogue, ultra-predictable ending. At the time, I wasn't looking for another girl, though, just another role, one that felt less melodramatic. So, ironically maybe, I auditioned for a play and took a part in a show called *For Whom the Southern Belle Tolls*, an over-the-top parody of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. I figured maybe the silliness of a broad comedy could help me feel better about Margaret leaving.

While I tried to perform my way out of feeling sorry for myself, I met my wife. I'm sad to say I don't remember much about our first encounter besides my own dodginess and foot-shuffling. After a few minutes, though, as if to acknowledge that I'd been unappealing and that we'd been awkward with each other, I told her my most immature joke:

“Hey Megan, what's sticky and brown?”

“I don't know, what?”

“A stick!”

Her nod-and-smile was the most effective joke-neutralizer I'd ever seen. She did everything but pat me on the head, and it became clear that the gangly/goofy schtick I'd tried so hard to perfect was not going to sway her. But I didn't have to have everyone in the world like me, right? And I already had a girlfriend, so that was something, I guess. I still tried, though, to think up better jokes, to keep tabs on where Megan was in the room, to somehow focus on the show.

Our bizarre production featured, as all college theater does, a broken piano, a feather boa, five forks stolen from the dining hall, an old wheelchair, three rotary phones, a single red rose, and a misguided director. Allison kept us at rehearsal late so we could do revolutionary new acting exercises she claimed she'd invented. She cast a pill-popping dropout in a huge role. And she made us all rehearse the show with Italian accents. This mostly worked for me, though I was ultra-conscious of the fact that my *capiche* was not as sharp as Signora Megan's was. Still, for a few hours a night, I pretended to be a happy-go-lucky college actor, care-free and flamboyant, improvising Allison's animal sounds in order to hone my sacred acting craft.

While I barked and meowed, I met my wife. Megan was an increasingly intriguing redhead with perfect comic timing. Because I thought she was hilarious, I needed her to think I was as funny as I really was. (Insecurity and over-confidence had led me, inevitably, to college theater.) So after the false start of our first encounter, I tried to talk to her a few times at rehearsals, but she was a tough audience, with that same suspicious streak I later realized was shyness. I told her my joke about the guy with the orange for a head, about the guy who goes to clown college, and all the material I had on

religious figures in floatation devices. She didn't really laugh: I took this to mean she didn't care for me. And so, perversely, she grew enormous in my estimation of her. Pale and lovely Megan. Enigmatic Megan. Unimpressed Megan. Always in the corner of my eye.

I'd started to act a few years before because I wanted to overcome my fear of being in front of people, of being noticed. Into those auditions, I'd taken the same nothing-to-lose spirit I'd mustered when asking high school girls to dances. Like those frightening attempts, acting was something I just had to do, not out of any artistic integrity, but out of an almost biological aversion to being a wuss. Now, when I had my anxiety-dreams about standing naked onstage, though, the only audience member staring back at me was Megan, in glasses, and she was taking notes. I dreamed that I'd forgotten my lines in front of her, and I was afraid she might boo me. Somehow, she'd become my newest stage-fright and I cowered hard.

While I felt a paralyzing fear, I met my wife. That same week Margaret kissed her ex-boyfriend over in Spain. When she told me, I played the scene perfectly, expressing just the right outrage before, after a dramatic pause, hanging up on her. I'm not saying my anger was fake; it just felt scripted. A thousand better men had taken their shot at the jilted lover role. I couldn't make it fresh. But I spent the day hovering between the emotional fetal position and a show-must-go-on bravado.

I decided we'd work through it, Margaret and me. But I wasn't going to feel bad about noticing Megan, no sirree. Our show was much more fun than the derivative drama I was sitting through in my actual life. And as diversions go, Megan was a cute

one. She had the seventh-best laugh in the world (I'd made a partial list), and I'd overheard that she liked Scattergories, my all-time favorite boardgame. From that, I built her up in my imagination, where she stole scenes left and right. She was kind, too, in a humble way, and calm amidst the pretty boys and nervous breakdowns of the theater set. For me, the real kicker, though, was the way she danced the Charleston (as we did, naturally, to warm up for performances). In that and in so much else she had an enviable, unguarded joy. I'd smile about her in spite of myself.

In our show, Megan had the title role. She was the Southern Belle. I played her perverted, mentally-challenged son, Tom. That was our inauspicious meeting, more psychological case study than romantic comedy, but we pulled it off. She nailed her debutante's accent, and I delivered a not untouching monologue about Dutch pornography while humping the set. I'd figured out that college theater couldn't be parodied. I'd figured out, in an odd way, how to be a different person. And, while I played him, I met my wife.

Act Two:

That whole year, I kept calling Margaret in Spain. Once a week, I tried to pack all of the drama of a college relationship into fifteen minutes: three minutes of sexy-talk, three minutes of angry miscommunication, three minutes of sitting silent, three of hysterical laughter, three of exhausted promising. I tried to remember that we'd been good together when we saw each other everyday. She gave great hugs, my midwestern girl, and wore great sweatshirts (what else was there, really?). I loved how she could

somehow be naively good-natured and bitingly cynical in the same sentence—that had made us tight friends as we walked around campus, wide-eyed, smirking. And her hair, leather-jacket brown, smelled like spiced chai and fire. For these reasons, for that last one really, I convinced myself that we could weather a year apart. We were patient. We tried. We said we would think about each other, tonight, not like in a sappy way—I'm not looking at the stars or anything—but tonight, at exactly 7:15 (12:15 your time), will you, because I will, think of you, even if you're just flossing or something. Okay? Good. But I could be a real beast to her—demanding future concessions to make up for the fact that she'd left me alone; not so subtly belittling the Spanish culture that she'd come to love (too busy with your precious Velázquez to call last week?); needily flooding her with affection only so I could feel like a martyr when she didn't flood me back. But I was only trying to coax some feeling out of her, out of myself. I'd learned in my theater classes that the best performers always got reactions from the other actors. But our portrayals felt strident, dull.

All of this happened in the afternoon, and not at 2 a.m. in a dorm stairwell—as is the agreed upon venue for late-adolescent histrionics. Because of the time difference, Margaret selfishly slept during my prime hours for advancing romantic causes, so I turned to Theater as a replacement dalliance. It was erotic: the late nights, the ecstatic effort of putting on another life (even if I was doing it badly), the fact that everyone smelled like cloves. We were all fearless Bohemians, too, so there was a charged frankness in the rehearsals that sometimes felt funny, sometimes forced. Had Joannie and Sam, as they so loudly professed, really done it on the costume room floor? Wait, Steve

and Roxanne used the prop feather duster for *what*? Hold on, *Who* was tri-sexual? (I didn't even know what that one meant, and maybe it'd been made up by Jamie, Pat, and Chris; some theater kids were androgynously named, most were androgynously dressed). Talk in the green room always turned blue. And it was in this context, when everyone was sitting in everyone else's lap, that I mentioned I had a little thing for Megan, you know, the quiet one. As soon as that kinda-truth was out of my mouth, and as soon as my drama queen confidants reacted, it felt like trouble. It hung in the room like a flubbed line, and I couldn't take it back.

Acting had filled my excitement deficit, and it was as silly and all-consuming as I'd expected—panicked rehearsals, frantically over-familiar friendships, new characters to embody. One day I'd be a closeted gay man, the next a singing pirate-king, and after that a horny cowboy. But besides the wildness, I liked the structure of it all, too. It took some courage to go out there, but life onstage was actually predictable, practiced. When I spoke, I knew exactly what words were coming back to me. If I walked downstage left, I knew who would meet me at that spot. Megan, who kept showing up in every play I did, was *completely* reliable, or so I told my androgynous friends. Even when I'd forgotten where I was supposed to stand, she'd somehow make the scene fly right, I told them. She's great, a great actress, I told them. They'd give little insinuating grins under their cakes of make-up. I'd put on my lip gloss.

For me, acting was both sexy self-expression and calming submission. Because of that safety, I didn't mind wearing green, groin-length shorts in a production of *A Chorus Line* my junior year. At 6'2”, I knew I would be the comic relief guy, the dancer

who couldn't really dance, and I was glad to offer my services. The show, a play within a play about auditioning actors, required all manner of splits, stretches, and self-exposures that were mostly beyond me, but whether out of lack of self-respect or lack of shame, I didn't worry about being embarrassed. Even as I gave a way-too-close-to-home speech as the wise-cracking, depressive character, Bobby, I felt protected. Acting had given me a way to be honest, but undercover. It was an introvert's ideal coming-out party.

I guess I've always liked to be a little bit showy. Because I like to control the attention I get, and because I don't always know how to be sincere. That was my biggest challenge as a beginner thespian—be the character, don't play the character. I hammed it up onstage because I was afraid that I couldn't pull off a serious role, that I didn't have anything important to say about another person, or myself. One of my theater friends said I was the only one who would be able to get fully naked onstage, though. I never did, but the point was that I was willing to reveal anything for what seemed like no reason, except to insist, “I'm not ashamed of myself.” As I ran out from the wings without my pants on, I may have been protesting too much.

I tend to put on the same show when I write about my own life. Here I am, bare, but under a thick layer of cover-up, pancaked on. I'm well-lit, well-rehearsed and ready to confess. Can't have anyone thinking I'm afraid, so I wear my microscopic green shorts and soliloquize. But I'm a mediocre actor, always was, so, as usual, I stand and deliver a heightened version of me, a complicated evasion. In the shows I did, I wondered if I was supposed to erase who I was—my personality tics—and be a completely different person,

or behave exactly like *I* would in the given circumstances of the character. Neither seemed possible, really, but the question remained: as I paraded around stage, was I trying to figure out who I really was, what I was afraid of? Or was I burying those pesky issues under a pile of sequins?

Three hours a night, I belted out earnest showtunes, failed in my attempts to tap dance, and generally escaped my dourness. *A Chorus Line* was a harbor for me. After a few months, though, one of the actresses got mono (after a few more, all of them did). This time, Megan was the replacement. The mood of my scene changed drastically, my lights dimmed. Every loud-mouth in the room knew I had the hots for her (though those 'hots' were still illicit on account of my expatriate girlfriend). And every loud-mouth knew that, at best, she tolerated me. I regretted having said anything to them, but with those wacky theater people, I'd felt a compulsion; we were all addicted to full disclosure, even pursued it as an extra-curricular.

I became acutely conscious—of the shortness of my green shorts, the croakiness of my high notes. Who was this mysterious person who refused to be charmed? And why could she snap me out of my ostentation? I'd started taking poetry classes that year, too, so I tried out all my best similes to describe her. She drew my attention like . . .

the smell of curry. No, not at all flattering.

Like a darkened window in a horror flick. Too scary.

Like an "open-on-Christmas" package at the beginning of December. A little clunky.

Like a karaoke version of an all-time favorite song, pleasantly unsettling. Close, I guess.

Comparisons aside, I felt a warm embarrassment around her, and I couldn't believe that I'd been cast once as her obscene son and that now, in this musical, she had to see me in a half-shirt and short-shorts. Worse yet, for an entire hour of *A Chorus Line,* Megan and I had to hold our positions, inches away from each other, frozen like mimes in our awkward tableau. I worried constantly that I smelled and calculated the distance—two-and-a-half-feet—from her nose to my underarms. I had grown up with the idea that this bashfulness I felt was the seed of romance. But I couldn't tell if I was humiliated because I cared about her or the other way around. Infatuation? Mortification? The symptoms were the same—self-consciousness and sweat. As we practiced our kick-lines (think Rockettes, only clumsy), I tried to chat with her, quietly so the director wouldn't notice. I thought I was being suave.

"To whom are you speaking?" she asked, exasperated. That's what I was trying to find out. We sang in quavering harmony, "One smile and suddenly nobody else will do." We sang, "You know you'll never be lonely with you know who."

Act Three

A young man walks down a steep hill carrying a mattress. It is winter, snowy. He looks haggard and he struggles with the mattress. He hugs it and, semi-blinded by it, steps forward gingerly in a funny sort of sleep-walking. It twists in his grip, he slips. They both fall to the ground.

Like most men inexplicably carrying mattresses while weeping, I'd just been dumped. After a couple years with me, Margaret had had enough by the autumn of my senior year, and so—very believably and with great feeling—she ended things. I'd anticipated it, even told myself I'd be half-glad if it happened, free to pursue shy actresses. But I fell apart. This is a strange thing to remember about a post-breakup epoch, but for a month I couldn't eat anything but Asian food. Besides that, I developed a psychosomatic rash on my elbows. And both staying awake and staying asleep seemed impossible. I'd been waiting more than a year for Margaret, pretty virtuously, and within a week of her return, she'd given me the hook. So, I showered twice a day (after my bowls of noodles), and spent most of my time searching for quotations (Walt Whitman, John Cusack) that could help me make sense of my visceral, trite, elbow-chafing loneliness. There were theatrical elements to my devastation, for sure. I sometimes fell to my knees with my arms outstretched, and, like a silent movie heroine, had a wide range of despairing facial expressions. I could laugh at myself for my indulgence, but then I'd forget what was funny.

I wasn't carrying that mattress because of the break-up with Margaret, though. At least not directly. I wasn't bringing it to the dumpster in some strange ritual sacrifice in order to expunge all memories of her. I was smuggling the thing because I'd surrendered my life to theater, and, for reasons of verisimilitude (a word I'd just learned), I'd decided that the play I was “directing” absolutely required a bed onstage. So, getting this mattress to the theater had become my quest—my silly, foolish, essential quest. If the play went well, it meant I could persevere. With this Sealy Posturepedic, I would show

the world (my thirty audience members) that I was on my feet again. We *needed* that mattress.

Looking back, I see that “directing” really only meant that I'd bribed three friends to learn some lines. But I at least *thought* about beats, objectives, and mise-en-scènes (though I've forgotten what those are now, if I ever really knew). I read a little Stanislavsky, drew some diagrams, grew a beard, and while plays had been a hobby, they became my manic passion. Figuring out how another person felt—so improbable outside the theater—seemed doable inside, and necessary. I envied the good actors, the ones who seemed to be able to switch themselves off. *Here's what you're thinking,* I'd say, and they'd think it—another person for two minutes, or five.

In the final scene of the play—Richard Greenberg's *The Author's Voice*—there are two characters onstage: a man, and the hideous creature who represents all of his desperation (it was a kind of Jekyll and Hyde thing). I'd gotten to pick what I wanted to direct, and I'd gone autobiographical. “More angsty,” I said to the two actors. “Everyone's staring at you, and you're wretched.” We tried it again. “Writhe,” I said to them. “You're hideous!” I said. My mattress was a key prop. (I slept on the bed-frame for a few weeks). “Writhe more. Sizzle!” They did. Twenty-six people came and stared at us, including Megan. She wrote me a charitable note telling me I'd done a good job, and I felt the warm embarrassment again. I didn't want to writhe anymore.

Theater wasn't all heavy-handed catharsis for me at that point, though. The day Margaret and I split, I was cast in a silly British play called *Noises Off*, opposite Megan. Our friend Allison was the director again so there were more animal noises, pill-poppers,

and Italian accents. Signora Megan played an Irish maid, and I was her Canadian ex-lover. I wasn't really in the mood for coincidental sex farce, but I'd pick myself off my bed-frame and, at the nadir of my romantic confidence, trade innuendo with a woman I'd always wanted to kiss. The two plays that winter were an odd emotional double-bill: my matinee of anguish, followed by light naughtiness at night. At that point, though, Megan and I still spoke in averted glances only. She'd heard the rumors that I liked her—at least I figured she had; theater kids gossiped like they wore black—and she seemed unfazed, a little friendlier even. There'd been no progress on the dating front, but I liked to imagine we had a strange intimacy. We alone acknowledged the insanity of the college theater world with our shorthand language of eye-rolls. We alone endured excruciating human knots as mandated by the increasingly batty Allison. We even fondled each other a couple times—in a play, of course. I stage-grabbed her breast so tentatively that I was sure I'd betrayed my feelings.

Act Four:

So once again my pants were around my ankles. *Noises Off* was filled to the gills with slapstick, and the script called for me to sit on a prop cactus and for Megan to pull the prop needles out of my butt while I yowled. In this scene, there was precarious perspiration. I tried to play it relatively cool in front of this person I'd come to care deeply about, but of course I had to wear unwashed, zebra-print underpants from the costume room (we all knew what happened in there). And of course Allison had to see it again, one last time, from another angle.

Bacchus, god of theater, was playing a joke on me. And, with my back turned and my face clenched in theatrical pain, I'd met my wife.

Act Five:

After that level of humiliation, I felt rejected by Megan before I'd even applied for a date. At the time, she thought we had a kind of implied friendship, though, and she counted on me to know what was going on when every other theater kid was addled by magic mushrooms, or at least acting like it. On the last night of the show, when she had to kiss me on the cheek, she let her lips linger for a half-second, and I took it as a thank you—for being steady, for liking her graciously and in vain. (She later told me she was just killing time so the prop-guys could get my ass-cactus in place, but I cherish the kiss anyway). That night, we took our bows for *Noises Off.* She was still my stage-fright, but it dawned on me that I might have to forget about her. After a few years, we'd stalled at acquaintance-level.

Three weeks before graduation, a devious friend of ours cast us in one more show, an experiment called *A Dream Play.* Megan's role was a cross between Alice in Wonderland and an Angel Jesus. For my part I had to learn to write backwards (again, college theater can't be parodied). I was also made to give Alice/Jesus/Megan a piggy-back ride and lovingly hold her hands while telling her, “You are the hope of the world.” (Damn Bacchus!). We'd gotten to a kind of respect, though. Less mortification. She laughed at a quarter of my public jokes. I laughed at almost all of hers. But even though

this was our fifth show together, and even though acting usually bred hasty intimacies, we still barely spoke to each other.

The night before opening, we had a dress rehearsal until 4 o' clock in the morning. As was customary, we were both asked to stay even longer and help decorate the stage with toilet paper. But under the psychedelic lights, we conspired to escape instead. Outside, there was a light, late-spring rain and the sound of a couple bullfrogs, a light-orange haze from downtown Worcester, a light taste of something honey-ish. She still had on an angel's eyeliner. I slowed my walk in order to slow hers and turned.

David (fearfully and blurting): I think you're great.

As lines went, it was no show-stopper. I paused. Everything was eaves-dropping, but she didn't say anything back, not yet. She smiled a little and I left. The next day I told her again that she was the hope of the world. Then we returned our costumes, took off our make-up. We'd done our last show and, finally, we'd met.

Bloodlines

1.

Recently, my grandmother revealed to me during a game of Rummy that she worked “down at the Tampax, in Three Rivers.” Turns out, the company had its headquarters in Palmer, Massachusetts, where her family lived, and I was eager to hear her stories. Before she mentioned it, I’d never known that she'd worked off the vegetable farm, at anything other than raising my father, my aunt, and a crop of onions. But back in the forties, our wheel-chaired matriarch had her hand in the business of lifeblood. That was her homefront, her war story. My grandma, great with stitching until she was almost 90, made both bandages and tampons at the factory, helping the war effort and the general hygiene of the country. Before she was married, and before she started what she'd always hoped would be a huge family, she did double shifts and worked quickly, daydreaming. My father could have told me as much, if he talked much. And my mother knew, too, but she doesn't get along with my grandma, doesn't relish sharing anything about the older woman's life. They have a slow-boiling feud that's always bothered me more than it maybe should. I know in-laws don't tend to get along, that it's almost the natural order of things. But their feud's about blood and children and how they get brought up, about what's proper and right. There's mystery in it, and I've wondered about their sides of the story, whose side I should take, and how their grudge has carried on in me.

2.

