The Sixty-Story Man

Thesis

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By

David Bukszpan

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The Ohio State University

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Dissertation Committee:

Lee Martin, Advisor

Michelle Herman

Jim Phelan

Abstract

The following pages constitute Part One of a novel ostensibly about the world's tallest man. Its themes, in no particular order, include, but are not limited to, media and representation, literature, the publishing industry, imagination, and faith.

Vita

2002……B.A., Kenyon College

2015 to present……Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of English, The Ohio State University

Field of Study

Major Field: English

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Yesterday upon the stair
I met a man who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today
I wish, I wish he'd go away

When I came home last night at three
The man was waiting there for me
But when I looked around the hall
I couldn't see him there at all!
Go away, go away, don't you come back any more!
Go away, go away, and please don't slam the door

Last night I saw upon the stair
A little man who wasn't there
He wasn't there again today
Oh, how I wish he'd go away

—"Antigonish," by William Hughes Mearns

PART ONE

Making Nothing Happen

ZERO

ONE

Of course, there was no Jim.

TWO

But that's what it was like—that preceding blankness, a big nothing—before Jim. And that's what it's like now, too, after him.

THREE

And that's what it was like in between, as a matter of fact.

It's important to say that. To remember that. To say it and say it and say it: there was no Jim.

FOUR

See, there's three parts to this. There was a *before,* when we never imagined we could imagine him. (Him being Jim.) Then a *during*, when somehow we did just that. And now an *after*.

And he didn't (doesn't) exist in any of them.

Then again, as soon as you say something doesn't exist, you bring it into being. This is known as the paradox of Plato's beard. It would do just as well, if not better, to speak of it as the paradox of Jim's beard.

FIVE

This is the story of that *during*, that in-between time, that *once*—which, like every once, is not a dot in time but a length of time, a period, a dash, a hyphen—when we believed that Jim was there.

Emily Dickinson would dig that, I think: the idea of looking at a time between—or inside—hyphens. "Hyphen" from the Greek *huphen*, meaning together. From *hupo* meaning under and *hen* meaning one. I love Emily Dickinson.

But she's a poet and I'm going to tell this story in prose. So maybe that's why I tend to think of things in terms of periods.

"Period" from the Greek *periodos,* meaning rounded or orbit, circuit, or cycle. From *peri-* meaning around and *hodos* meaning a journey, or course. (Hence, hodometer, or odometer.)

Hyphens bringing things together, one beneath the other. And periods bringing them around, full-circle.

SIX

It's been said that these three periods—the before, during, and after—taken together, resemble life: from nothing to nothing, with just the illusion of something in between.

I guess that's the Buddhist take, that life is but an illusion, talking in circles, in riddles, pronouncing what *is* as actually that which *is not*.

Therefore, says the master, it is not the Buddhist take.

It's possible Jim was a Buddhist. He did travel a lot through Asia. Then again, at different times, Jim traveled just about everywhere, so by that reasoning Jim was probably pretty much everything.

Or, says the master, he was nothing.

Me, I'm no Buddhist. I don't—I can't—think life's an illusion. It's got to count for something, or else what's the point? I guess that makes me a realist. Or an idealist.

Q: Why did the Buddha look so short to everyone who approached him?

A: Because he was sitting under the peepul.

SEVEN

That's why, growing up, I liked the news. None of this *what is real* stuff to worry over. You'd tune in and it told you what happened. There's be stuff missing from the story, sure, but you could trust what you got. Of the infinite things happening everywhere, the news focused on just a few, and you could be sure those things, at least, occurred.

Which is why I was always especially thrilled to see places I recognized in the background on the news. In fact, of all the places in the city, Times Square always felt the realest to me. Because it was the one that the news showed the most.

But that makes for trouble, of course, relying on the news to tell you about the world. Skews your views. It's always raining somewhere.

It used to be better. At the end of the program, they used to give you a human interest story, something to cheer everyone up. Probably not just the viewers, but the newscasters too.

Why they called them that I don't know, though. Was it was supposed to interest humans or convince us that humans were interesting?

Or perhaps it was kind of a euphemism for a euphemism. Like "Good News!" wouldn't make it seem good enough, or else too good.