In a green-brown dining room smelling of cigar smoke and cabbage, they all sit together, my parents and grandparents, looking younger than they should. My mother, burdened by a four-year old and hurting from a miscarriage, listens as her mother-in-law intones a Polish prayer, over Christmas Eve dinner, for more children. More children. More children. The men sit silently, as usual. Whether they know it or not, they're in the middle of this thing. My mother doesn't want to hear about more children, though. She wants the one she almost had. But she bows her head and plays with the edge of the white table cloth. She's learned two things: that sometimes it's best to hold her tongue. And that she can't pronounce the words of this prayer anyway. She 'amen's when she thinks it's over, says her own private blessing for the disappeared boy she'd already named. There's a place set, as is tradition, for an unexpected guest, an absent family member. It's 1981. I'll be born, a peculiar answer to these motherly prayers, September of the following year.

"Eat," my grandma says. "You're so skinny." My mother asks for nothing, gets a full portion—mushroom soup, three kinds of fish, and a plateful of uszka. "Eat."

3.

Before the Tampax job, my grandma was just a single girl sewing silk at the Wright Mills parachute factory in Warren, Massachusetts. The war had taken almost all of the town's men, and at the worst time too. She was 21, wanting a family, the only sister left at home without a husband. As she stitched, she imagined the boys under her handiwork after they pulled her cords and floated down behind the enemies' cannon

positions. The chutes bursting up. Expanding red. Then white. Then blue. Her local soldiers tangled in French clotheslines, a long way from Warren.

She kept at the parachutes. But the work was tough and tough to get to, factory being ten miles away, so, when a new opportunity arose in Three Rivers, she took it. While the boys were gone, she would make tampons, and other things, whatever was needed. And she took to daydreaming again, during piecework, during wartime.

Tampax Incorporated was founded by Ellery Mann in 1936. His name is one of those incredible ironies, almost too precious to mention. But it was up to this Mann to change the way women thought about their bodies. He began an advertising blitz aimed at convincing the medical community to embrace his product. "The central thrust would be national magazines," I read in a history of the company. "Advertising such a sensitive topic to a national audience would require just the right touch, a combination of aggressive selling and delicate good taste." There's a headline in my brain, on a spinning tabloid set against the black background of newsreel footage: "Mann thrusts aggressively, delicately." But as soft as his advertising touch may have been, he was unable to convince my grandmother. Having worked for the Mann, she continues to insist, seven decades later, that she "never wore the damn things."

There are certain ways to go about these things, these womanly things. There are regulations and standards to live up to. My grandmother was always worried that the product she made in the forties—on the assembly line—would fall out. This would not be proper. I see her scrunching up her nose about it like a little girl, the way she would later in life when her niece married a black man. She knew people had different ways of

doing things (this is how she would have said it), but she still thought her ways were the best, still hated any change. She was of a certain time and place, we might say, had certain steadfast opinions—about tampons, about blacks, about church, about the right way to pick asparagus (pinch it skinny and green), or pray over supper, or hold a child, or respect an elder. And this is how she approached my mother. For a summer, they were close, and even after my brother was born. They watched him together, making blankets for him by hand (my mother sews, too). They spent days in the field, my grandma bending low and teaching my mother the right way to harvest all the vegetables—"there ya go," she would say—and the right way to feed their new baby. But were my brother's meals to consist of breast milk, formula, or cereal? My grandmother fed her children cereal in line with Polish custom. This was how it should be done. I can hear her stubbornness, her condescension. My mother, an obstetrics nurse, disagreed. I can hear hers. Hadn't my grandmother fed her two babies well, though, those hearty babies, the first one born within a year of the marriage that ended her tampon-factory employment?

Before that union, she'd dreamed of having a family she could cook for, care for. "Why do the kids go so far away?" she asks about her grandchildren now, so it's fair to say that, even at the age of 21, she imagined a big, bustling family for herself, one that would stay in the same town, one that would love her. While at work, she picked absently at the compressed cotton under her fingernails and thought of names for her kids. Maybe a Virginia. She'd heard people talking about Clark as a nice name for a boy, but she didn't care for it, not one bit. One would be named after her father, of course. Maybe there'd be five kids. Or six.

Her coworkers knew she wanted a big family of her own and a strong husband. When, at long last, the time came for her wedding to Joe, they threw her a big shower, gave her a radio to share with that soldier boy just coming back, who, attracted to her spaghetti and meatballs, sat down one night at her family's table and never left. She was thirty. She quit the Tampax factory a week before her big day, went from producing sanitary products to stitching together a family life, tight. She changed out of her factory-whites into her wedding dress, left the job that made her blush and became a blushing bride.

When I ask her about her job now, she recalls the lubrication oil on the floor of the factory, a remnant from its use as a textile mill. But the place was clean, too, she says. "Because it needed to be, you follow me?" I pause before I admit that I follow her. My grandma is 91. I'm embarrassed by the hygiene talk. But I do note the cleanliness contradiction—clean and dirty, her uniform spotless, her shoes squished in oil, six days a week. Many Catholics considered tampons a product for bad girls, and I bet she agreed. *This is just not the way things are done*. And even after seventy years, she's squeamish. "I just don't know why people would use 'em," she says. She came to think womanliness and motherhood should be a certain way, too. Any other option was suspect, untested, potentially filthy.

4.

They came to the hospital after I was born, my grandpa with a celebration cigar, my grandma with advice.

“You were always *so* starving,” my mother says, mocking my grandma. In her mind, grandma fussed as much as the toddlers did, thought I wasn't being fed enough. Getting the kids to eat, though, was the mark of motherliness for Victoria Wanczyk, formerly Wazocha. She was a Polish farmer's daughter, a Polish farmer's wife, and large portions, plump children, meant success. She'd prepare piles of homegrown asparagus and enough bigos for twelve, plus rye bread, a stack of kielbasa, and all sorts of pickled things. Her children grew large. Years later, at holiday dinners, she'd start an “eat, eat” chorus after each helping, dishing out more sauerkraut whether we wanted it or not. I was praised for being the family Hoover, able to save space in the refrigerator by eliminating potential leftovers (I couldn't stand up to her). But we were all still so thin in her eyes.

My mother agonized over how to please this forceful woman. It's not easy to stand by as someone implies, with excessive sausage, that you are an unfit mother with malnourished children, so I partly understand her grudge. But I see my grandma's side, too. She'd grown up on the soup of bacon dripping and parlayed her four dollars a day at the Tampax factory into meals for her family. She lived, and lives, on a schedule of meals that cannot change. No surprise her focus is only as wide as a plate, that she won't listen to those who say they have enough. There's never enough. My mom, after three firms “no”s, still gets a small portion of pork.

By the time I was aware of their rift, it was more than just awkward, though. The only anger ever really expressed in my family, their feud felt like a gateway to other tensions. I didn't even know what it was based on, really, if it was based on anything.

Nothing had happened since I'd come along, as far as I could tell. But on our way to visit my grandma, my mom would invariably say, “Alright, let's get this over with,” and her uncharacteristic rudeness bothered me. I'd snap back, “Please be an adult.” She'd mutter to herself, something like: “Oh, well, you don't, yeah, you'll see. *You'll see*. You think you're so smart.” It's true that I'm uncomfortable around conflict and wished that my mom could just drop what I saw as her pettiness. But I was really just speaking up for my dad, who'd mostly keep silent during these flare-ups. I'd advocate for his side of the family against my mom because he seemed like the underdog, defenseless against her lack of tact. What was he supposed to do, disown his mother? Over what? I hated that my mom made me feel that kind of pity for my citadel of a father. And I worried, too, that if I didn't counter her, she might finally tap into his reservoir of anger, a body of water we'd never seen the true depth of. Her coldness, his helplessness—these weren't traits I often saw in my parents, and, back then, I didn't want to see what else they had hidden.

“Mom. Please. Calm down.”

Suddenly, she'd be unable to locate her coat, and there'd be a delay before we could leave. “I'll just stay home,” she'd say, as my dad lumbered around our living room, looking for the coat she'd already found. My mother never seemed to realize, as I sometimes don't, that she could be at all hurtful. I think we both consider ourselves ineffectual in the face of frustration, and so, wrongly assuming we're harmless, shoot off our awful little mouths way too quickly. We're put upon, we think, and so when we have a grievance, we figure it's okay to air it: no one's paying attention to little old us anyway.

I've heard myself act this way with my own in-laws, sniping to my wife Megan about their exacting standards (which I've mostly imagined). Maybe I do it to drive a wedge between her and her folks, though that's never conscious. Maybe I complain to convince myself that they don't know any better than me: how we should lead our lives, how we should start our family. I've already fantasized about the fights we might have in the future about how to feed, how to teach, how to discipline. I've steeled myself for those battles, and I've trained under the major-general of overreaction herself, my mother. "You'll see," she said, but I hope she's wrong.

I wish *she* could have seen that all my grandma wanted was a stake in her grandchildren's lives. They were her next three kids, her huge family. So I kept siding with her. Because I was against my mom's childishness, a trait I saw myself carrying on. Because I couldn't stand the fact that maybe my father was powerless in this situation, caught between the rock of his stubborn mother and the hard place of his impatient wife. And because I was trying, really, to convince myself that I could love my grandmother, this difficult person who'd embarrassed me with talk of my girlfriends since I was just out of diapers, who didn't much like immigrants, whose "lousy" aches and pains turned *how-are-you* small-talk into *oh-no* discussion of dire suffering, who sometimes seemed desperate for our affection, and too aware of our reluctance to give it, as we unbuckled our belts and watched "Wheel of Fortune" on her boxy old Magnavox. As she got us more snacks.

5.

To save money, the workers at the old Three Rivers Tampax plant brought their own lunches to eat. Leftover kielbasa, mostly, sliced thin for sandwiches. On the half-hour break, my grandma sat with Helen Koziol discussing a new house on West St., a wedding from three weeks prior, who had a “fella” now, and where he'd taken her (the topics never change). She’d have been there since quarter to six. If you’re not early, you’re late, and the job starts at St. Stan’s bell, goes until 2:30. At lunch, she’d try hard to keep her uniform clean, napkin in her lap. If her outfit looked sharp, the *whole* outfit ran smoothly. That was her attitude. Stay letter-perfect, be on-time, get the job done. She liked these early morning days better than when she worked the second shift. The next week, though, she’d have to stitch and sort from 2:30 to 11. The worst part of that was missing supper at home, not being the woman of the family. Now, I still hear my grandma's scorn when I mention that my mom works nights.

“Where's your mother?”

“Oh, she couldn't come. She's working tonight.”

“She *asleep*?” (Grandma finds this almost impossible to believe).

“Yep.” She looks out the window at her hummingbird feeder and waits before delivering her final word on the matter.

“Huh.”

These swing shifts disrupt family life, she thinks, and when she had to work them herself it must have troubled her. She appreciated the job, but she hoped for someone to take her away from all of it. Nearing midnight, she’d walk home from work, in her mid-twenties,

humming Jimmy Dorsey, wanting nothing more than to sew baby blankets instead of tampons.

6.

"I don't know how they'd describe it now," my grandma says to Megan the first time they meet, the same night the Tampax comment slips out. "My husband and I did a swap." I have no idea what my grandmother is saying. It turns out she and her brother married a pair of siblings. I'm relieved that that's what she means by a swap. Before they die with my grandma—she's infirm and blackening under the eyes—I'm struggling to discover the basics of my family, and its secrets, but I don't want to know too much.

We look at pictures together of unsmiling Polish immigrants with permed hair, of my father with a bow and arrow at 11, naked at 1. I know that my grandmother married her brother-in-law. Or was it merely her brother's brother-in-law? Are whole families linked by a single marriage? Mine isn't, I guess. Did they all pray together for more children at Christmases? Probably, though the thought of it, considering the sibling relationships, seems strange to me. They'd eat more to forget about that, I assume.

I'm feeling uncomfortable here with Megan. I try to focus on the Rummy (I have three nines), but I know how hard it's been for other women who've tried to be with Wanczyk men. I'm not sure my grandma will approve. She's funny, and fun to be with now that I'm older, but she's never really approved of *anything.* I shouldn't care. But if my grandma and Megan can get along it will be like a re-do. I'm my dad in this scenario, bringing a nice girl home to meet mom. And I want to be vindicated in my position that

my own mother's been rash all these years, that grandma's harmless. So Megan's brought flowers. Though not Polish, she's Catholic, at least. That should help. (My mother was neither and she always thought that these failings were the two strikes against her from the beginning, nearly unforgivable in her mother-in-law's eyes). I'm curious to see how my grandma acts, if she's unwelcoming or sour as I've always heard she would be. She looks at her cards. She has three tens. And she talks on and on, unguarded, confiding in Megan like a girlfriend. She's giddy about the idea of a new member of the Wanczyk family (though I wish she wouldn't say so—at that point, Megan and I hadn't been together all that long). Her stories funnel to the last Wanczyk we lost, my grandfather, who's been gone for a few years. How he built their house, how he'd been in France in the war, how he'd lost his sight.

"Oh, you're blind," she would always say to him.

"Ahh—," he'd growl back, as if to say, "What the hell does *that* matter?" Mostly, he stayed silent, as his wife, to be heard for once, said what she felt needed saying.

The last time I saw him, he was laid low. My mother was there in the hospital, and she had to wash him, this naked man, her second father. She ran a cloth over his sunburned skin. He was embarrassed, but grateful to be taken care of. He held both our hands as she cleaned him. The way she treated his bare body, love without hesitation, it was hard for me to fathom the intimacy she'd felt with three generations of Wanczyks. Maybe a marriage *had* linked our families. He tried to say something to us, but I didn't understand him. It might have been "Boy," his name for me both before and after my

face had blurred and he'd forgotten who I was. The next week my mom was in the hospital with him again, but, as he was about to die, she left the room.

"I didn't belong there," she told me. "I'm not part of the family."

7.

There are questions about this frayed relationship that I try to answer by asking my grandma roundabout questions about her life. What was my dad like as a baby? Did she enjoy helping out on the farm? How many kids had her siblings had? She has pain, though, from a fractured family and the black eyes she got falling out of her wheel-chair. I don't get the truth. Mostly because she can't remember it. Before I'm able to stop her, she rolls into the kitchen to get me another cinnamon bun.

After my visit, I sit over a turkey sandwich with my mom.

"What really happened with you and grandma?" I ask.

"There's too much you don't know," she tells me. "There's just too much." I don't even think *she* can remember all of her mother-in-law's unintentional slights. Maybe my mom has no case, really, besides a general feeling that she was slowly disparaged, over years. Maybe it's the guilelessness of my grandma—this simple, old woman with an eighth-grade education who never meant to be mean—that's most infuriating. I don't know. But I'd like their anger at each other to be either fully repressed or fully borne out. Right now, when all's quietly unforgiven, when my grandma's in and out of the hospital, the specter of easily-avoidable regret surrounds them. So I guess I'm trying to orchestrate a death-bed reconciliation, the grand, unimaginative ennobling. Because I have no

stomach for bad-blood, and I'd really like to believe in some kind of small-scale redemption.

“Are you still hungry?” they both asked, separately, as they covered over the repeating secrets: their somber husbands, their unborn children, this common grudge.

8.

After my father was born, my grandmother couldn’t have any more kids. He was pre-mature, like me, and the doctor told her another birth would be too dangerous. She was 33 and maybe, she thought, she'd started too late. I ask my mother about her own false-start pregnancies before me, a blighted ovum and a miscarriage. The former sounds worse than it is, may not have been a pregnancy at all. She missed a period because her body was somehow convinced it was pregnant, though the egg was barren. If she wasn't a nurse, would the word “blighted” have made her feel deficient? Did the miscarriage make her feel that way, all the same?

“It’s not hard physically,” she tells me.

I know this can’t be true, and her deflection implies the loss *was* hard emotionally. Her friends surrounded her. She’d called her father for him to visit (her own mother had died years earlier). What was the reaction, though, from my grandma? Was there sympathy? Did she remember the feeling of losing children she never had, or recall those bittersweet first days with my dad when she realized he'd be the last, the only son? My mom had had one child already, but what if that was it? my grandma might have wondered. What if her only boy had married an unfit woman? My grandma is no

monster, but isn’t all of that down there supposed to work? I can hear her innocence, her ignorance.

9.

“There were two sizes of tampons,” my grandma tells me. “Junior and Super.” She hadn’t spoken for a few minutes before this classic bit of elderly frankness. I cracked up. Maybe out of immaturity or shame, maybe that this talk was happening at all. Some things, I guess, I was allowed to know. When I think of my grandma’s work in hygiene, I'm reminded of her constant advice to my mother, of bloodlines and assembly lines, blood feuds, family feuds, families linked, the family business—mothering. How personal it must be. How embarrassing to be told that one's way of going about it just isn't right. Was the worst thing about my grandma's criticism that my mom—strong, but impressionable—believed her?

I wonder if my mom was scared when she was pregnant with me, if she'd bled so badly when she lost her other child that she found me dangerous. She tends to shrug these things off, medical professional that she is. For years she helped deliver babies—working 3 to 11 in her white uniform and dark glasses—so she likes to think she’s seen it all. But what could have prepared her for that experience? It has to be a helpless feeling to go through the same difficulties you see in patients everyday, and she must have recognized the complications, known the signs. But there was nothing she could have done. My father held her hand. They tried again.

I didn’t breathe when I was born, turned white, then red, then blue. A nurse named Mrs. Hansen smacked me in the rear and I settled to a jaundiced yellow. A cigar would follow from my grandpa, and fussing from my grandma. What should mother do with me, this second child? What was the right way?

10.

I'm in a green-brown dining room that smells of cigar smoke and diapers. It’s 1984 and my mother is pregnant with my sister, her third child. She's 33. As I cycle through the images, some days the memories rush back at me, thick as my grandmother's Borscht. Some days I only remember light, the shade given off by a lamp shining on my grandparents' wagon wheel wallpaper. I was just past two then. But I can’t quite reach back there to the encounter that touched off the full-fledged fighting. My mom tells me the story finally, and I think it'll jog my memory.

I fall heavily. I hit my head on the corner of a door. My grandma gathers me in as I cry, holding me tight as my mother runs in from the other room. “Your daddy will be home soon,” says the older woman, smothering me in hugs, inspecting my tiny head. An egg swells, a little blood. “Your daddy will be home soon,” she coos again. She keeps me away from my mother as red stains a dish towel.

“Give me my son,” my mother demanded coldly, her anger like ice rushing too fast out of a pitcher. She snatched me back and took me down to her father's house a mile away.

And that was it? A little bump, a little confrontation, and then thirty years of keeping each other at arm's length? Sure, my grandma might have been telling my mother she wasn't fit to take care of me. Or she might have been saying whatever she thought would calm me down. And couldn't my mother's reaction be chalked up to instinct? This was kid's stuff, this fight. They should have been fine with each other twenty minutes later. When my dad returned from his errands, though, he heard anger that has become part of my history, from both sides. *Why would she yell? Why would she keep my baby away from me? Why would she take my baby out of the house?* There would be apologies later, but those attempts at forgiveness haven't concealed the bitterness caused by a tiny egg, swelling.

My father didn't favor anyone in the argument, never has really, despite what my mother believes. She thinks he's always sided with blood, placated his mother and offered little or no defense against her pointed criticisms. But there was no good option for him, this slow-moving man who's ill-suited to passion. And his split loyalties made things worse. Because he's the battleground, too, and part of what my mother really meant when she yelled “Give me my son” at my grandma was, “Give me *yours*.”

11.

My grandma recalls a factory where ladies, dressed all in white, supervised the lines of production. They had to make sure everything was done to specification before boxes full of tampons got sent to the mailing room. Everything must be kept ship-shape. For years, she supervised production in my family, too, had her hand where it wasn’t

wanted. But she'd hoped for such a big family, and all of that had stopped for her after my father. So how can my mother not see why she wanted to be a part of her grandchildren's upbringing? Wasn't the "more children" prayer at Christmas really a personal plea? Didn't my grandma want to baby me the way she would have babied the kids she couldn't have? Then again, I don't know what it was like for my mother to have her role as a parent challenged, to be kept on the outside of a family.

"There's so much you don't know," she told me, and she's right. But as I sit under her quilt and my grandmother's last afghan, I know how quickly a family can unravel. And when I daydream about my own two kids, not yet born though already named, I can feel the beginning of a jealous love.

"You'll see," my mother said. "More children," my grandma said.

Stations

In her later years, my grandmother told stories about trains. In one, she was being carried under a mountain by a train late at night with her brother and sister. She thought this had happened the evening before, and she had phoned us, she thought, to tell us about her trip through the tunnel. We hadn't received a call, we said. At this she paused, raised one hand, and threw it at us dismissively as if we were the ones telling tall-tales. As she turned her head from us and frowned, the oxygen line running to her nose settled into the shoulder-folds of her flower print.

The train memory made her tired and a little scared, too, but she also seemed to treasure it. I understood her nostalgia for trains, but, these stories seemed psychologically-loaded. Had there been a moment in the past when she was on a train with these beloved people who were now gone? For my widowed grandmother, was this innocent mountain-trip a yearning for the married love a train might somehow represent? Or was there a more haunting reason for why she imagined the journey?

Because it was clearly fantasy, I felt like a nurturer when she told us about it. “Oh yeah,” I'd say to her, as if she was a little girl spinning a story about eating spaghetti on Mars. But I could see my dad was uncomfortable having his own son talk to his mother like she was a child—with the same high-voice she'd used with him, he'd used with me. So we tried to turn our attention to other topics, the styrofoam tray of pot roast and apple sauce my grandma hadn't touched (*if you don't eat your dinner, you won't get dessert*, we'd say). But she'd always come back to the train, and I didn't want to ignore what she was telling us; I wanted to explore the crumbling caves of her mind. On the one hand,

the mild dementia might remind her of an important family connection, and might help me understand her history.

On the other hand, though, the story put me on edge. It recalled images of the holocaust—of the strong, the weak, and the weak-minded whisked away on death trains, brothers and sisters together. My grandma did identify strongly with the Polish people and might have been confused by the suffering that occurred in the homeland. Maybe she'd even discussed some of that with my Grandfather Joe, who'd been in Germany three weeks after the liberation. Was her train-under-mountain experience a moment of frightening attachment to her lifetime's worst dream? Did the train represent Death the Nightmare as well as Death the Reuniting? My dad and I just listened as her stories churned ahead.

"Pretty weird," he'd say afterward.

"Oh yeah," I'd say, though with my relieved laugh instead of my high voice. What we didn't say was that her journey-to-the-center-of-the-earth dreams must have had something to do with her inevitable rolling away, her wish to leave this station for the next. All of it made me think of her other train story, too, though, her favorite memory. In 1953 (or was it 1954?), my grandparents set out to build a house on Rocky Hill Road in Hadley, Massachusetts. It's the house I spent holidays in (the rooms of my memory that place inhabits still smell like my grandfather's cigar breath and the sour simmer of my grandma's galumpkis. Those rooms are a warm place). It was a modest brick ranch, but my grandpa built it with his own hands, so it was Shangri-La to them. I know when my grandma talked about going to a "better place," as she did all-too-often, that this was

it for her. As she told us the story of its construction, I always knew that those days were the golden ones of her life. In the Autumn (or was it winter?), a train slowly came up the tracks that ran along the Connecticut River, and on that train were the bricks that would become their house.

I imagine her gleeful impatience as the train slowed. She would have been dressed to help with the lifting, but might have allowed herself a touch of blush—left over from their New York honeymoon—to celebrate the day. She would have been stoic in the face of the challenge. But I see her bouncing on the balls of her feet, too, indulging in a squeeze of my grandfather's war-strong arms. They were deliberate people, not prone to excitement; but this day they spent together must have seemed like their fifteen minutes of local fame. A new house in Hadley brought validation among the Polish farmers. And it brought out the neighbors to help, to gossip. Vicki and Joe were celebrities!

Maybe the train arrived at 11. No matter when it came, my grandmother would have been up before dawn, would have been hours early to the station. Perhaps my grandfather put on his hat and tweed suit to go to the credit union that morning. Perhaps he peeled a series of bills off a clean wad to pay the brick wholesaler. Perhaps my grandmother had never seen so much money, felt embarrassed and proud at the same time.

And then the men pumped hands roughly, clapped each other's backs.

“Here's your new house, Joe,” the merchant said as he showed my grandfather a pile of rich-red bricks in a train car: two bedrooms, one bath, a porch from which to shine

a light. My father, at three, stood by in purple-puff snow-pants, ready to take one brick at a time from the train to a borrowed Chevy truck. He'd have been red with the effort, cradling a brick in his hands. Through his thin, wool gloves, he'd feel the stubble of it, the grit. He'd have looked at his father expectantly.

"Go, boy," says Joe. And my father feels, for the first time, the limb-enlivening goodness of—back-and-forth, piece-by-piece—work.

My grandma tells me this train story on her 89th birthday. She tells it with great detail though she can't remember the rules to the card game, Pitch, that we've played during every visit for the last ten years. She claims she's never played it, certainly not since she moved to the new house. She scolds her daughter, my Aunt Joanne, tells her this is a newfangled game and we're trying to trick her. We deal anyway and she wins.

She's been installed in this new place since my grandpa died. It has twice the space and everything she needs to be comfortable. It's hard for her to feel at home here, though. She'd lived in one place for fifty years, and it was the house where her children grew up, the house that she saw her husband cobble together in front of their own asparagus fields. Between deals, she remembers their season of bricks.

It's a sunny day. Her sisters bring supper—ham and horseradish on rye bread—. And then that day ends again.

Though my grandpa was 83 when he died, she says he went too quickly. Sometimes she calls me up and asks if I know Joe Wanczyk. I do, of course. He was a good man. "Yes he was," she says, almost as if I'd been arguing with her. And then she

asks if I'm from Hadley, if I know the old house. I've been there, I say. “He built it,” she says. “The bricks came on a train. Can I tell you?”

On that day when it came, back in 1953, the train pulled out of the station before my grandparents offloaded all of their bricks. Too quick. There went the chimney, there the outside stairs. They'd been left with half a house.

“Whatdahell?” my grandpa would have said, hustling to catch the engineer. My grandma pieces this part together for herself now, but she doesn't tell me everything that happened. She turns her head and the oxygen tube settles again. In the compartments of her mind, she thinks she sees a man now, hitching the caboose. Who is he? Her memory's made of train-churn, a light winter's dusting, her good husband patching a pile of crumbling bricks, calling it quits. She's at the house with him now, as she gazes out the window of her new nursing home room.

She's at the stockyard as he chases. And there go the train and the man, again and again, taking her home, taking the last of her home with them. The chimney, the stairs, the room they'll call a nursery. Joe hops on the back to salvage the rest of the house. He's brick-blistered and brave. She sees him turn and wink, that wanderer, headed out of town for a stretch, but only a stretch, his gotta-do smile a porch-light promise.

Kin

For a long time, I just didn't have a good first memory. Other people talked about theirs like an early memory was as easy to pick out as a full moon, but I couldn't remember anything that happened before New Year's Day, 1987, when I'd learned to tie my shoes. How could I claim to write memoir if I had that kind of deficiency? I wanted to feel like my own life reached back farther, that I'd been aware at five or before, observing and collecting. Whatever I could drum up might just be the most insistent part of myself, I thought, some hidden clue to the person I've turned into (at the very least, I'd get a poem out of it). So why hadn't I memorably bumped my head at three, or eaten dirt at two, or catalogued my mother's unforgettable face one morning when she opened my bedroom door to pick me out of my crib?

Sometimes I saw flashes of my pre-school teacher, Robin, blond and horsy in a pretty way, but when I focused on my toddlerhood, there wasn't much. I wanted a striking image or a haunting voice, something that made for a good origin story. I was determined to pour through my mental filing cabinet to find that elusive legend. Maybe if I jammed my thumbs into my eyes hard enough, the broken drawer filled with all the yellowing moments would finally open. I worried I was forcing myself to remember, though, creating a false first memory, so I tried to keep my imagination still. I'd only think about the few images that kept coming back to me involuntarily, the ones I couldn't explain or put in any sort of context.

Always, I settled on the faded white chair in my family's living room corner. I didn't know why, but the chair reminded me of my mother. A picture emerged, an

association. Had she held me there when I was a baby? Probably. Did I really remember that? Probably not. Then why did the picture of the chair persist, its brown floral pattern, the pilling of the fabric? Why was it distinctly nighttime? The memory felt like a slippery emotion—helplessness and security mixed together. My face at my mother's heart as we sat in our white chair, next to the old church organ, beside the grandfather clock. Yes, I felt like I'd read my own mind, filled in some details even. But things aren't quite right with my mom. It's late and she's up-all-night. My father's disconcerted in the doorway: we tense up, and she's about to hand me off. And that's when it stopped, my new first memory. But how could I recall being an infant? That had to be false. All of these memories are—just trace-paper drawings of the real experience.

But I still felt connected to that moment. I'd made part of it up, maybe, but it seemed essential. After so long, I'd been able to remember being a baby. The memory felt far away from me, too. I could only experience a semblance of it. It was almost as if it was another person, a family member. I felt it as a part of me just the way I feel my mother's a part of me, as a quietly persistent impression—in the white chair, in my personality. My half-invented memory and my mom, with her salt-and-pepper chin-length hair, medium-dark glasses, and timid-warm grin in the white chair, shaken. Without understanding, I identified with them.

* * *

We sat bundled together in the white chair, my mom and I, and the grandfather clock rang four times for each quarter of an hour until, at one, it gave its full salute—16 chimes and a gong; she fended off its thunder with a cupped hand, my face at her heart.

I wonder about her more now as I'm starting to recognize her traits in me. We laugh under our breath, a mischievous little laugh that says, “You and I have a secret.” We're both scared, for no particular reason I can tell, of the early afternoon. Feeling, for a minute, a trace of her personality lets me think we're connected, that I understand her. At the same time, when I've just sounded like my mom, or been drastic the way she is, I can be baffled by the resemblance. Who is that other person residing in me? On this kind of empathy, Virginia Woolf wrote, “Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others.” We can blur with other people, she says, but connection is an illusion, too, one we sense so strongly that we force it to be true.

When I was very small, my mom helped me count to 1,012, that exact number. I remember seeing her turn from the front seat of our van—though her face is blurry. She mouthed the last digit, twelve, like she was saying it for me. We listened to Bette Midler on the radio (she's staticky, too). I wanted to keep counting with my mom, but that was as high as I could think. She turned back to the road, and I tried to figure the number she had in her head, the next number, but I couldn't know her.

Sometimes I can maybe. On my sleep-deprived days most of all, my mom raises up inside me and I hear her voice from my mouth. “I guess I’ll just quit,” we say when

we're frustrated. “I give up.” At those times, I think I figure out how quickly life gets dire for her, and how quickly it ebbs back to an anxious, almost silly relief. I've been visited. “That was my mom talking,” I'll say, shaking my head quickly to get her out of it. I'm sure most people like me, in their late twenties, have those parental flare-ups, but don't the moments affect us just like memory does? Both my mom's personality and my memories sneak into me automatically. Sensing that empathy with her and remembering an image from when I was younger feel the same at first, instinctive and undeniable. I'm jarred out of myself, my present. But I have inadequate access to both, really. With memories, I start to imagine artificial details so quickly—the afghan on the organ, the dust coating the chains of the grandfather clock. I can give myself the illusion that I remember clearly, that I'm not tethered to the present, but I'm mostly stuck re-creating. With my mom, there's a flash of shared experience, maybe false. I think I feel my mom in me especially when I'm transfixed by water, mostly the ocean. She's my precedent; but then it's up to me to imagine what else she experiences, up to me to pretend. I can give it my best guess, just as I do when I'm restructuring the setting and dialogue of some shadowy past. But while both my mom and my memory can seem to take me over for a few seconds at a time, I find myself making them up, no matter how close I feel them to be. Memory is kin, mom a flash of neurons.

* * *

When I was six, my mother caught me naked with my friend Daniel behind our basement couch. We'd made a fort with t-shirts and blankets, set up cushion ramparts, and, feeling so secure and accomplished and happy, we'd started hugging. Why not take off the rest our clothes? we thought together, though I don't remember any discussion of this. We laughed and wrestled on the pile of afghans (there were no afghans, probably). I felt safe and half-asleep. This *must* have happened.

I kiss his tummy with a big, funny “mwah” noise. He's nice and playing with him is fun. Here comes mom, looking into the fort, no girls allowed, her face disciplinary (this is the real kernel of memory, the blue-black, half-second impression).

The room was dark but slowly filling with the flickering, false-start light of broken basement fluorescents. After she got us all put back together and Daniel's parents collected him, my mother sat me on the counter by the microwave and asked me, with kindness, why I'd been kissing my friend. The kitchen smelled like her hamburger casserole. I giggled with her when she talked about “twangers,” which was our word for boy-parts. I knew she loved me in spite of my nakedness, but for the first time, shame was part of our life together, a feeling we shared that blocked us from each other. We listened to Kenny Rogers on the radio as she finished cooking.

Even that I can't remember comprehensively. My mom seems erased, as if I've trained my memory to resist her. Even when I force myself back into some moment with her from more than twenty years ago, she looks like she does now. Shouldn't I have so many distinct recollections, though, her expressions, how she walked, said 'goodnight'? At least for me, those are mostly missing—all of the memories are streaked. Peter

Handke wrote about his mother, “And because I cannot fully capture her in any sentence, I keep having to start from scratch and never arrive at the usual sharp and clear bird's-eye view.” I sometimes try to describe my mom again and again, worried that she'll stay with me—now and after she's gone—as one vague emotion instead of as a series of vivid moments. Worried that when I tug the skirt of memory, I'll look up to see a woman I don't recognize.

* * *

I saw her cry once, when my grandfather had successful heart surgery. He died a week later, and we clung together in the living room, in the white chair. The organ was gone by then, I think. For the first time, I considered what it would mean to lose a parent. I was ten, and the dry, February sun slanted through the bay window, blank-paper white.

“It's all over when your parents are gone,” she said, my father standing despondent in the doorway. I didn't know what she meant at all, even though I tried as hard as I could.

I want to imagine we can reach into each other's lives, but I only convince myself I'm feeling something close to what my mother's experienced every once in awhile. All these memories are outside my grip, too. I can cast myself in them, but they're distant. My mother rears up in me—more and more as I get older; a memory rears up in me and I go back into it about as often. I try to shake them off, these jolts. They persuade me I can go beyond my tightly-wound identity, but they mostly feel like delusions.

* * *

I think I remember my mother in the passenger seat of our family van, her face lit (it's a good bet) by passing cars on our Thanksgiving drive back from my grandpa's house. I'm seven or eight or nine. We listen to “Whiter Shade of Pale” on an AM station, and it sounds chilly, like the dead November rhododendron that tickles my bedroom window at night. I feel that I'm asleep: I must not be because I remember seeing my mom in profile, frozen in a stare. *And so it was that later, as the miller told his tale, that her face at first just ghostly, turned a whiter—*. I've pushed my head up against the pillow of the window as the bumps of country roads give way to a smooth doze of interstate. My neck's twisted, my forehead's bouncing off the glass.

If I could just sleep, we'd never get home; we could go and go like this. My mother looks far-away past the car windows, closes her eyes. *One of sixteen vestal virgins who were leaving for the coast, and, although my eyes were open, they might have just as well been closed.* We pass a mall that's lavishly decorated for Christmas. Even I sense how quickly the time passes, how this recurring display feels like last year. I watch mom watch the thousands of lights, and we both seem to deflate. She checks to see if I'm awake but I narrow my eyes. *She smiled at me so sadly that my anger straightaway died.* I don't know what she's feeling, but maybe my dad will keep driving tonight. Maybe we can wake up tomorrow to be somewhere, someone else and still going, *my mouth by then like cardboard*, my mom and I safe, and asleep, and united, with the radio softly playing.

* * *

I've partially grown up into my mother's disposition and of course I emulate her. Of course there's a family resemblance in our looks and personalities. But that doesn't mean I understand her mystically. Last week, when I talked to myself the way she does, weren't we just a mother-son metaphor: equated, separate? Like, unlike?

Then again, Henri Bergson wrote, “[I]t is of the very essence of our attention to be able to be divided without being split up.” He was trying to understand how we relate to our memories. He thought we could sense continuity in our own lives and feel great distance from our earlier selves at the same time. I can feel the influence of five-year-old David in a cushion fort, but think of him as a separate person, too. Maybe, in the same way, I can be divided from my mother and still composed by her. Maybe we're not totally split up.

* * *

There's a face at my mother's heart as she sits next to the old church organ that's covered by a loosely woven, blue-black afghan. Streetlight in crosshatch from the bay window touches the grandfather clock, its dust; the time groans out. I stand holding a stuffed moose, pouting. We're up-all-night again, and I look at my father's out-turning feet. My mother cradles my sister, who's brand new. I'm jealous. That used to be me, I

think, and I hug my mother's knees as she presses me to her with a free hand. My first memory: remembering something else, some feeling that's disappeared.

* * *

Once, when I was ten, I came to bed without a shirt. My mom was waiting to tuck me in. There was a baseball game on the radio—Red Sox versus Angels. I liked to have her rub my back while I went to sleep. She'd tease me by warming her cold hands on my tummy, but I didn't mind. They were dry, too, and good for scratching. She'd tell me how tired she was, trying to coax my eyes closed. I wondered why she wouldn't let herself drift, at least for a nap. She always made me feel like she wanted to stay there with me, like we had a secret club. In the morning, I would be partly sad that she was gone; I couldn't recall her leaving. And I never remembered the snapping off of the hall light she'd promised to leave on.

That night, though, I'd done something wrong. Why wear my Celtics jammies? I'd thought. She's going to rub my back anyway. "No, you *need* to wear a shirt," she said, nervous and firm, grabbing for her glasses as I came in the room. In the wind, the rhododendron smacked my bedroom window, and there was an urgency about the way she didn't look at me. She tucked me in quick, but we both knew something had lapsed between us, just like that: she left. In all of this, I can only really see the way the door swung almost-shut; the light shining in was a tiny consolation. I toss around in the sheets, the awful Angels scoring run after miserable run until the radio turns itself off.

The grandfather clock groans out every few minutes, a jolt, a raised voice. And my mother is a memory, a light from the hallway under a closed door.

Collation

Family

My wife comes from a prominent one. Her father is a respected doctor in Boston, both sides have ties to city government, and they all exude a grace that's the kinder twin of superiority. I love them for that dignity, but they're difficult, too, so I've always tried to be on my best behavior. Because I want to be one of them: a Sheehan through and through. They're close, daily-call close, and I've hoped for a part of that—guardedly—since I met Megan. My own family is more loose confederation of states than strongly united clan. We—refreshingly, regrettably—can go for weeks without talking. "Sheehan," though, is an identity, a nation, and for the last few years I've wanted little more than to be their countryman.

The mantra of the Sheehan is "love many, trust few, and always paddle your own canoe." Megan's father, Dr. Sheehan, learned the phrase in Catholic school Latin class, and he repeats it slowly like a chalkboard lesson. I imagine him in his sixth grade room, his eyes narrowing as Sister Constance, kind but sarcastic, ends each day with the canoe commandment. He nods slowly, gathers his grammars and, neatly buttoned, rushes as calmly as possible to be five minutes early for his train. "Love many" (he says now). "Trust few" (he looks at me, his son-in-law, with kind, narrowing, humorous, serious eyes). "And always paddle your own canoe."

Food

The first time I met Dr. Sheehan, Lester, he cooked me a large dinner of polenta under a heartily-spiced tomato sauce, Caesar salad with homemade dressing. As pots boiled and strainers strained, I tried to think of things to ask a girlfriend's father. There aren't many safe entries in this category. I didn't want to seem over-familiar or irreverent, so I asked him about the present moment, about the weather, the polenta, the little dog skittering at his feet, wall-hangings. We carried on like this for a few minutes as the kitchen got hotter, him cracking a hard-boiled egg, me walking on its shell.