Or else it was like the viewers were each God weighing Sodom, and the reporters like Abraham, searching for the righteous to keep us interested in humanity, yet producing but one model citizen per night.

Local news programs still present human interest stories, but not the national cable news stations, who go from one news program to the next, bad news without letup.

So yeah, as far as all that, I miss Jim. I miss the Days of Jim. I miss seeing him on the news, on the skyline, in my dreams. Jim was the ultimate human interest story. He was a perennial puff piece.

What do you say: shall we return to those happier times? Shall we enjoy a little relapse? Or should auld acquaintance be forgot and never brought to mind, should auld acquaintance be forgot and auld lang syne?

There's a great chapter in *Auld Acquaintance: A Life of Robert Burns*, published by Astoria Books, devoted entirely to his poem, "Auld Lang Syne," which not only translates the song but describes the evolution of the "old song" into Burns' poem and then into the old song we know.

It was in there that I learned I'd been pronouncing it wrong. Syne is pronounced not as if it starts with a "z" but homophonically with "sine," the name of the curve. The author speculates that so many pronounce it "zine" because we hear others sing it, even if they sing it correctly, that we hear the "g" from lang and "s" from syne, and together we perceive (perhaps with the help of some intoxication) a "z" where there never was one.

That's just what we're told to do: forget about Jim, forget about that "z" we heard. That's what the shrinks say: forget. (Shrinks! Ha!) But the shrinks don't want you forgetting anything until they have you remember it first. First remember, then forget. That way they get a piece of the action. They're doing pretty well, post-Jim. The drug companies, too.

But Q: where were they then?

EIGHT

A: Right here with the rest of us, there's where.

Right here on the firm ground, along the potholed pavement and pitted plains and all the way up to the pockmarked permafrost, staring skyward in wonder, pointing and oohing and aahing at that person up there, that permanent face in the firmament (whose feet, like ours, were also down here, grounded, though often in water).

Because back then there wasn't much question of believing. At least any more than there ever is. If you thought the world is illusion, you probably believed Jim was one too. If you believed your eyes, you believed in Jim.

That's not to say we all believed from the get-go. We believed our eyes, not our ears.

Because news like that is hard to swallow, a baby that big being born. It felt unnatural to the ear, too aberrant for the brain to abide. But it was tough to argue when the pictures came through, video of the infant laying long as a yardstick, his arms and legs flailing, still doughy, big but half-baked.

Even then, not everyone bought it. That's a goddamn fake yardstick, some said. That whole house is a set built small. They shoot the kid in a doll's house. It's a midget in a mask. It's superimposed. It's optics. It's green screen. It's flimflam.

There are always a million reasons to believe something.

And there's always a million reasons not to believe.

Evidence often leads us in the wrong direction.

And yet we keep believing things.

Even disbelief is belief.

A year later, on Jim's first birthday, the debate—if you can call it that—rekindled. And again when he turned two, then at three, by which time they tyke—if you could call him that—toddled around about as tall as his mother. Malarkey, said some. Bunk! Those goddamn Canadians, they're giving us the business!

Didn't they know (was the implication) that that was America's job? That it was we with our big-city skyscrapers and Hollywood soundstages and Silicon corporate tech campuses who were supposed to be giving the rest of the world the business. Those bozo hosers, they were taking our snow jobs!

But each year on Jim's birthday, it became clearer that this was no little diddle; this was the real deal. Each July 1, as the reporters from the world over descended on the sleepy, sloping, slatternly little town of Tatamagouche, the news beamed back compelling new evidence, new pix and vids that arranged themselves into matrices in the liquid crystal displays of our phones and computers and TV screens, colorful rectangular representations which both beggared our belief and secured it.

Even so, some held their ground. Ibiwisi, they said. I'll believe it when I see it.
What, we said, don't you believe the papers? The news? Why, that's the Fourth Estate.
We don't buy estates, they said. Besides, the mainstream media lie, they've got an agenda. Why, they're the global elite. You're just drinking the Kool-Aid, they said.

Or in this case, the milk.

Which, it must be said, also especially irked us because we wouldn't be caught dead drinking Kool-Aid. It was they who drank Kool-Aid.

Besides, the ibiwisis said, hadn't the media been hijacked before? Hadn't images been altered? Hadn't textbooks, too? *Aren't* textbooks? they asked, pointedly.