When we sat down to eat, he asked me where I was from. I told him about my Western Massachusetts town, a sleepy little place with its old-fashioned department store. I mentioned the big roads near Greenfield, routes 91 and 2. A young man who can talk roads, I figured, always garners respect from his elders, and I hoped Dr. Sheehan would recognize my region and my inter-state maturity.

“A lot of pedophilia out there,” he said.

“Uh, I guess,” I said, unwilling to contradict him. He nodded.

I scanned his face to see if he'd meant the comment to be purposefully inappropriate. Was this a dark joke? And if so, was I meant to share it or be the butt of it?

“Lestah,” said his wife Joan, scolding him. (They have the strong accent the rest of the country sometimes confuses with “Kennedy.”) The doctor had a knowing smile, a look of command enhanced by his bright-white hair and his round, priestly face. I was on the run.

“In the church,” he said. “A lot of pedophilia in the church.”

I rambled about what a shame that all was, oh yes, how I didn't know of any particular cases, not in my church at least, but if he'd heard about it, then, yes, it must be, though I don't think so in my town, so I'd have to ask around, but it must be. Sex, especially the deviant kind, was not my preferred topic for our first meeting. I was sweating from the polenta. Megan was mortified by her father's strange third-degree. I recovered, though, and we had a nice enough time together, with white-haired Lester both welcoming and wary.

Laughter

Since Megan still lived at home, I saw a lot more of the Sheehans. For the first few years, I always shaved and put on a collared shirt, always projected, as best I could, excessive stability. I didn't fit in, but I didn't stick out. I started to understand their rhythms, though, how they prized both gravitas and giggliness. On one occasion, Dr. Sheehan argued passionately that he was the most rigid member of the family and would never give up the crown. Integrity was paramount. But they spoke an insular language of family-jokes, too, sometimes off-color. I often felt like a little kid on a bike, trying to tag-along with them.

My second year in, I was invited to Easter at the Sheehans' and slated to meet some extended family members, most notably Megan's Uncle Richie. I'd heard Richie talked about as a cult hero in many of their stories. As the youngest of Dr. Sheehan's siblings, he'd led a less rigid life, journeying in the late seventies to San Francisco to

paint and play. Amongst a family of Catholics, he'd tried out Buddhism. As Dr. Sheehan perfected his technique with a scalpel, Richie, who'd become an artist and musician, experimented with brushstrokes and G-sharps. And no one could beat Richie, I was told, when it came to wit.

"You know at funerals, there's the meal afterwards," they told me excitedly. "Well, he calls it a *collation*. 'It was a grand *collation*,' he says." They laughed. I didn't get it, really. To me, "collation" meant office work and nothing more. But Richie was their Oscar Wilde, and every quip of his was gold. Just like a star, he was fashionably late to that Easter dinner. He'd called and said he would be, said his wife and two small kids had gummed up the works, but that they would still bring dessert as promised, in the form of a leftover cheesecake from a party earlier in the week. The Sheehans chuckled about the cake, too, said it was just like him to bring left-overs to holiday dinner. I didn't get it, really. Cheesecake was cheesecake.

I expected Richie to be off-the wall, but when he arrived he struck me as a quietly sly man. He had gray-hair and slightly slumped shoulders. Everything about him seemed earth-toned. He put his tin-foiled cake on the counter, and then I saw why his few slices were out-of-place. Next to it, appetizers were laid out—four fragrant cheeses and a pâté. Vegetables were being julienned. Dr. Sheehan, who treats his meats like he treats his patients, carefully dressed the roast. All were in aprons and bustling, and here was a part-cake on a paper plate. I felt sorry for it, took its side, and Richie's. Maybe the Sheehans' standards were too exacting. Maybe Richie's seat-of-the-pants way was more in line with my own. What was wrong with his cake after all? What was so important

about dignity anyway, about doing things the way they should be done? In fact, maybe *I* was like that perfectly good cake, received only grudgingly by the Sheehans despite my obvious worth! I got a little worked up and passionately defended the dessert to Megan. She seemed vaguely amused and we all went into the TV room to watch The Food Network.

Dinner baked and Dr. Sheehan and Richie and Megan laughed together. Lester has a comedian's way of looking at everyone in the room after a joke, to share the moment and to make sure everyone's loving his line. His laugh comes in four gravelly bursts, and while laughter can be as hard to describe as wine, Lester's is full-bodied with chortling undertones. It sounds like a low-stakes card game. It rolls a little and has just a hint of the nasal (he pinches his nose up when he laughs for real and that lifts his glasses). If I could get him to laugh, I was in.

We watched a baker prepare a mince-meat pie, adding suet to the apples and raisins. The new ingredient didn't seem to blend well. Faces were made.

“I've never understood those pies,” Lester said.

“Eh, at least it's not half a cake,” I said, in the consuming warmth of an opportunity to be funny. Megan elbowed me in the ribs. Eyes darted and then reset themselves, and a single throat cleared. I spent the rest of the day in a state between nauseated nonchalance and cold fear, hoping that Richie—their star, their brother—hadn’t taken offense. I felt like I'd put a whole foot, not half, squarely in my mouth.

Collation

It was hard for me to get Richie and his favorite word, “collation,” out of my mind after I'd left that miserable first impression. I found out it meant a number of things. Beyond a light meal, a *collation* is “a careful examination and comparison to note points of disagreement.” To collate is “to set against and consider.” All I'd been doing lately was considering myself in the context of this new family, thinking about my notes of disagreement with them. Was the pressure I felt around them self-imposed, or was there something about these Sheehans that gave me this sporadically deep uneasiness? I worried that if Megan and I survived, I would always be on the outskirts of the family.

Food and Family

On the 4th of July that year, I cooked for the Sheehans for the first time. In the preceding months, I'd started making chili pretty religiously, and I wanted to share a new brew with them. We'd been to Vermont together a few weeks before, so I thought of a recipe I'd seen for a Green Mountain chili I thought they might like. I knew I would. I've been a mixer of food my whole life, and the casserole was my main sustenance growing up, so chili is my favorite thing to cook. Throwing in an extra ingredient usually works, too—carrots, ketchup, cashews, kale. No need to be careful, really. It's a creation, a culling together, a grand ole mixing.

While I was cooking, the Sheehans and I talked about our specialties. Lester made a great everything, of course, though he was mostly humble. Megan had started cooking pizza, like her Uncle Richie, and everyone was anxious to have a taste. My

specialty was this bubbling bean and broth thing, and I hoped it would turn out alright. There was talk all around of exchanging recipes with me. Some were family secrets, though, so we'd have to see, wouldn't we? We laughed. Everything smelled pretty good, felt pretty good. Their little dog skittered at my feet. I did a sword-fighting move with my ladle and went in for a small taste, making the dainty face I imagined a French chef might as he sampled his consumme. Nothing beats saucy burger, tangy and garlicked, and the maple syrup from Vermont stuck all the flavors together. This chili was to be an unmitigated triumph. How could they not love me after they'd tasted this? I went to stir it one last time with the ladle.

"You're going to wash that off first, right?" Lester asked.

I'd hoped I wouldn't have to.

Laughter

As time went on, the Sheehans began laughing at me more and more, sometimes in ways I appreciated and sometimes in ways I didn't They'd tease me as if I was one of their own ("because they like you") and they'd laugh at my jokes occasionally.

"You're a nut," Megan's mom would say and I would take it as a compliment, almost. And yet, even as I felt more included, the way we all lined up kept bothering me. Since I was seeking their daughter, I wanted them to see me as a grown man—mature, mate-worthy. But the Sheehans treated me like they were my second parents, telling me to call when I got places, packing me off on trips with an extra tooth-brush. I hoped to be more than a second-class son, though. I wanted to be accepted into their family as

someone who might start his own—a free and sovereign province of Sheehan nation. Even as I hoped to be accepted, I worried that I'd lose some of that independence. Could the closeness of the family determine where Megan and I might choose to live and how we might raise our own kids? Would their standards and traditions subtly (or not-so-subtly) mold my future? Would I ever really paddle my own canoe?

Every little thing with them seemed to me to be a portent of how my life would unfold. *Too much snow to drive*, the Sheehans say? I'll live a cautious existence and die having never been bold. *Time to re-do the kitchen*, they decide? We will be eternally dissatisfied with what we have, kitchens and otherwise. *Just thought we'd call and say hi*, they say on the phone? Megan will always act the way they do, always be theirs, never be mine. Over and over, when I visited their house, I'd trip over the dog's gate that covered every doorway. I'd curse and extrapolate wildly that when I was with them I was thoroughly trapped, possibly neutered. My doomsday reactions can fairly be called commitment issues, but though I made mushroom clouds out of molehills, it felt important at the time to question their influence over us, Megan's influence over me, and what we'd all become together.

Collation

I'm a word nut. Sometimes I'll listen to conversations or lectures only to note which words in them are Germanic (*word, nut, listen*) and which are Latinate (*conversation, lecture*). And, like Lester, I took eight years of Latin in school. Sometimes he'd test me on my Virgil. *I sing of arms and men*, he'd say. He knew some

of Cicero's arguments against Cataline, too, and we bonded over our classical knowledge—his real, mine pretend. It wasn't football or ice fishing or stock brokering, but it was something to bond over.

Lester had been an altar boy and had memorized the Latin mass, he told me. At weddings and funerals he was sometimes slipped a dollar or two. Afterwards, in the church hall, there'd be a light lunch. I imagine paper plates, sliced apples, macaroni salad, rolled up cold cuts, maybe even a chili—mass-produced in a church basement vat. The widow is there, and she's wearing a veil. The church hall smells like chalk and stale donuts, everyday. It's a contrast to the incense and commended spirits of the eternal, of upstairs. Just about everyone's relieved and sitting at a long table and eating a sandwich in the bright gray light leaking in from a stained-glass window that's too faded now to be used in the sanctuary. It's 1961 and there's chat of the new president. *Truth be told sister,* a ruddy-faced man whispers to Constance, *I still like Ike*. She laughs in spite of herself, quickly.

“Richie calls them collations,” Lester tells me. I've heard this before, but I don't mind hearing it again. *Collation*. Latinate. From *Co-* and *-latus*. To bear together.

Family

It’s Megan’s birthday, so I’ve stayed overnight at her apartment. She got it our third year together, and I'm glad to have some time with her away from the parents. We wake up early to make the most of her pre-work hours. In the morning, especially in the morning, she's as beautiful as they come, and this is going to be a good day.

Unfortunately, her father calls her and she decides to answer. It turns out he's around the corner and wants to swing by before he heads to work. It's 8 a.m. *Typical*, I think—unfairly, since he's never done this before.

It's an unspoken rule that I'm not really supposed to stay over and, though we're 24 years old, I'd prefer to remain hidden. No need to have him thinking I'm anything but a good Catholic gentleman. Grumbling, I get myself straightened just in case we have a fatherly visitor. I retire to the kitchen and sit with a book in front of a bowl of cheerios. Megan bellows from the hallway to warn me that she and her father are, in fact, coming into the apartment and that I should either show myself decently or scamper under the bed or into the bathroom. This is so childish, really, but I'm nervous. When she opens the door, I try to assume a position that I can stay in, silently, for the next few minutes. I rehearse greetings in case he comes into the kitchen. *Fancy seeing you here, sir, and please do pardon my underpants.*

"Oh daddy," Megan says in the living room. I've never heard Megan call her father "daddy." I listen. Is she sobbing? Is this some strange birthday ritual between father and daughter that I'm not supposed to be a party to?

"Oh daddy." Do they embrace dramatically every August 9th and declare their passionate love for each other? Odd. I consider the fire escape. But something's wrong and my being there makes it worse. I hear Megan ask questions and her father mumble replies. After a minute or two, there's discussion of needing a phone. Megan says the phone in the kitchen's broken, still covering for me. This is petty. I'm up on my feet with an impulse to rush to her, them, but I'm frozen to the floor. She comes in breathless.

Her Uncle Richie has died. An hour earlier, in New Hampshire. Her Aunt Laura found him on the floor. Their son Patrick stepped over him on the way to the bathroom in the early morning, thinking that his father was trying to stretch out his back and neck. They'd been hurting the day before, and Richie and the kids had had to cut a bumper-car ride short after he was hit too hard. She whispers all of this to me because I'm not supposed to be there. *I'm not supposed to be there*. Still trying to be quiet, I mouth my worthless shock and hug her, but she pushes away. She has to go find her Aunt Mary, Richie's older sister, and tell her what's happened while her father races to New Hampshire to help with the personal effects, the after-effects.

As she leaves with her father, he calls out "How ah ya, David?" I can picture his face, defeated though somehow still composed, round, red. Maybe his surgeon's hands shake the slightest bit. (Though I was cowering in another room, the picture of his slow retreat from the apartment stays with me somehow).

"Hi. I'm so sorry."

He bows his head the slightest bit, closes the door. I should be with them, I think, with her. But it hadn't come up that I would go. It's a private matter. *Weakling*, I say to myself. *Typical*. I watch three straight episodes of *Project Runway* and try not to think. Megan finally finds Mary. She'd been test-driving a car and so hears the news of her little brother's death in a dealership lot, under all those dealership flags standing at sharp attention, slammed by the dealership wind.

Food

I grabbed a train and went to eat with Megan and her Aunt at the Sheehans' that night, but I didn't know whether to be my usual goofy or my unusual reverent. We were all there to be sad, but mostly to remind ourselves to eat, too. *You need to eat something*, we said to each other. *Have you eaten*?

Megan's Aunt talked about Richie almost involuntarily. She has the best memory of anyone I've ever met, this eccentric lady with pretty, peach-fuzz hair. Her eyes, still bright, were impossibly focused on the space three feet in front of her. Her mouth slacked the slightest bit and she listed—in her high voice that seems to have been consumed by Boston accent—who needed to be called. Megan tried to calm her down, reminding her that Richie's friends from the old neighborhood were not our first priority.

"Hand the watah to Richie," she said to Megan, calling me by his name. She laughed at this mistake—two choked and warbly bursts that said *Can you believe what I just did? Can you believe it?* Laughter and grief seem so connected sometimes, like a taste and an after-taste. And so Mary was shocked to tears by her laugh. What stopped her crying was the mushroom pizza we'd ordered from Domino's, its luke-warmth.

"Pass the salt," she said. The Sheehans salt their pizza and Mary went extra-heavy. Everything can seem like a tribute on those nights. When we spilled a little wine, then, it felt like a ritual, too. One second, I bowed my head grimly. The next I'd be buoyant, playing along with Mary's nothing-to-lose jokes.

"If yuh gonna go, yuh should just go. That's how I wanna."

"Yep," I said. "Yep."

Lester came home. He hugged his sister and, as I looked on, they repeated the same cycle of grieving and gallow's humor. It was the worst day of their life, and here I was. For three years, I'd been next to their laughter, trying to laugh along, and now I was next to this. I hadn't loved Richie, though, and I knew almost nothing about him besides his half-cake. But while it's belittling to say that I wanted some of what they were going through, I'd been so covetous of everything else that they shared, so it felt wrong to be unmiserable.

During the better moments, I'd help myself to another slice.

“Pizza,” said Lester.

“He would have wanted it this way,” said Mary.

“Yep,” said Megan. “And there will be a grand collation.”

He would always say it, they tell me again, hungrily. *Collation*. They're lighting up to share this, and, as I chew the scabby bubbles of Domino's crust, I know my job in the family.

“Col-*la*-tion,” they say (he would roll the 'l' aristocratically. He would sound like Peter O'Toole.) What I do, by doing absolutely nothing, is turn their old stories new again.

“Co-llation,” I try.

Collation

A collation is “a light meal that may be permitted on days of general fast.” We scarfed the second pie. They told me about Richie's pizza-making talents, the way he

seemed to obsess about the skill once he got interested, how it became his new art (he'd given up painting to be a stay-at-home dad). His old paintings were all around us, though, hanging on the walls. A dash of yellow on a gray city-scape. And he'd just been inspired to paint again after a long lull, just before he died. As a gift to Les, he'd done a picture of an old diner they used to go to together, but other than that, his kids had been his focus. They sang Beatles' songs before they could talk, the Sheehans said, because he played the songs so often. Lester and Mary and Joan told me—in concert—that once, while Richie was playing with his band, Shoo-bee-do, he got pelted with tomatoes because they were so bad.

They got better.

Family

We went to Richie's wake separately. When I got there, a recording of "Here Comes the Sun" was playing on a loop in one of the outer rooms of the funeral home. It was a good choice, but every time it started again, I had the feeling that we'd never leave this house, and that we'd been there before. *Little Darling. It's been a long cold lonely winter. Little darling, it seems like years since we've been here.* The song was wistful, appropriate, and, after 38 repetitions, a little weird, but it had the effect of a Rosary.

Richie's boys, 9 and 12, were playing cards by a water cooler in a stashed-away room, their ties loosened. I went in to see them and they smiled at the novelty of shaking hands. They'd been doing a lot of that.

"Go Fish, huh?"

“Yeah,” they said.

As I went through the receiving line, a guest of the family, I came first to Laura, the widow. I hugged and she kept the embrace.

“Don’t do this to Megan,” she said. “Go to the doctor.” (Richie had died of bleeding in the brain and was gone, like a handful of ashes, before he hit the ground. Nothing could have been done.)

“Okay,” I said, still held close.

But what did it mean? Don't leave Megan alone? Don't die? We weren't even married yet. Laura has an aura of mysticism even when she's not the central figure of a funeral, so it didn't seem out of character that she would foretell my future. Still, I was only the boyfriend, and this was the first time anyone had said I'd be around indefinitely. After that, I came to Les. I'd always looked up to him even when he seemed like my foil, but what we were to each other right then wasn't clear. I wasn't family or friend, exactly, to him or Richie, and I didn't know what it would be like for him to be so exposed in front of me. The emotion that comes out of men like him, like me, is an infant unused to seeing the light, and that new thing showed on his face. In those three seconds he looked undefended, finally, like a boy who'd hit his head but was waiting for permission to wail.

Collation

“What do you think of David?” Aunt Mary asked Megan's brother after the funeral.

“He's okay.”

“Good, becawse there's gonna be a wedding.” She closed her eyes and floated away. It was the second time in as many days that the two women closest to Richie came out of the blue to tell me I was now a part of the family. I wondered why, especially since I'd felt out of place with them—shifting in my blue blazer, sitting in church alone. Maybe it was a consolation for them to think about happier family gatherings, and maybe I'd entered a family, finally, through the backdoor of a funeral home.

In the church basement after the burial—Richie'd gone from Buddhist to Baptist when he got married—we sat at long cafeteria tables together. I had a sloppy ham salad sandwich and a cup of coffee. It was a simple collation, ungrand, but nice. Older folks swarmed the little boys, and we judged them for trying to preach about heaven. The kids were too young to handle God in any public way at that point. The little one, Andrew, just stared, while his brother mustered smiles.

I went up to them and asked if they'd like to have an olive-eating contest, pimentos and all. So we sat, stuffing them in, four at a time. We each ate twelve and, though they prodded me to do more, I thought it was better if we all tied.

Then, amidst the folding chairs and boxes of construction paper used for Sunday School cut-outs of crosses and wise men, I milled. The Sheehans all chatted. We got up as people left, and ate standing. We lined up for second helpings of broccoli and bacon salad—potluck communion—and were slowly brought back from the dead to daily life, into that familiar collation of uneasy joy and unseasonable sorrow where we reside, eating olives, always.

Laughter

When monks paused at the end of the day to eat, they often discussed saints, telling the stories of each, the old gory glory. They would pray and read from a book called *The Lives of the Fathers*. This was known as a collation: a time to try and make sense of things, to gather the events of the day like ingredients and sit together with them in contemplation.

I was invited to a cool-down supper the night of the funeral, the sort where a chair gets left open, where there are sighing toasts, irreverence and ravenousness, where “good service” means something other than hot food. I hadn't expected to be included and, through some act of clothes' shuffling, I found myself in shorts and formal shoes. When he saw me that way, Les broke up laughing—his four bursts and a bend at the waist.

They finally tasted things at that deli. It had been an awful few days but now, at least, there was beef tongue and pastrami, corned beef and ham, huge slabs of turkey on marble rye, chicken soup, bagel chips, beer. Even Les was relieved. When gloomier angels flew over our table, though, he teased me about my shoes again, and I was more-than-willing to be the butt of that joke.

Family

Outside the deli sat a straggly-haired guy, singing. I’d never seen a street performer in that neighborhood, let alone one with such angst. He pounded his guitar and wailed “Don't Let Me Down.” The Beatles. *I'm in love for the first time. Don't you know it's gonna last*. We all felt like this meant something—hearing a spirited guy sing

The Beatles, Richie's favorite, but sing them sad. Megan squeezed my arm. Luckily for us, every once in awhile it's possible to feel like there's a meaning in things, even when we can't figure out what it is.

Food

Megan’s parents have taken Richie’s boys for the last week of their school vacation. I'm going to visit and I plan to make Yankee Bean Pot Chili. It's perfect for them, I'm sure. The thing cooks for five hours and I'm hoping they'll get caught in the scent. There's no better distraction from a bad day than a slow simmer, and this one's especially good, with its brown sugar, salt pork, molasses.

For Les, I've brought Beano, the anti-gas pill, not because he has any indigestion, but because I figure families prank each other. I'm hoping he's not insulted, and it's a good bet the boys will like it, at least; they're pre-teens and farting is right in their wheelhouse. My joke is generally well-received, and Patrick and Andrew sit to the side, smiling slyly. They laugh as a team, a little doubtful of the joke, as if they're being teased. Patrick does three exhales, Andrew two: they look at each other and only then is there a muted little sing-song titter, from the younger boy. This is how they've laughed ever since, as a combination, each reliant on the other. I put on my yellow apron—the one decorated with jalapenos that the Sheehans gave me as a gift—and I stand ready to stir a few cents worth of bean and pepper. What they'll let me do for them, what grief they'll let me join—these are serious things. I quarter another onion and it does its work.

“Tho' life's a gift no worth receivin',
When heavy-dragg'd wi pine and grievin';
But oiled by thee,
The wheels o' life gae down-hill, scrievin',
Wi' rattlin' glee.”

- Robert Burns, “Scotch Drink,”

The Father

Scotch sits on the bar, a penance to be done. Its smell is so heavy I sense it in my stomach, like guilt or love or a combination. It's Glen Livet, aged a few years, though I'm not sure how many. I've only had scotch twice before: once in England, wrongly thinking that it was somehow fitting there. And once, on the chug, with my brother the expert.

I'm taking the sacrament with my fiancée, Megan, feeling Irish and Catholic and helpless. We'd had a mass said that morning for a dead friend, and now this drink seems like another service: it's a little death, a little life. It keeps us in our dull, black-humorous grief. Sip. We're getting pious and pissed, one-part deliberative *What-is-Heaven-anyway*? mixed with one-part angry *What-the-Hell?*

The stuff tastes terrible, but it makes me feel, like religion does, as if I can stretch back a few centuries. It's almost liturgical, the drink, and it puts me on a timeline with my Grandpa Don, glass in hand; my Great-Grandmother Miller, blending a little with water; Eva Beatrice, who wouldn't touch the stuff (in public); my numerous nameless Millers and Keefes, Drinkwaters, Sheehans: their little nips of history. Take. Drink. This is something at least.

And so Megan and I take turns with our shared glass. Sip. Because a second friend died today, and scotch was his bracer of choice. We drink it to feel like him and bad for him, to stop time just for a bit. It's a day of religious tributes: for Mary Cahill, wine at dawn. For Michael Cody, scotch at dusk. The blood and bile of Christ.

Michael's dead in Santiago of a blood clot, of cancer, of everything—two days after the diagnosis, in his sleep. He was, maybe, at peace with God, we think. Maybe a priest can be, even after he receives such *malas noticias*. And we start thinking bad news and bad omens ourselves. He was supposed to preside over our wedding, sip, supposed to send us happy on our way. He'd be there for the marriage like he was for Megan's baptism. *He'd said* in a recent letter that he'd be there, "please God," shortening the reverent "if it pleases God" into what now seems like a prayer.

The bar lights dim. Megan's Godfather died a short time ago. Sip. Now *The Father* has died, this vibrantly selfless man. "Don't let it come in threes," she says, and we do a maudlin laugh, knock all the wood we can find, and lift the glass—half-sheepish, half-hostile. It's an offering and a threat to God, or the low ceiling, whichever. That *can't* happen, we say, thinking of the possible third, her healthy dad, and all the salt he eats. This man who made a family and might just let me join it. Sip. His death is beyond all calculation for us, "out of all scotch and notch" as an old saying goes.

Watery now, the scotch sits on the bar like a penance to be finished. I've had most of it, and a Guinness, so I'm almost drunk. The poet Robert Burns, in a love song to scotch, once wrote, "Thou even brightens dark Despair / Wi' gloomy smile." Well, after an hour trying to kill the "amber dew," I'm gloomy-smiling too. Because I've thought

ahead and already considered her father's passing—during dark moments when the worst of what could be rattles in me like ice in a glass. I know there won't be any solace when it happens, not from a whole barrel. So amidst all the reasons for asking Megan to marry me—the passionate and the practical—this one stood tall: her father *has to* be with us to offer his toast, to give me his blessing. We have to beat that clock. And, please God, we will.

Tagging

Before I got married, I was thirteen—a floppy-haired know-it-all in high-water pants—and I sucked. That isn't some vague, reminiscing self-hatred, though. It's true that a lot of guys mythicize their early teenage years as pock-marked abysses of voice-cracking and girllessness, but I had a smooth transition from alto to baritone, and at that time I didn't yet measure my worth by the female laugh. But I knew I sucked anyway because that fact was documented on my family's fence in cheap red paint, sprayed there, as far as I could tell, by a neighborhood hooligan named Jake Rampley.

Jake and I were forced carpool friends, but we'd known each other since Little League. As I hustled too hard, Jake sat on his glove muttering that I was a toolbox, a dickwad, an asscheese. I never really knew why he disliked me except that he was allowed to. Jake's parents treated him like he was an adult, and let him mouth off about everyone, including me. Worse, he made a constant throat-clearing sound—ghhhcck—that I obsessed over. It was a Streppy snicker that came across as both sickness and cynicism. I hated him. It. Whatever.

Beyond that glottal annoyance, he called his parents by their first names, Skip and Kathleen. I couldn't believe it. To utter a parent's name was as forbidden as chanting “Candy Man” five times into the bathroom mirror, but the Rampleys just laughed and gave him a pool table for his bedroom. They either didn't have a defense against their son's disrespect or they didn't care, and so Jake rebelled in a vacuum, pissed about nothing and everything. He knew who he was, though (at least he seemed to think he

did), and he knew what he loved: the grunge-band, Nirvana. Adoring them wholeheartedly was his answer to the indignity of being a spoiled little prince.

Kurt Cobain was the figure-head of Jake's bad-boy realm. He wrote the singer's lyrics on his jeans in Sharpie, and, with narrowed eyes, challenged the world from atop his skateboard. Wiry and menacing, he seemed tattooed with a dangerous apathy, just like his hero. Cobain had been important to me, too, though. When I was nine—the earliest version of myself I can still recognize today—I felt something of the Teen Spirit he sang about. I wrote unintelligible songs about farm animals and suffering and played them on my kiddie guitar with as much pre-teen angst as I could muster. By 1994, though, it seemed like Jake and KC were part of an alternative movement that had gotten too cool for me, so my resentment grew for both of them—the way they had it all figured out in their flannel, singing new songs I didn't know as well. Jake's hero-worship repulsed me.

I didn't understand the music he liked or his bad behavior and, in retaliation, he teased and taunted me at school. Then, after a night nursing a beer and some boredom—those slow instigators—he walked around the corner from his house to mine with a can of Skip's spray-paint, and he tagged me, right there on our fence:

Before I got married, it was the boldest, most public review of me I'd ever encountered. Fuck you, David sucks. After I found it, I sat in church an hour later, crumbling. It had been sprayed just as K. Cobain had sprayed red swear-words on the cars of his own enemies. So, in a sense, the feeling I had was the result of Jake's emulation, his love.

Though I hadn't thought about it for a long time, I recalled Jake's vandalism and his devotion to Cobain when I was about to get hitched to my long-time girlfriend, Megan, 13 years later. I'd been pacing around my house with anxious, tingling feet. Thinking about marriage was giving me the same sensation I got when I considered extreme heights. I was afraid, but I convinced myself my fear was over something that probably wouldn't hurt me. I thought about how irrevocable this all was, though.

Sherwood Anderson once wrote, “You must not try to make love definite” because he believed love was “the divine accident of life. If you try to be definite and sure about it and to live beneath the trees, where soft night winds blow, the long hot day of disappointment comes swiftly.” That was exactly what I was trying to do, though, so my feet tingled. Loving someone too avowedly had always seemed reckless to me, a leap, and I never wanted to look back and see how foolish my wholeheartedness had been. I'd found my hero, but the problem was that hero-worship went hand-in-hand with need.

Before I got married, I was twenty-six, and I didn't want to admit that I needed Megan, or how she conjures me back toward happiness, or how she chews the inside of her cheeks when she grabs my arm, or the necessary way she's let herself depend on me.

And the suspicion that being permanent with her would lead to the long hot day of disappointment was terrifying. What if we falter? What happens when we mark each other indelibly, and for the worse?

Before I got married, I found Jake's graffiti. My dog Nutmeg went to sniff the fence, but I pulled her away as if what was scrawled there was dangerous—a porcupine in words. I went inside to tell my dad, and he inspected the damage before we went to church. I remember sitting in the second pew, still a little boy really, feeling knocked out of my own life and into a crueler one. I'd been cursed, and it was the first time I felt like I needed to pray. That was no use then, though, because all I could concentrate on was that shorthand Fa-Q. The hymns dragged me toward tears but I couldn't let my dad know I was too affected; he'd be more helpless then. I felt conscious of my face and I trembled a little. Maybe The Gospel that morning told a story about strength in the face of persecution, but it was probably about fish or mustard.

When we got home, my dad spent his Sunday scrubbing the swears, but the remains of my suckage are still there. Part of me thanks him for not buying a pristine new fence, which would have stood as a memorial to the graffiti. If I were him, though, I would have torn it down with my bare hands. Instead, the old fence weathered, and the profanities seemed to heal up year by year as it faded to a dark brown, behind the telephone pole, where the ivy was planted and our dog peed, where I'd been cussed out and told who the world thought I was.

I wondered back then what I could have done to stoke Jake's anger. He'd been my nemesis with his stupid throat clear, but I hadn't known I was his. Maybe I'd told my parents something bad he'd done, and maybe they'd gotten him in trouble with Skip and Kathleen, but that seemed unlikely. No, instead I thought about Kurt Cobain, Jake's role model, who'd just killed himself, and about how Jake had gotten more and more sullen after that, slouchier. I thought about my reaction to the suicide. My mom and I were listening to Light Favorites 100.5 when I heard about it. Phil Collins's "In the Air Tonight" came on as a clunky tribute. "Well," I said, "It's kinda good, because Jake loves that guy." Neither of us thought much of Jake, but my mom told me I was awful and I knew she was right. But I couldn't help imagining Jake, that jerk, sulking, or even crying. Maybe he'd realized that what he'd been so sure about could crumble. Maybe he felt as small as I'd felt when he mocked me in and out of school. Death was sad, but the silver lining was that Jake could eat my shit. Clear that out of your throat, I thought, perfectly 13.

Before I got married, Kurt Cobain died and I sucked, and maybe it was my attitude about Nirvana that made Jake vandalize me. Whatever it was, I remember his words, which I sometimes can't help believing, together with an image of my wife mouthing her vows at our wedding. "I promise to love you," she said, another bold review of me. I felt conscious of my face as she told the world who she thought I was, not with a bright red Fa-Q, but with an "I do." I was being tagged again.

What really links the moments for me is that they both seemed so undeserved. When I was 13, I was no dickwad or asscheese. If I was unfriendly to Jake, or even rude,

I was still little old me, incapable, I thought, of arousing his spray-painted passion. And after I got married, I hardly felt like a person around whom anyone could build a life. How could I inspire so much devotion?

David Sucks. David is worthy of life-long love.

No, I'm in-between those, really. Jake should have written “David's only okay,” and instead of “I do,” Megan could easily have said, “I guess.” But we tried to make our love definite. We decided to be each other's groupie, and I hope the “I do” stains me. It's my label now, through cold nights and long, hot days, and though I don't know how to live up to it, here's my vow: I'll try hard not to suck.

—It's just a job. That's really what it was. I mean, if you think about it in any other terms you wouldn't be able to really deal with it, I don't think. It's just a job and what I did was no different than a professor teaching a class three times a week.

EB:47

While I was teaching him *Catch-22*, my student E. B. reported to me—sanely, insanely—that he had killed 47 people as a sniper in Iraq. I stared at him. "Okay," I said, as though he'd just told me about a learning disability I had to accommodate. "So," he said, "I might not be able to watch some of the war movies you assigned." "Oh, of course, of course. Oh my God. And whatever I can do to. . ." Did I want to help? I didn't know whether to feel sorry for him or not; he seemed so unaffected by what he'd told me, like everyone he knew had done something similar over their summer breaks.

A few weeks after that exchange, after I'd felt completely useless teaching him anything about the realistic aspects of war literature, I went to see him at his apartment. Our class had ended and he'd invited me for a whiskey, and to talk more about his tour in Iraq. I didn't know what I was doing. I had some righteous feeling that I could help him if he needed it, but I was also way too attracted to his incredible life-story. E. B. was a stocky dude with glasses and a short shag of black hair. I'd pegged him as your everyday frat boy, but now he was this walking moral conundrum, a guy whose challenges fascinated me. How did he function on a daily basis? Was he somehow at peace, or was he struggling with the thought of 47 different faces?

In a way, my interest felt unsavory. Was I treating him as some specimen I could study? I didn't want to let my curiosity overwhelm the facts of what he'd done, or keep

me from treading lightly with a shaky student. But I didn't think it was right or possible to ignore what he'd told me either. Maybe we could talk, I thought, about how he was coping—with his memories, with guilt. He had a psychiatrist, but he was sick of the prodding; I'd just listen, and he'd told me he might want to write, too, and that I could help him with possible topics. So I brought a tape recorder. But I had my motives. I thought I could write about him, too, and though it crossed my mind that I was setting out to steal his story, I wanted to prove to myself that I had the ability to understand it, and him.

E. B. was 27 at the time, older than my other students by half a decade. In class, his shirt was always tucked in, his clothes always spotless. He was cordial, calm, and he had a funny, tell-it-like-it-is style. He'd bring up the war in class and say that Heller had it just right in *Catch-22*, no question. Then again, as frank as he was, there was something dodgy about him, too, and he never wanted to say what Heller had right, or what in the book he could relate to. “Care to expand?” I'd say. “No,” he'd say coyly. But then he'd linger after class to talk more. It seemed like he wanted someone to listen to him, but not too closely.

In one of those sessions, he told me he had Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, offhandedly, as though he'd nicked himself shaving. I didn't know much about PTSD besides the Hollywood depiction of a scraggly-bearded man overcome by flashbacks. I wondered if that's what he guarded against. When he invited me to his apartment, what I most wanted to find out was how he experienced his memories. Could he tell me anything about being dominated by involuntary thoughts?

I hoped that as I talked to E. B. I could figure out my own morbid preoccupation with him, too. What he'd done may have been repulsive, but, to me, it gave him a kind of sufferer's wisdom I couldn't help respecting. His life was gritty and real, I thought, and that intimidated me and drew me to him at the same time. I was ready to accept just about anything he had to say about how the world worked as he sat, separated from the other students, at his front row desk by the radiator. With his background, I wondered if there was any way I could identify with him, though. He acted like he knew better than all of us, and while I hated that he felt isolated, I didn't like that he thought he was smarter than me, either. He played games. In class, he was both upfront and withdrawn and so, really, I just wanted to interpret him. That was the challenge. To see through this man who was around my age but not much like me. This sniper who said he felt a hundred years old, who had a war-busted knee and a war-busted head.

In his apartment, a 75-gallon fish tank dominated the largest wall. He had on one soft light, and the place felt like an aquarium, a strange setting to talk about violence, real and psychological. We spent a half-an-hour with self-conscious pleasantries and he poured himself that whiskey. Though I was done teaching him, this conversation felt like another job, one I needed to stay sharp for, and so I didn't drink. We sat on opposite couches. He put his feet up on the coffee table. He was wearing a “Make Love, Not War” t-shirt as a joke, and while I fumbled with the tape recorder, he seemed poised, like he'd been through the battle of this conversation before and knew all the strategies. When I started taping, something changed, though. We spoke differently, with our newscaster

voices, for the record. I tried to stay casual and, by way of introduction, I said into the recorder, “Thursday, March 23rd. Talkin' to E. B. in his apartment about his . . . time.”

I hoped he'd be forthcoming because I didn't know how to approach him. He'd told me before that he saw being a sniper as just another job, and I wanted to start with that idea, but my questions sounded phony, like I was a little boy trying to play investigative reporter. I stammered and he gave blunt, dismissive answers. He wasn't going to provide me with sound-bytes. He'd been an intelligence gatherer, and he knew how to cover himself. “Track me another way,” he suggested with his body language. You won’t find me out that easy. I didn't want to pry, really, but at this rate we weren't going to get to anything useful—for him, for me?—unless I surprised him somehow, back into his memory. I got too wrapped up in that challenge of finding him out as he methodically relayed the facts of his story, set to the whir of the fish tank.

E. B. began his military service in 2000 after relinquishing a basketball scholarship. He'd been a guard with a serviceable outside shot, good from the line, but he lacked the discipline to follow through with his class work, so he joined the Marines looking to steady himself. That would do even though he'd always wanted to be in the Air Force, ever since he was a kid. In fifth grade he dreamed of flying jets. The Gulf War was on and E. B. was falling in love with the big planes.

As we talked, I remembered watching CNN on split-screen in my parents' bedroom as American tanks rolled in from Kuwait and greenish missiles exploded over a televised Tel Aviv. At nine, I saw the campaign as a fantasy, but I wasn't completely ignorant of the fact that people were about to die. Still, the urgency excited me, and I

said so to my mother, who corrected me, saying, “No, this is not fun.” That was one of the first world events I remember and the beginning of my addiction to “Breaking News,” the exhilaration of the out-of-the-ordinary. That's when E. B. learned war, too, and I wondered why he wanted to emulate those characters he saw on T.V. Had he ended up killing because war seemed like a game to him when he was growing up? He didn't want to talk about that, though. He was still thinking about fifth grade and the drills of his grammar classes. He was hard to follow as he darted from subject to subject.

—Can you name every helping verb in the English language? he asked me.

—Every helping verb?

—Is am are was were been has have had do does did shall will should would may must can could.

He used to be able to name all the prepositions, too, he said. He had a way with mnemonic devices, and I was impressed by his display. That's what he wanted, to charm and entertain me with his intellect. He knew I was there to witness him unreel his memory, and he was warming up with a little bit of verbal showboating. There was something combative about the way he did it, though, like he wanted to prove to me that he wasn't just a guy who'd killed people. He was the master of all of this, he seemed to say. He had everything memorized and completely under control. I wondered if he was going to deflect my questions the whole night, though. If that's what he needed to do, I should have been fine with it, but I wanted to hear about the war, to know what stayed under his skin. What could he, should he, would he tell me about his fractured life?

His sideman had been shot and killed right next to him, he'd told me once. He was so matter-of-fact when he mentioned it, and he liked that I reacted differently, that I said “Oh my God” and struggled to hit the right note of sympathy even though he didn't seem to be asking for it. I think that made him feel strong. But strength *had* to be his distraction. Why would he keep talking to me if he just wanted to brag about how desensitized he was? I figured he wanted permission to be weak, to talk about the people he'd killed. I didn't know if he should, though, if he had the devices and mechanisms he needed to keep safe as he remembered them.

Training:

Instead, I ask him how he got his start as a sniper.

—Well, I mean, I was basically in a designated marksman type situation. I went to secondary school and I got more, more, more, of an education for my trade.

E. B. trained for his specialized employment—just a job—in Northwest Virginia. He tells me he got this chance because he was a good marine. That determines, he’s sure, whether you get those opportunities. He uses “opportunities” unironically. He wouldn't judge the military with a snarky tone, and he doesn't usually judge himself either. Judging yourself is a fear, he says, and he’s no longer afraid of fear. He’s a Roosevelt of those vaguely inspiring slogans, and, in his presence, they were hard for me not to buy. I'd nod at my mentor, waiting for his next gem.

So he gets opportunity after opportunity, finding himself in Washington state for a tour during his second year in, protecting a nuclear weapons facility. One day he’s

coming off his shift, two to six in the morning, and he’s at the mess grabbing food, and the cooks there, they always listen to Howard Stern, see. And he’s got some supermodel on, not Cindy Crawford, but one of the ones with a mole. And this was before XM radio, so Howard Stern was national, and Stern’s talking about The World Trade Center. E. B. thinks this is just a shock-jock fucking around, so he gets his food and sits down. Then the alarms go off.

—We broke into the special weapons locker. Broke out all kinds of high-powered machinery that usually wasn’t allowed in the limited area, because, you know, it’s a nuclear weapons facility and these are high-powered weapons. Something bad could really happen. The president had just grounded all planes in the United States. No plane was allowed to be in the air. There was a plane that had taken off from Alaska. And it was headed straight towards Seattle.

This is what I'd been looking for—war stories, insider scoop. He seems to relish telling, too. I'm perking up, more than I would if I was just there to listen to him. There's an authenticity to this, like I'm finally talking to the real-life version of a character I've heard about so many times on the news. Give me more, I think, feeling energized and a little sick.

Evasive Maneuvers:

Alright, E. B., so you’re talking about that day, and you’re hanging off the roof of the nuke plant by your knees with a weapon you'll shoot at the plane if it ever shows up. You’re angry probably, or you’re in high gear. What were you thinking about right then?

No, don't tell me. I want to imagine what I'd be thinking if I were you. (And is this really what I hope to get out of talking to you, a chance to live vicariously? Some part of me wants this action badly. I dream of necessary violence: it seems instinctive. And to be morally certain, what must that feel like?) So, yes, tell me, because I want to know what kind of thing would stay in my mind, what never leaves. I want to know what you're capable of, E. B., what we can force ourselves to be.

—Well, at that time, on September 11th, I was only 20, 21 years old, I think. Yeah, 21. I'd only been a marine for like a year and a half or so, and boot camp was still fresh in my mind. I was a gung ho young marine, you know?

That's the thing, I don't know, not at all. I've never even held a gun, and I'm hoping to understand *you*, something of what you've seen? That's almost inconceivable, but I want to try, because if I can—you killed 47 people—then maybe I'll know that I'm not just an insulated person who claims to care, that I can, after all, feel a strange compassion. And maybe I have your banal, calculated, responsible evil in me, too. All you did was flex your finger 47 times. I could probably do that if I'd been convinced my life was at stake. And maybe I could bury it all as well as you have. That would be justifiable, normal. And you're *so* normal. You eat pizza in class and crack jokes about Britney Spears just like the rest of us. We could be buddies. I've never been gung ho, though. I can imagine what it might be like to get caught up in courage, but I'm sure I'm wrong, so I was hoping you could tell me what you were thinking as you prepared to blow up a jetliner, how I might act.

—I didn't think anything of it.

I don't know how that's possible. I'd be shaking, trying to think of my family. I'd be worried that I was seconds away from committing an act I'd never get over. How did you turn off your mind, what did you say to yourself?

—Like, hell yeah, this is my chance. I might get to do some crazy shit now. This is what I worked for, you know, blah blah blah, that type of thing. It didn't really have any impact emotionally or psychologically or anything like that on me.

E. B. is either perfectly suited to a kind of robotic military duty or he seems to be able to carry off some pretty heavy denial. Maybe both. Sometimes he seems to believe himself absolutely, and at other times, he is so aware of his own bullshit it's embarrassing (I would get worked up about how calm he was, how uninteresting). I do my job, I feel nothing, I think nothing: that's his self-preserving stance.

But how can I do *my* job if he's going to insist that he's unaffected? If that's really true, then am I sitting here in a tidy, Ikea-furnished apartment with a brainwashed monster? Maybe I can't know him, this machine who never had to use a second bullet to kill, even on his farthest "mission." And that's what he calls all those people he shot—missions. Just one bullet each. That's what he told me. He'd shoot almost ten-thousand feet, and I want him to say more about that work.

—You have to realize, he says, that it's extremely detail-oriented, this job. Outside of intelligence gathering, you're trying to—mechanically, you're trying to put a tiny piece of metal into a small area that wide.

He cups his head. After an hour, E. B. doubts I want to hear more of this, though. He thinks people who haven't experienced war aren't interested in it. They want to know

what they already know in twenty-five words or less. I'm interested, I tell him, maybe too forcefully. It's not often I get to witness a guy bump up against the boundaries of what he'll say about himself. There's a voyeuristic thrill, and anyway, I don't want to be another one of these people who can't stand to acknowledge what he's done. Whatever he wants to say to me—his specific 25 words—I'll listen. I can guess what a few of the words will be: job, fear, shot, mission, dead. I've got my armor on, though, ready to endure anything he has to confess. I don't mind gore, but something occurs to me. What if he's about to tell me he doesn't have any guilt? I'm afraid to find that out. He's been discussing the shootings like they're routine procedures, and I don't want to know it's possible to shrug off four dozen deaths, so I keep asking all the questions I can. When do you feel relief? When do you feel remorse? What happened to you over there?

—I don’t think I’m happy to talk about it. And I don’t really volunteer information about it.

Spying:

But yes he does. He volunteers it all the time. He took a war class after all; he doesn't seem to want to avoid anything. He's a storyteller, and if I sat here, if I had a couple whiskeys with him, he'd talk through the night. Every time I'm with him, I'm afraid he's duping me, though, embellishing for some reason. The more he can unflinchingly claim he's done, the more immune he'll seem. And I'm just the new audience for the well-rehearsed stories of his own stoicism he needs to tell, with the morals and self-affirmations. I've gotten myself in this position of mock-therapist, mock-

friend, and I have to sound impressed by how nonchalantly this student of mine can look back at the precision of his murders. I don't want him to be secure with himself, though. It's my job to get him to reflect. If he wants to write, he'd better be in crisis, but he says he doesn't think that way about the war. In order for me to justify him, though, in order for me to see him as the complex person I think everyone should be, he needs to hurt in front of me. This is weirdly sadistic, I know. But at least then I'll know how to respond. I could pity him. I'd know that the perpetrator was actually a victim, too, and I'd be secure in my assumption—that E. B. is a regular guy who was made to do something terrible. As a subject, he'd be knowable. But if it's rationalization he needs—like he needs an early bedtime and one drink a night—then I should let him have his hiding place. I should back off.

He hasn't started to sweat yet. That will come later, over his left eyebrow. Right now, he gives lengthy, thoughtful answers about how he doesn't want to talk, and then, without any prodding, he talks. Though I'm there to listen, I partly wish he'd stop. He's not going to be healed, and, the way things are going, I won't figure him out. But I keep pressing, because maybe what he's got locked up in his head is just another mission he has to carry out. Just like your mission on February 1st, 2003 when you got to Kuwait, right E. B?

—That was actually pretty much pandemonium. We got off the plane and it was basically my whole, just my company came over on that plane. We got all our stuff and they put us on buses and bussed us like 45 minutes away from the airport in the middle of

the desert and we had to set up a base camp. And we got some sleep that night and that was pretty much the extent of that.

I don't believe a good night's sleep was the extent of anything, but, again, he likes to downplay. He gets off, I think, on acting unimpressed with himself while I insinuate with my tape recorder and my wide eyes that he's extraordinary. I wait for him to say more, but he holds out. So I ask him when he crossed the border, because I know that's when he took his first shot.

—Well, March 19th is when we officially. . .

—That's when you heard?

—Yeah, yeah. They woke us up at, like, one in the morning or something and we got all our shit and staged about an hour and a half away from the Iraqi border.

—So what were you thinking right then? I mean, you're not really thinking anything, right? You're so used to being in the zone, or is that not true?

Redeployment:

And that's when you started to talk about Afghanistan again, E. B., how you trained there in the 120-degree heat. You would be right on the verge of admitting something personal and would take yourself to another country, another topic. Afghanistan. Basketball. Republicans. Whiskey. Whatever crossed your mind. And that's what I wanted to see, in a way, how your thoughts moved you. But didn't I need plot-lines and images, too? If I saw you in action or heard about what you really remembered, then maybe we could connect a little, meet on common ground. Or was

empathy an insult to you? Was it patronizing of me to try to understand the improvised explosiveness of your mind?

You resented me, too, right? Because maybe I was faking concern, just another smart-ass who thought I knew better than you, knew what you needed. I'd speak about unburdening yourself, free-association writing, talking it out, new-agey shit like that. But I didn't really intend to see through your rifle scope, did I, look at the world as you saw it? No one could do that, maybe, except the guys at the VFW. They can help, I can't. So you keep switching topics to avoid saying what you brought me over to tell me.

You talk about your son and your calls to him, which are like a daily anesthetic. This is how your mind needs to work now. You're careful what you concentrate on, and he distracts you from March 19th, right? He moved away with your wife when she left you. He's your little buddy, three now, and with a tiny birthmark on his left cheek. He's got surfer hair and his father's nose. That's who you were fighting for in Iraq, right? The children? Major combat's over, and you're feeling for the kids. Talk to me about the kids.

—I mean, the day after the Baath party was toppled and it was official, I saw kids playing in the street for the first time since I'd been there. You know, and at that point my wife was preg—my wife at the time was pregnant, you know, and I just kept thinking about what if I lived in a society where I wouldn't even let my kids go out and play. You know? What we did in Iraq needed to be done. If for no other reason, for that reason. I was all excited because I was going to be a dad and the actual war part was over,

supposedly the threat was gone and for awhile it really was. And we got to interact with these kids outside.

As he told me this, I wondered how he'd switch from killing to playing in a few minutes, and then back again, the compartments of his days. Fortunately, E. B. seems skilled at that.

—I mean, we had jobs we had to do. We still had to patrol and we still took a lot of contact. You know, a lot of fire fights and stuff. But when we weren't doing stuff like that, the kids would come to where we were staying and I remember we, uh, we'd make ’em sling shots and then during the day we'd have slingshot wars with ’em and we'd shoot M&Ms at ’em from our M80s.

Taking Aim:

Before I could process that story, or question whether is was even possible to fire candy out of a gun, he jumped back to March 19th, the day the war began. In order to allow his company to penetrate into the country, E. B. would compromise the Iraqi system of surveillance. With his rifle barrel set, he waited. He was assigned two border guards, and success here, according to him, meant his guys wouldn't face resistance on the first part of their advance.

His sideman lines up the view, he looks through the scope. He sees the first face, part of it a target, finds the corner of the mouth. This is the story I'd asked for, but I still hope it turns out differently. The guard's olive skin looks yellow through the night vision

goggles. E. B. breathes, feels the heaviness of his arm, breathes again. And finally shoots.

If he hadn't shot his first man, it would have been a disaster, he thinks. I believe him, or at least I believe that he believes himself. He killed the second man like he killed the first. No disaster, just a job, and I want to know how long he had to perform this task.

—February 1st to August 12th.

Almost seven months. 193 days. 47 bullets. That's about one mission every four days, and each took three days of prep, he told me. Those are the statistics, but he knew so many details about each mission, too, as much as one person can know about another one just from looking in. He would know habits, tics, distinguishing marks. He took notes on limps and facial hair changes, on their cars, their clothes, how they laughed, and who they spent their time with.

—I knew the color of my mission's wife's panties, he said.

There was a restraint to this comment that bordered on respect. Everything he did, he did consciously, and he made the decision to do it, it was just a job. He repeats that line like it's his "name and rank," the only thing he'll allow himself to utter under duress. He says thinking about it like that is the only way to get by. It's as if he's had to teach himself not to reflect, and for a second I admire how he seems to be impervious to his past, even as I hate what we can coerce ourselves to forget. But later he tells me this:

—I think it's impossible to deal with it. I'm in a better situation to cope, though. You know, for four years I was taught to kill. Everyday. You know, from the first day of boot camp to the day I got out. Marines are trained to kill, period.

Collateral Damage:

His wife took their son and left home a few months after E . B. returned from Iraq. He'd been depressed over his wrecked knee, over the chemical weapon he'd gotten in his eye. He held himself back from her and she couldn't understand his moods, why he felt no enthusiasm for their new life in Ohio. She kept asking him to tell her about it, whatever *it* was, the war, his memory. One day, he finally shouted at her. *Have you ever seen this?,* he'd ask and describe a violent death. *I have. Have you ever seen this? I have. Have you ever? I have.* The outburst proved to his wife that he wasn't the person she'd married. Glancing up at his boot camp graduation photo hanging on the wall behind me, he doesn't deny what she thinks. In the photo, he's unrecognizable: thinner, smooth. And now he's just a different man as he remembers his violent, middle-eastern adolescence when, with fifteen others from his training class, he checked off one mission after another in the unendurable heat.

He's lost some of the swagger he had when we started talking, and I'm sorry for bringing him back to those breakdown days. Again, I wonder what I'm trying to accomplish here. As much as what he's saying moves me, I know it's happened to thousands of veterans who had trouble re-assimilating. He's not teaching me anything new, and he doesn't seem buoyed by talking about his life either. Selfishly, I'd wanted him to be my history of the war, my most vivid account, perched over his gunsight. If he could live this life, I wanted to prove that I could at least stomach the story of it. Now I'd watched him shoot two men and lose his wife. What I'd wanted was for us to

communicate, but all I could do was acknowledge that, yes, this was all exceedingly awful. His weakness wasn't illuminating anything.

He tells me about the doctors who tried to diagnose him with PTSD, how they pestered him with questions about what he remembered. He was mildly sedated so he'd talk, giving up secrets to show he was wounded. He's 50 percent disabled officially and went through two years to prove it. He tells himself he's fine when he cashes the government checks, though. He can't easily admit frailty, even six hundred dollars worth of it.

—In terms of the mental stuff. What are the sorts of questions that you had to deal with? I ask him.

—He didn't really ask questions, he just kind of guided the conversation. The one that actually diagnosed me. I see two other doctors and they said I didn't have it, but the reason they said that was that my exterior was all I was allowing anybody to see. You know, anybody can act like something else. Umm, this doctor actually got inside my head a little bit and, you know, he saw that, and that's why he told me I had it.

I'd seen something get in E. B.'s head recently, too. During the last meeting of our class, I showed *Jarhead*, the 2005 film about a Gulf War sniper who never fired his gun. E. B. had told me this was a tough one for him to get through, but he attended, and I ask him why he came.

—I guess it goes back to not being afraid of fear. You know, like, if I don't have to do something, I probably won't do it, but if I need to do something I will do it. I had to

see the movie so I could complete the assignment. Or the mission if you want to put it that way.

—But you didn't need to do it for me. I mean, when I do my work now, I'm doing it to prove it to myself in some way, right? Is it the same with you?

—Partly, yeah.

—And you got up after that movie and I remember you were the last one in the room. Do you remember what was going through your mind at that point?

—Umm, I don't know. It's kind of hard to, cause, I mean, every time I see something like that something different goes through my mind. It's never, never the same thing. Sometimes I can look at things and have a good memory. You know a memory of taking my marines on patrol or something, and on the way out of the compound I slip the lady a five dollar bill. We're out on patrol for three hours. We come back and now I've got two big ass plates of fried chicken and a shit ton of flat bread that she made for us for five dollars, you know. Memories like that come back just as much as all the death and destruction come back.

—But is the harder stuff ever as specific as the chicken? Do you get specific—Is it like dream stuff? Do you have a dream of an image, or is it just like a, like a, you get the same sort of feeling you had?

Now I'm avoiding, careful not to insinuate that he's crazy or fixated on one traumatic thing. Though he 'umms' and 'likes' and 'you knows', he's more articulate than I am during our session. I'm scared of offending him, scared of his anger, and maybe I

don't really want to see him uncovered, but he's ready to talk again. I stammer one more time.

—Do you have a, do you have an image that comes into your head?

Why is this so important to me, the one snapshot he holds on to? Do I want an image of my own experience with the war, my limited tour, the three hours with him in his fluorescent blue living room?

—Umm, one of the guys, one of my missions was about 33 years old. He had two kids and he was clean-shaven and I don't think he could grow any hair on his face at all. But, uh, he had a mole on his left cheek. And I have a recurring image of, uh, at the time I don't even know why I did it.

(Again, I'm way too excited to hear what he did. Even though this might be hurting him, I can't help thinking he should say it and that I should hear it).

—I put my cross-hairs on his mole and I pulled the trigger. I just have that, that vision.

He has a sweat sheen on his forehead now.

—I have a mental image that recurs. You know. Have you ever looked through a rifle scope?

—I haven't.

—Rifle scopes have cross-hairs on them, and I put the cross-hairs directly on the mole on his left jaw and that's what I shot at. And I have that, that vision, of just the cross-hairs lined up on his face like that.

This man had been with his daughters that day as E. B. scouted him. He tells me he sees it sometimes, the man's mole, when he's eating ice cream.

Cover:

I get the sense that he hasn't told this story to many people, and it's the first time during the night that he's revealed himself the way he says he can over at the VFW.

—What sort of things do you say to them that you can't say to me?, I ask

—We just talk about specific, you know, instances. It's just a bunch of combat veterans drinking alcohol and talking.

—So about physical kind of effects?

—We don't necessarily talk about the effects that our actions had on us. We talk about the specific actions themselves. Unless it's somebody we're extremely close to, we usually don't talk about negative emotional effects of what we did. I mean the military trains you to be what they want you to be and emotional weakness is not a part of that. From very early on, your emotional weaknesses are correlated with unmanliness, you know. To be emotionally weak is not to be a man.

Maybe this is my cue to end. He's embarrassed now, downbeat. I've tried to force him to be everything he avoids, and I'm not qualified for that sort of thing. I wanted him to be a compelling subject for me at his own expense, but have I gone too far? Maybe I should drink that whiskey now and take off. The tape's running out anyway. But he continues.

—What grown man wants to admit they have nightmares? You usually don't want to do that. Those are the types of things most men will keep to themselves. I don't not talk about those things out of fear. Umm, in some cases I wouldn't talk about them because of compassion.

Compassion for who you're telling, I wonder. I can take it, I swear.

—In other cases I wouldn't talk about them because I don't want to remember things, umm, and by compassion I mean as a civilian you wouldn't want to hear stories about, you know, a guy that, you know, shot a ten-year-old boy or something. You know. It was totally an accident, but you don't want to hear about that. Those are, that's something I've done. I killed a ten-year-old boy because he fired at me. I didn't know he was a ten-year-old boy. All I knew was I just got shot at and it came from that direction. I had to defend myself. And as a civilian, you don't want to hear that.

He's mostly right. I'm gut-punched, but now I know for sure that I can't identify with him, with the guilt he feels over this kid caught in a different sort of slingshot war. This must have happened around the time his own son was born. *Have you seen? I have.* He gets up to feed his fish.

—And there's lots of things like that you just don't want to talk about. You don't want to let people in because you know what it's done to you and if it can do that to you, just imagine what that could do to a normal person. Then you're expected to come back to, you know, wherever you're from and be normal. I don't think I'll ever be normal. You know, I'll never be that kid, never again. I'll never be that kid.

He points to his picture on the wall above my head.

—When was that? I ask.

—2000. That was my boot camp graduation picture.

—You look young.

—19 years old. 161 pounds.

He laughs.

—You know that? I'll never be that again.

For a second, he seems to flashback to that teenage era as well as he can, and when he smiles I feel like I get one glimpse past the armor he's built up, but then the E. B. I know comes back. He shakes my hand—firmly—and we're done for the night.

—I mean. You look at it in terms of being a job, he says.

Take

The last few weeks at church, as a courtesy, I've taken a good glug of communion wine. If the congregation doesn't finish the stuff (a.k.a. The Blood of Christ), then the Eucharistic minister has to down it all because Catholic tradition has it that no amount of communion can go unconsumed. This regulation became apparent to me at my wedding, last August. The priest prepared the normal amount—mingling eight parts water with two parts wine, doling it all out, saying "This is Jesus. . ."—but, because of the demographics of weddings (eight parts secular), very few imbibed of Christ. One of the Eucharistic ministers had a particularly fun evening after being made to chug a quarter-liter of The Holy Spirit. I thought I heard the priest say "bottoms-up." I've had this in mind during mass lately, and so I've drunk deeply to spare the gray-haired ladies at St. Paul's from midday burping. It's hard to look reverent with a mouthful of Burgundy-Blood soaking a wafer of Man-God, but I fold my hands and sneak toward the back, where I always sit. I swallow in secret and feel, for no and every reason, good.

I've always loved the light pomp of approaching the altar with a group of people to receive communion. To the uninitiated, the whole experience might seem creepy, involving as it does a collective trudge toward an old man in purple robes offering a magic slice of bread. To me, it's like a weekly graduation, but, instead of a degree, I get fellow-feeling. We're all in this together, you and you and pretty you and elderly you and infant you. We're asserting that we have something in common, shared suffering maybe or a sense of charity. There's also the deep satisfaction, having had the opposite

experience so many times, of being in a line that moves efficiently: there's no quicker, more consistent queue than communion.

I think it's that consistency that's most important to me. Communion is something I've done for twenty years, at the same time every week, often at the same place. There's not much else, beyond bodily function, that I can say that about. Generations of grandparents took communion, too, their lives measured out, week by steady week. I like the idea that a religious service projects me back in time, connects me with those long-gone folks. We all chose to see something artful in the sprawling, flawed narrative of Christianity—this ongoing approximation—and that's validating for me in a way that most of my activities aren't.

I remember taking my first communion, in my suit, up on the altar with the priest and the be-flowered girls in white. I'd kissed one of them on her barrette in school that year, in the coatroom. I planned to share a couple sacraments with her, in fact. We'd been taught all year how to receive: left hand over right, say “amen,” eat without chewing (old-fashioned Catholics don't want to bite down on God—I nibble). But we hadn't really gotten to the mystery of transubstantiation—the incredible process through which a sliver of mass-produced cracker turns into the flesh of a 2000-year old, 5'1” Arabic man. We had a coloring book, but that didn't clear up the figurative/literal debate. Was this bland cookie actually Christ? Was it merely a symbol of his love, a token of remembrance, a chewy little metaphor? We were left on our own to think about that. I, eternally distracted and distracted from the eternal, kept an eye on that cute, barretted sweetie instead.

I knew we were almost there, though, almost to the big day, ready to take, eat. It's odd to make this deeply-personal step a kind of performance, but the church always parades their eight-year-olds through the motions. If it were up to me, kids would decide when and if they wanted to suspend their disbelief and leap into the zany world of spiritual snacking. As it is, though, they have to go through the ritual, get watched, get clapped for. I was so nervous up there that I wasn't much for prayerful focus. I think my main concern was making sure there were no Christ-crumbs on my little-kid tie.

“Do you feel different?” my Aunt Joanne asked me afterwards. I knew I was supposed to say yes and so I did. I guess I was being honest; I was part of the adult group now and that was different. We weren't saved or elect. We just got to decide if communion was something that mattered to us. I felt different because I actually had to *do* something in church. I felt different, yes. In the coming weeks, I'd get in the efficient line and wander up. To me, it wasn't unlike lining up to go to gym class. This was something I was supposed to do, something my brother already did. I did it.

It took me a long time, years, to understand that I was meant to be communing with God and with the people around me. Now, once every twelve masses or so, I get that sensation of common purpose, and I love it, especially since it's so hard to look around in regular life and understand any part of the experience of that guy on the street over there, this young woman popping her gum, the orange-headed kid who just let go of his balloon, that person—inscrutable—agitated by, who can know, then suddenly across the street. Communion, it's my hope, reminds me to be with them just a little bit, because, as much as I want to be an individual, I want even more to be—under a

spectrum of stain-glassed light and everywhere else—unalone. So I try, for a few seconds at least, to imagine myself as the warbly-voiced widow singing “How Great Thou Art” a bit too loudly, the little kid reading *Curious George,* my father back home.

It's sometimes said that when historical Jesus went to the desert for forty days he was trying to take into himself all of the potential emotions of humankind. Through meditation and imagination, through fasting and temptation, he tried to experience, the theory goes, all that's possible—desperation, goodness, what it's like to be the warbling widow, shame, joy, violence, how that agitated guy might have to confront the world, someday, centuries in the future. I doubt he succeeded, but when I take communion, I think about that attempt. Empathy is the miracle.

At eight, though, all that was important to me was that I got to tease my sister right after I received. She was only five and had to stay back in the pew, fiddling with her up-on-Sunday hair. Even though she didn't care much about church at the time, when I got communion she wanted it too, as if it was a long-neglected toy I'd rediscovered—Lincoln Logs or a yo-yo. My brother and I conspired to make her think that communion was the most fun thing in the world to eat, that she was missing out.

“It tastes like tacos,” I'd tell her.

“Nuh-uh,” she'd say.

“That's why it looks like a little tortilla,” my brother would add.

“Nuh-UUUHHH.”

“Mmm, salsa and cheeeeese.” I'd smack my lips: she'd hit me. I was not empathizing with her.

“Don't you guys listen to what we're talking about in here?” my dad would say. He's no Bible-thumper, but he knew how to use anything at his disposal to keep us in line. We hadn't really heard the readings but we figured whatever it was meant that we had to behave.

It's hard for me to explain why I believe in this thing, the Eucharist. A few weeks ago, I was listening to a man on the radio deride Christian extremists and what they believe. He mentioned some Old Testament stuff about arcs and parting of seas and I didn't blink an eye. He's right. That's symbolic at best, and everyone knows it. When he got to the part about the Eucharist, though, when he mocked that substantially unbelievable tenet, I tensed and looked away. It didn't feel good to be the target of the kind of snarky progressive I usually associate myself with, and my reaction, it seems to me now, was an attempt to physically disappear. I didn't want to be there, didn't want to be the fool. The moment convinced me that, despite all the reasons I should not believe in the Eucharist, I do, instinctively. It remains a wonder I base myself on, extra-logically, up there with the mostly inconceivable puzzle of human consciousness.

I think maybe Christ is an odd collective memory for many of us; when I take the Eucharist, I'm remembering a good person and that's all. There's no body, maybe. But memory isn't just a metaphor. Memory is the thing and its representation, co-mingled. It's solid and spiritual. The philosopher Mircia Eliade argued that all ritual is an attempt to return to the original event, and in eating a piece of bread that's meant to help me remember this person I've never met, maybe I come to carry a physical semblance of him

within me somehow, if only through the play of memory, memory that's material, physical.

The writer Barrett Mandel says, “Since my past only truly exists in the present and since my present is always in motion, my past itself changes too—actually changes—while the illusion created is that it stays fixed.” Whether we're religious or not, we're carrying with us the living body of our past, the flesh of memory.

I'm sure all of this has been well-considered by theologians for thousands of years and that I should probably stick to keeping my own memories alive. But to challenge myself I'll try to think about all of these ideas when I go up to receive this week. These and all the other people in front of me in the fast-moving line, their personal enigmas. I'll drink the wine, blood, backwash; eat muscle and wheat. I'll strain for a memory and I'll try not to drop any of it on my tie.

Nuclear Family

I.

Mostly, my father works. For 35 years at Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Plant, he's overseen refueling operations, directed safety exercises, and written reports on protocol. My family has no idea what any of this means. We know he's perpetually on-call and often pre-occupied, so much so that my mother refers to Vermont Yankee, Vy, as my father's mistress. This hussy takes all his time, calls late at night and early in the morning. Vy's his first priority.

When I was growing up, I revered his work for its mysterious quality, but later questioned its dryness. By the time I was in my late teens, I thought the job represented everything stagnant in the world—concrete and time sheets. I thought corporate work corroded the soul (I'd learned about my soul during freshman year at college). And I knew the work-a-day life of my father was not, repeat not, for me. He woke up every morning at precisely 6:18 to be half-an-hour early to work and spent his days discussing synergy. He toiled for an industry that was environmentally suspect at best. And worst of all, he actually prided himself on what I considered the nightmare of his life: that things at The Plant, things in our home, stayed safely and exactly the same. I, meanwhile, meant to find a job, a life that expressed the cloudy mass of altruism and awesomeness that was my inner core. If dad insisted on being a staid old nucleus, I needed to be the rogue electron that broke away from him hard (I'd learned about chemistry during my freshman year in high school).

For a long time, my dad epitomized steadiness, and steadiness was my sworn enemy. Something funny happened, though. I finished school, got married, got a job I didn't always like that wasn't particularly steady, questioned where I was going with all of my many choices. And within a short time in my life, less than a decade, just as nuclear power itself has re-emerged as a trendy new energy source, my father's life has started to look different to me. He's been relatively content over the years, I think, if not excited. And while he often seems deeply disappointed, stern in his silence, maybe his job has kept him level. Maybe we both need that calmness. I used to think possibility was the only thing that mattered, not purpose, that options meant fulfillment; as I consider my father, though, and as I remember the way he can reorder a room with the gravity of his barely-contained sullenness, I wonder if it's some narcotic purpose that will keep me, like it's kept him, from ripping apart.

II.

My father began his nuclear life around the time of the reactor accident of Three Mile Island, in Pennsylvania. The fiasco there is considered “the worst accident in the history of commercial nuclear power.” “The reactor,” wrote Daniel Ford, “deprived of both normal and emergency sources of cooling water, and no longer able to use its enormous energy to generate electricity, gradually started to tear itself apart.” When I read this line, I understood what happened at the plant in the limited way I can grasp nuclear science, but I also felt a strange identification. For just a second—long enough to make a hasty note—I personified the reactor core, this sad thing that was unable to live

up to its potential and had a kind of nervous meltdown. It wasn't logical, but it made me think of my dad, an ultra-steady man whose promise of volatility frightened me all through my childhood. He was occasionally inconsolable in a way he couldn't seem to communicate, and I brought some of that feeling into myself at an early age. As I've gotten older and felt his underused grin on my own face, and felt some of his same inner churning, it's my own volatility that frightens me now—the enormous energy of our dark places.

What frightened people about Three Mile Island was a similar mysteriousness. How could something so stable fail so instantaneously, and what kind of harm would occur from its releases? My dad had insight into this fear because of his position in the industry, but he distinctly remembers being just as confused as the citizens who lived near the plant. He told me about Walter Cronkite's dramatic description of the events and how he stared at the news footage for a few nights in a row. Millions of people shared that experience and wondered if this nuclear accident meant certain doom. Even today, Three Mile Island remains synonymous with nuclear failure; it's known as a Great American disaster, perhaps our most infamous industrial conflagration.

The most pervasive force guiding the reaction to the accident, the reaction to nuclear power in general, was the country's long, propaganda-fueled battle with The U.S.S.R., with The Bomb. For years, schoolchildren had been taught of the immediate and devastating impact of a nuclear reaction. In 1951, the film “Duck and Cover” was released to demonstrate proper techniques to avoid injury in the event of a nuclear episode. The film warns, “Always remember. The flash of an atomic bomb can come at

any time. No matter where you might be." Be on guard, this films suggests. Things will somehow fall apart.

Throughout the fifties and sixties, civil defense films continually warned against particles, gamma rays, and immediate death. Despite their fear-mongering tone, they offered a certain truth about atomic bombs. The destruction would be terrible. The unfortunate side-effect of the movies, though, besides paranoia, was that people began conflating nuclear bombs with nuclear energy. So even though no deaths are attributed to the episode at Three Mile Island, the link remains between the partial reactor meltdown and the imagined destruction of nuclear war. In her book, *The Power to Save the World*, Gwyneth Cravens writes, "After a few days, news anchors began to announce that the accident was under control. Still, assumptions that were wrong and dire predictions of devastation that did not occur have lodged in the public mind."

III

When I was little, I didn't think much about the implications of my dad's job. Was it environmentally sound? Was it safe for him? What was his place in the energy future of the country? How was his work, and his dedication to work, different from that of other dads? Mostly I just knew that this man with the perfectly-groomed mustache worked at "The Plant." His job there was, in some ways, as unknown to me as he was. Around the house, he wasn't much for constant fatherly wisdom or instructive stories about his own childhood. In his white shirt and Plant-issued I.D. badge, he'd sit at supper eating his mushroom soup casserole quickly, listening to his kids (sometimes), and rarely

asking questions about our elementary concerns. Though he kept to himself, my dad's huge presence dominated our house. On one hand, he set a peaceful example; on the other, the heaviness of his dejection—the way he slouched—had me on guard even at a young age. Though he would never insult me or my siblings, he could make us feel frivolous by ignoring our little comments. And I was constantly afraid, sometimes still am, of acting stupid in front of him. He could shame so easily with his tone, and "You know better than that" was one of his favorite lines. By the time I was eight, we didn't really know how to consider each other. He was sweet but scary, dependable but distant.

Because of his expertise in math, though, he was tapped to help me with my homework when I was in third grade. He'd write up extra math questions and I'd try desperately to carry the right twos. Calculus, physics, nuclear engineering were all easy to him, so he didn't seem to understand why I couldn't get long division. I'd arrive at a complicated quotient and take my answer to him sheepishly. When I was right, he'd tussle my hair with his calloused hand—a gentle, forth-back-forth—as I looked down, closed my eyes, and smiled our ever-so-brief, embarrassed smile. This was about the best thing that could happen to me. I'd lived up to my dad. But his aloofness, and the pressures of his job, still kept us apart.

I was proud of his work then, though, the way he managed things at V.Y. from the time he left early in the morning with a "Bye guys" to the time he came in late with a "Night guys." He didn't talk much about work, but when he did, I was mystified. What was an "outage"? What was a "reactor"? What was "containment"? Those were my days watching *Mission Impossible* and *Get Smart* reruns, and I sometimes thought that

his evocative talk about The Plant was code. It crossed my mind that maybe he was in the C.I.A. At nine, the C.I.A. sits in the same daring, cloudy part of the brain as S.E.X., and I often thought of his job as pretty S.E.X.Y., imagining him directing traffic in a dangerous control room full of red buttons, or in a white coat juggling vials of goo as other, less-steady mad scientists considered him with polite-clapping admiration (he'd bow slightly). I wondered if he, like Penny in *Inspector Gadget*, had a computer-book in his briefcase and cufflinks with which he could shoot acid at enemies, burglars, saboteurs, the French (I didn't really understand Cold War politics at that time, but I always felt vaguely threatened by Pepe Le Pew, so I figured those guys were the enemy). To me, my father was a spy, a laconic Bond with a license to make power. And though his job may have been all-consuming, at least it let him express what I saw as his extraordinary genius.

Even when his dadly stock had risen, though, I was still sometimes frightened of him, not because I worried that he'd lash out at me, but because he carried so much gloom in his voice. There was the chance that I'd disappoint him and add to the gloom, but the tentative feeling I had toward my dad came more from the fact that I just didn't understand the pall that could so easily settle on his face, on our family life. At that age, I knew absolutely everything, so when I couldn't figure out this sad-dad, I didn't know what to do. We avoided each other the way, on certain days, people avoid mirrors. My mom told me he was different at work, though, friendly and funny. I saw that sometimes, but not too often. Instead, I got a mostly shut-down dad, a spy who seemed to have self-destructed already.

One Friday, I'd had it with my dad. So when my mom told me I had to finish the weekend's homework before I did anything else (unbelievable!), I blew up when he agreed with her. My tantrum intensified, and I yelled at him about how he did nothing but work and that now he wanted me to be the same. In the middle of it, he grabbed my arm roughly and dragged me to my room with the speed of a chemical reaction. I'd never seen him so angry, his eyes so animated; the fearful noise he made as he picked me off my seat wasn't language. I shut up quick, amazed at the built-up power he'd unleashed. A few hours later, after I'd stewed, he filled my doorway. He approached and, hugging me, choked an unstable “I'm sorry” into my neck. I felt his stubbly breath. I didn't know what he was sorry about really. I'd been the brat. His anger, maybe? Or that he'd worked so hard to hide it all.

IV

In 1986, the fourth reactor at Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant near Pripyat, Ukraine experienced a massive meltdown. The disaster had many causes, among them gross human error, poor plant design, and Soviet stubbornness. While forty-three people died as a direct result of the disaster, it's thought that resulting deaths from illness will approach 4,000. “I think there was general, shock is probably too hard a word, but curiosity,” my dad told me when I asked him about Chernobyl and his company's response. “Any time there's radioactivity released we know how dangerous that is. There was a sort of 'what the heck happened?' feeling.”

"All the plants had to do hundreds of things," he told me, "to demonstrate that the types of stuff that happened couldn't happen at our plants." Indeed, these two accidents—TMI and Chernobyl—shaped the nuclear sector all while slowing its growth. In the thirty-five years of my father's involvement in nuclear power, no new plants have been ordered. The plants that remain face constant criticism from environmental groups and, even though federal support for plants has been tripled, Vermont Yankee itself is in a nationally-publicized battle for relicensing. My dad has taken this to heart, working on a public relations website called I-AM-VY (he is). And in a letter to the editor published recently, he wrote:

> When you are considering if the Vermont Yankee operating license should be extended, do so with the understanding that it's not just about the physical plant, it's also about the workers and management who are always looking for ways to improve ourselves, our programs and processes, and the performance of the station. It's who we are.

It's who we are. It's almost as if he's hoping to be relicensed himself, stamped as a valid man. But I want my father to be more than his job, more than those processes. I don't want it to have been a waste, his years there.

What has it meant to my dad to be caught up in a moribund industry that's always under fire? He takes it personally, avoiding local businesses that are anti-nuke. If the hippy tire place and that restaurant up in Brattleboro boycott him, he returns the favor. And even though he has the same job title as Homer Simpson, out of loyalty he's never watched that show, which depicts nuclear power negatively. I wonder if he ever blames

those two accidents—Three Mile Island and Chernobyl—for this public vilification he tries to shrug off. “We're talking about a once-in-a-million-years possibility of these things happening,” he told me when I asked him if similar accidents could occur now that safety regulations he's worked on are enforced. But two flukes in ten years affected the story of his industry and his life. Commission after commission demanded new procedures. “All I remember was working for what seemed like years responding to these documents,” he said.

During those lost years, he must have had a 'what the heck happened?' feeling about his job. Now, as the public slowly revises its opinion of nuclear power as a possible leader in green energy, he's nearing retirement; he's worked most of his life in an unpopular and even discredited field, and as it emerges as a viable option, he's on his way out. Just last week, the Vermont legislature voted to close down my father's life's work in the summer of 2012. When he walks out on that day in July, he won't leave anything behind him. He'd never admit this, but, the way I sometimes see it, he's dutifully stayed put while the industry has gone nowhere.

Some days I resent him for this. I feel bad for that, especially since he supported me with his long hours. But I worry that his job—its benefits, its bonuses, its procedures and plutonium—bled him of a chance to be extraordinary, the capacity for which I see in him, in his explosive mind, as if he were my own son. I worry that he let this happen because it was the easiest way for him to live, and that I'll do the same thing, plugging along with my teaching and writing because that's what I've always done. This isn't a new resentment. Sons have wanted to stray from their fathers' life paths forever, have

worried about turning into dad. Lawrence Sutin put it well when he wrote, “It's your only chance to become someone you haven't already met.” What worries me is that my dad's particular job was a necessity for him, that it perfectly expressed his cautious personality, and that it provided a harbor from his own over-active head which, if father is like son, and he is, can be a catastrophe. What if he needed to be pacified by paperwork? I sometimes think I might need that too, that nightmare of his life, the methodical rigor, the quieted brain.

V

When I was in sixth grade, my science class took a field trip to Vermont Yankee. I knew there'd be something snazzy about the place. If this is where my dad spent all his time, there must be some fun bells and whistles to look at, some experiments or explosions. I figured I'd score some popularity points, too, for being aligned with the dark art of power generation. And if the technicians gave us ice cream sandwiches, I'd be an unopposed hero.

As the bus approached at seven mph, we all saw the familiar outline of the nuke plant, the concrete curve of the reactor looking like some interplanetary cathedral. We ooohed and ahhhed and headed into a public relations room for cider and cookies. My teacher, Mr. Kilroy, introduced my dad as the plant manager and the director of safety and regulatory affairs and most importantly as my dad—and wasn't that really his toughest job, har-har? I'd never heard my dad laugh like he did at that joke. It was two-note, loud and confident. He smiled hugely, and I saw my father with his professional mask on,

even as I noticed the dad I knew, the one who looked down and closed his eyes at a joke, deferentially, as if ashamed to be laughing. I've felt my face do these things since.

And then he addressed us. Did he commit the sin of saying “Hi, kids?” I can't remember, though if he did, it would've only been a minor issue. Did he go on too long or not long enough? I can't remember, but I know I was actually *willing* him to relate to us at our sixth-grade level, a difficult level to ascertain. I know he told us some technical things that weren't very interesting but that, conversely, weren't very condescending. A little bad, a little good. And I know his voice was a bit too high-pitched in a story-hour kind of way. I think he mostly talked to us like we were grown-ups, though. We went on a tour, checked out a replica control room, saw a few radiation charts. In the little educational museum connected to The Plant, we all took turns riding a stationary bike that powered a small light bulb. We worked until we sweat, went nowhere. I wondered when the big show was coming, when we'd encounter a nuclear reaction or some glowing, light-saber-like rods. It had been a decent trip but there's no way we'd really seen it all, was there? As I got on our bus and left that place of intrigue and scientific wonder and nuclear secrecy, I was glad that my dad had done well, relieved, but also bored. I was eleven. And my dad wasn't a spy anymore. He had a staff meeting.

VI

Though I didn't think of them in sixth grade, the arguments against nuclear power are numerous and, to the extent that they are true, damning. The biggest issues are health-related and environmental, with radioactivity dominating discussions. It's often

thought that past radiation leaks from nuclear sites have caused cancer clusters, birth defects, and plant mutations around the sites. Radiation leakage can, in fact, lead to different levels of Radiation Sickness, the evocative symptoms of which no doubt stoke public outrage. Large doses of radioactivity can cause: headache, vomiting, fatigue, bleeding in the mouth and kidneys, spontaneous abortion, bone marrow loss, heart failure, delirium, diarrhea, and the monumentally awful "Walking Ghost" phase, a days-long period of apparent health followed by massive cell failure and certain death. Many of these symptoms were reported by residents close to Three Mile Island, and one academic study showed a 28% increase in fetal mortality in the plant's county. At Chernobyl, the far worse disaster, some think radiation release has put as many as 1.2 million children at higher risk for leukemia, while impacting as many as seven million people overall. In response to these dangers, the environmentalist Helen Caldicott writes in her book *If You Love This Planet*, "All nuclear reactors, both military and civilian, must be closed down at once so that no more waste is produced, no more bombs are made, and no more accidents occur."

Though health is the paramount concern, the environment is at an arguable level of risk from nuclear power, too. The most iconic symbol of the industry's negative effect is The Red Forest, near Chernobyl. There, radiation-scorched trees quickly turned a bright color and died, but they stand as an unnatural reminder of the blunder. In the Zone of Alienation, the provocatively-named area surrounding the reactor, it's thought that many species have been negatively affected (swallows, for instance, have gone albino). Additionally, anecdotal evidence suggests that the accident at Three Mile Island caused

“a plague of death and disease among the area's wild animals and farm livestock.” Even in those reactors that have continued to operate safely, environmental concerns proliferate. Many scientists argue that nuclear power is far worse, greenhouse-gas-wise, than renewable sources of energy such as wind and solar and not as large an improvement over coal-fired power plants as is often thought. These are some of the things I heard as I got older, and I wondered how my dad could allow himself to be associated with that kind of danger. But there was more.

Beyond the damage of disasters and the incidental effects of operation, the most pressing environmental concern is waste disposal. After they're spent, uranium fuel rods used in the thermal reaction are removed in a refueling outage and stored in on-site pools. Because of the long, radioactive half-life of elements used in nuclear fission, a great deal of danger remains (and will for as long as 10,000 years). The solutions for storing nuclear waste, therefore, are logistically and politically complicated. In the United States, storage at The Yucca Mountain Site in Nevada has long been considered an option, though that plan has encountered decades of delay and has now been tabled. Waste from nuclear plants, stored in underwater casks, sits idle now, temporarily secure. But this stockpile frightens the public, too, especially since 9/11, when the collective ability to imagine complicated terrorist attacks expanded wildly. When I asked my dad what changes have taken place in the industry since that day, he told me, “I can't share with you any details specifically.” It was the first time in years I thought of him as a nuclear spy again.

These issues of health, environment, security, and waste—these are the cons of nuclear power, and they are daunting cons.

VII

The daunting cons of my father's job are as follows:

1) His sixty-hour work week drains him almost completely, and though his schedule has improved as he's gotten older, it has taken its toll on his back and his spirit. He's a trudger, physically and emotionally.

2) His job is the performance of caution and so, since he's like many hard workers who can't separate their employment from the rest of their lives, *he* is caution. To me, it often felt like his default position was to point out what could go wrong in every situation.

3) The Plant is such a professional place—protocol and pleated pants—that the daily friendlinesses he shares don't seem to translate into friendships. There are no after-work beers. And when my father's mother died, flowers were sent, but not one of the people he's worked with for decades attended the wake. "No one from VY," he mumbled to us.

4) "Work is his life," my mother tells me pretty often. It's as if sociability is mostly against his nature, she says, and, having to strain himself all day to converse, he has little left for his family. She mostly says this when he's grumpy with her, when she wants to write him off as a company drone even though he's thoroughly lovely 90% of the time. My dad lights up rooms for a living, but he can do that for his family, too, with his generosity. His sense of humor glows. He's unassuming and wry, in the corner over there with his crossword, in the corner of my mind, almost always, with his puns. That

other 10%, though, can convince her, as it used to convince me, that he's an unhappy man, that work sometimes soothes this sadness, sometimes causes it. When he comes home, he can seem utterly defeated by the indignities of the salaried life: Vy has jerked him around. And at these times, tired, aggrieved, under-appreciated, my dad is quietly contemptuous. Undisturbed, he will stabilize; so we stand clear.

5) There's anecdotal evidence that my father doesn't enjoy vacations from The Plant. Though I remember him heaving me joyfully into the deep-end of the Red Roof Inn's pool on our three-day trips to Cape Cod, he'd later become withdrawn, thinking of the doubled workload that waited for him in his to-do box. His mini-golf putts into sharks' mouths and pirates' pockets became even more precise as he hoped to end the rounds quickly, head home.

6) Because in many ways one day was like every other at The Plant—had to be this steady—my dad settled into a life in which the calendar pages ripped quickly. His life passed in eighteen-month increments, the amount of time The Plant can run on one fuel cycle. He'd work fourteen hours a day during these refuelings, which are called outages. We wouldn't see him much for at least a month. But when I was almost nine outages old, I came to him one night and asked if, what did he think, I mean, I don't know if I'm old enough, but, when I am, do you, dad, do you think you can teach me, because I think I need to, to shave? He was eating Mexican Beef Soup while flipping through a Parade Magazine, and he looked at me with his innocent, wide-open, dark-brown eyes.

“Oh,” he said with an uplift, like a Minnesotan. “I think you've got awhile to wait before that.” I was probably in sweatpants, probably still sang alto, probably seemed

every bit the little boy. But I'd been using my mother's Schick for about a year, sneaking shameful swipes at the silly bit of grown-up hair I had on my lip. I remember feeling so nervous talking to him about shaving, like I did later when I asked a girl I barely knew to a Sadie Hawkins dance. It'd been the right question at the wrong time as far as they were both concerned, sweet but misplaced. I ad-libbed, looking for ways to wrap up the conversation with my dad without feeling rejected. But I wonder if my embarrassment was less acute than his was. I'd said to him, after all, that he'd missed me becoming a man. He gave me an electric for my birthday and I eventually figured out how to use it.

VIII

I took a temporary job at my dad's plant when I was 19. God Bless Vermont Yankee Nuclear Power Corporation, General Electric, Entergy Vermont Yankee Corporation (ENVY), Enexis, and all of their respective subsidiaries for the financial opportunities they've provided my family, but rarely has there been a more stultifying place to work than The Plant. That summer, I was in the Instrumentation and Control Department housed in its main building. Besides its Soviet name, Instrumentation and Control's soul-deficit came from its lack of any apparent function. I recall that my duties included scanning, taking naps on the toilet, and scanning. The creation of nuclear power, one of the world's most complex and awe-inspiring processes, seemed then to rely on me plugging 12-digit numbers into a spreadsheet. It seemed to rely on me not just filing yellowed papers, but keeping a log of what I'd filed. In triplicate. Making power, it

turned out, did not mean having it. And Vy, my father's taskmaster mistress, was decidedly unS.E.X.Y.

After my second day at the plant, I teared up as I walked away. Though the job would take me out of circulation for only a few months, it felt like a portent of things to come. It wasn't just my possible future that shocked me, though; it was my father's past. Is this what his life had been like? 12 hours at the uranium processor, quick supper, bedtime? I didn't want that, obviously. As I listened to the buzzing wires that delivered our electricity and battled for sonic space with the mid-summer insects of the nearby Connecticut River, I thought only about how unnatural this job was, only of escape. There were days when I would leave The Plant just a few minutes early, and I count those minutes among the happiest in my life. I felt like I was taking a liberty that my dad never took, and sometimes the smallest naughtinesses are the most delectable. I'd quickly shed my lanyarded clearance badge and book it to the car so I could break the five mile an hour parking lot speed limit with a death-flouting eight. I was free.

But then I was back, creeping in at four mph the next morning. I'd survey the industrial fences, the large warning signs, the gray-brown gloom, the daunting cooling towers (no longer evocative of space or the almighty). But work's work, as my dad always says, and so I soldiered on. When I'd earned some trust from the engineers, they gave me strange schematics marked in red pen. I was to input corrections I didn't understand into a program I didn't understand, and then initial the print-out twice. When I made mistakes, someone else, a Dennis, initialed twice and sent it back to me so I could initial his initials and add a few more of my own. Soon, I received procedural papers that

required my signature, even though my authority on the nuclear issues these papers regarded should have been sub-atomic in scope. I didn't outwardly question my new task, but I felt some turmoil over the paper trail. I'd been reading *Catch-22* that summer, a novel that reinforced my somewhat immature rejection of bureaucracy. In the book, the hero, Yossarian, signs as “Washington Irving” when he's made to mark procedural papers, and so I did the same, writing messily so that the joke wouldn't get me in hot water with the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.

The paperwork took a haunting turn one afternoon, though. While I signed dozens of papers (Irving Washington, at this point), an artifact emerged that stopped me short. The paper I was meant to mark—and I was the 26th person to do so—had been generated, in 1986, by a certain Robert J. Wanczyk, my dad. I laughed and signed it, my own name this time out of respect for him. I thought that maybe his signature followed by mine meant I'd joined my father in the family business, that I understood something that he did at work, and that, at last, we would share some nuclear solidarity. Maybe I'd been let in on his secret world. Maybe he'd think of me as a responsible part of the team instead of as a teen to whom he'd always had to say, “You should know better.” Or maybe, in following in his very careful footsteps, I was actually wearing the same boring shoes.

I used this generational trauma as an excuse to steal an ice cream sandwich from the union guys' refrigerator, and to think. Were these papers my dad's carbon copy legacy? It used to be that I thought he was a decision-maker, that his job was a great challenge that took smarts and ingenuity. He seemed powerful to me, essential to the

workings of this complex factory that provided electricity to an entire state. And when he acted distant at home, I rationalized that he'd been busy with important matters at the office, tired-out but productively so. When I worked at The Plant, though, I got a different view of him. I imagined him doing the same stuff I was doing, with only a bit more responsibility attached.

He sat on a strange white-collar assembly line, I thought, signing a constant stream of legalistic papers about maintenance and systems analysis. Instead of rebelling against this work, though, he'd been groomed to enjoy it. It wasn't mindless at all; it took a certain focus. But it was hypnotic, and he started to find it necessary to his own equilibrium. He never spoke ill of it or complained about its repetitiveness. If it was his cross to bear, he'd started to rely on the weight. Without work, what was his guiding principle? Without it, he'd be alone with himself, a walking ghost. Without it, he'd be morose, guilty in his relaxation. Without it, he'd feel an anger that terrified him, in silent, fifteen-minute spasms (and then it's always gone), toward his wife, his kids, especially himself. He'd think about how blissful it might be to switch off the power to his own charged-up head. How else, other than with daily tasks, could he stop those uncontrollable reactions? It seemed to him like the gloom of his moods would go on and on, and though those periods would invariably end for him, he passed down some of that distress to me, his other carbon copy legacy.

IX

I wasn't sure why I started reading about nuclear power last year. I'd been feeling confused about my dad, about what kind of future I would have, and I wanted to find out more about what it is that he really does. I'd thought his job was probably harmful, not just to him, but potentially to the world. I was ambivalent about that dark energy, too, and I think I wanted to draw some kind of analogy between my attitude toward my dad and the world's attitude toward nuclear power. It was a relatively good thing, I thought, and he was a relatively great dad. But, of course, there were issues and misunderstandings.

An issue with dad: we've gotten closer since I moved out about ten years ago, but we can still go weeks without speaking. An issue with nukes: there's the problem of radioactive seepage. With dad: I still sometimes worry that he's not fulfilled, and, maybe more pressingly, that our relationship might never reach its capacity. With nukes: the energy is incredibly difficult and expensive to produce, and not, perhaps, very clean.

With dad: we feel, I'm almost sure, some of the same anxieties, but we've never really acknowledged any resemblance. He's never said, “That's my boy,” or anything close, and I wonder if, when he looks at me and how I act, he feels like I've figured out something of what it's like to be him. Maybe I've found him out, and it's awful for a dad to be found out by his son, found out that he never really knew what he was doing, that he is, in the end, not that strong.

I thought that if I could learn something about nuclear energy, though, somehow defend it against the charges that it's unreliable and volatile, then I could defend my dad,

too. From my own adolescent misgivings about him, from my own current doubt about his very steady, very cautious choices. But I'd heard so much about the destruction of Chernobyl that I couldn't help thinking his pro-nuclear bias was delusional. I knew the stories of nuclear fallout around Three Mile Island, the claims and conspiracies. Surely I'd discover information that made me feel even more conflicted about my dad, what he does, what he is.

But in fact there were no cancer clusters in Dauphin County, Pennsylvania after the Three Mile Island accident. "The authors failed to find definite effects," "No associations were seen," "[S]uch allegations have not been supported by scientific consensus," "No member of the public died or was even physically harmed." In fact, the studies that showed infant mortality rates increasing around Three Mile Island have been debunked. Even the apparently damaged flora around the area are considered to be asymptomatic. In fact, so little radiation was released by the TMI accident that the average person living within ten miles received as much as they would have from a mere chest x-ray. In fact, radiation from nuclear power plants is grossly misunderstood in general. We get more radiation from the heating of our houses, much more from flying in a plane. Annually, the average person receives as much radiation from a plant like VY as he does from eating one banana.

The radiation that came from the Chernobyl disaster, however, is the worst that can happen at a nuclear plant. Many people died, including at least 28 from acute radiation sickness. Despite theories to the contrary, though, a 2000 report from the United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation tells us that "the

great majority of the population [living around Chernobyl at the time] is not likely to experience serious health consequences from radiation from the Chernobyl-accident." Even so, the nuclear industry has been attempting to learn from the mistakes there for a quarter-century and has become much safer in general. As Dr. Richard Anderson suggests, "[A] Chernobyl-type accident could not happen [in America]." Three Mile Island was the American Chernobyl, but because American plants have containment buildings around their reactors, the health and environmental effects were infinitesimally smaller, and would be in any future accident.

There are other environmental effects from nuclear power, most of them positive. "Nuclear power emits virtually no greenhouse gases," wrote Dr. Mohammed ElBaradei, and a Harvard University study argues that "a thousand additional reactors worldwide in place of fossil-fuel plants would reduce civilization's greenhouse gases by 25 percent." Gwyneth Cravens offers a statistic that is the most persuasive I've seen that nuclear energy is, in fact, good for the environment:

> If you got all of your electricity for your lifetime from nuclear power, your total share of the waste would weigh two pounds and fit into one coke can [. . .] If an American got all his or her electricity from coal over a lifespan of seventy-seven years, that person's mountain of solid waste would weigh 68.5 tons. Picture a soda can next to that.

Even with my new knowledge, though, even after I've read that nuclear power pollutes far less than more conventional sources of energy, I couldn't let my dad off the hook. Because there's still the intractable problem of that small amount of waste, this by-

product with the impossibly long radioactive half-life that will always be left behind, no matter how safe the original source. There's still this dangerous matter, and no real solution.

X

I can't figure out if work saved my dad from his own sorrow or caused that sorrow. “Confusion, contradiction, and questions clouded the atmosphere like atomic particles,” said Walter Cronkite a day after Three Mile Island, and I'm feeling some of that confusion now. These questions about my father's job, about my father, are radioactive for me, because I don't know what I can do about our family trait, our incurable funks. He took his own enormous energy and devoted it to a complicated, predictable task. With careful regulation of himself, he didn't break apart, but I'm afraid of what will happen to me either way. I hate the idea that I might need to have a certain kind of dull job to be content, but sometimes the loose structure of teaching and writing leaves me unmoored. Some days I want a job like his with a sense of purpose attached, with finite goals, with concrete and time sheets. But that safe life frightens me like a numbness in the arm. Screw office politics, screw accruing vacation time, screw commutes and water coolers and anniversary clocks. I see what they did to my dad. He's content sometimes, but also vanquished, so I still worry. I'm not anti-nuke anymore, and I'm less anti-dad than I ever was, but I'm not sure I want his world, this wonderful man's even-keeled inheritance.

I know better, though, and sometimes I'm not sure I have much choice in the matter. As I hear his voice in mine (we sing “Silent Night” two octaves down), as I sense my face hardening into the stone of his perennial disappointment, as my jaw locks with grievance and unlocks again with unexpected glee, I feel the unmistakable weight of his settling. That, it turns out, is not all bad. And what a strange moment it always is to finally recognize my father, not through any of the hard attempts at understanding him, or his job, but through the natural onset of my own grown-man moods: my half-lives, the waste of them, the gloom and glow of our back-and-forth heart.