Okay, perhaps, in some politicalized cases, we admitted. But what of science? The international scientific community avers with near consensus, we insisted, to the legitimacy of Jim's unprecedented stature.

Don't get us started on science, said the ibiwisis, those guys are always changing their minds. Remember Pluto? Remember global—

—Can we not? we said.

Fine, said the ibiwisis. All we know is we don't buy it. It's a hoax, a con, a shell game. We don't Adam-and-Eve it.

But it's so, we said.

Says you, said they.

Says everyone, we said.

NINE

My foot! they said. My eye! My ass! My elbow! Tie that bull around back. Can't you see you're being bamboozled? It's fiction, it's phooey, it's hornswoggle. We're warning you!

We called them kooks and crackpots and conspiracy theorists. And between ourselves we called them worse than that. We heard something ugly in their tone, saw something sad in their worldview. It smacked of something dim, something dangerous.

But name-calling didn't work, so we put our faith in reason. Clearly something weird had happened, we said, something that doesn't make sense. We can't explain it either, but that's no cause to hold out belief.

We don't believe in miracles, the ibiwisis claimed.

Which really made us hoot and huff, because that's about all they did believe in.

It's not a fucking miracle, we said, it's just something that hasn't yet been explained.

There's more to heaven and earth…

Spare us your poetry, the ibiwisis said, you'll see before long, vis-à-vis heaven and earth.

No, you'll see, we replied.

Eventually, everyone saw. What (he who) at first had only been available through mediation—over the news, broadcast by radio waves or bounced down by satellites—sooner or later came sailing through (or over) just about everybody's back yard, when Jim crisscrossed Canada, then the States, then the world.

It's one thing to mistrust waves, which are invisible transmissions. It's another to mistrust your own eyes.

Actually, strike that. It's ridiculous not to trust in waves, just because they're invisible transmissions. Think of a magnet, which we trust because we can see it spin, but spins for reasons we can't see.

I think I need to pause here to tell you a about waves. Or at least I want to. Sometimes it's hard to know the difference between needs and wants.

If you think you don't need to know about waves, or don't want to know, or already know enough, just skip right ahead. Hit the snooze button and fade back off to sleep until the alarm goes off, until the bell rings and it's the end of class. Just pretend like the next two pages don't even exist, like you can't even see them.

By the way, I've learned the following from the remarkable *Coming Through in Waves: From Sight to Sound to Data to Combatting Cancer, the Invisible, Unstoppable Power of Waves*, available in paperback from Astoria Books. I highly recommend it.

There are two types of waves. Mechanical waves—which need a medium, like air or water—and electromagnetic waves, which don't. All waves transport energy or information about some initial signal or disturbance.

Radio waves are electromagnetic, and are used not just by radios but TVs, Wi-Fi, and cell phones. Radios can tune into stations two ways: by reading waves' amplitudes (the height) or waves' frequencies. So there's amplitude modulation (AM) and frequency modulation (FM).

A wavelength, the distance between two waves, is represented as λ, which I recall seeming to me in high school as looking like a T-Rex or a walking man.

The time it takes for a λ to pass is called a wave's period.

The way waves move, the way they travel, is called propagation. It's a central point about waves that they start at a central point and propagate outward.

While light waves are smaller than bacteria, radio waves are long: FM wavelengths are about 10 feet long and AM wavelengths are about 900 feet long. All around these enormous double-dutch ropes are sailing around us.

The first manmade radio waves are still propagating outwards through space, invisible double-dutch ropes making ever-wider concentric rings around earth, growing at the speed of light.

Unlike radio waves, sound waves are mechanical, which means they need a medium through which to propagate. The sound waves we hear (at least when we're not underwater) are moving through air. Our ears can process mechanical waves with λs between 17 millimeters and 17 meters long.

Our ears are actually registering air-pressure changes as sounds. So the ear takes in mechanical waves and the eye electromagnetic. Our skin, which can feel pressure and sense heat, detects both. We are transistors. We are Geiger counters. We are the receivers of waves.

We make waves too. Not just when we make noise. We give off heat, which is electromagnetic energy. And we make waves in water. Water waves—also mechanical—are different than sound waves in that water waves are transverse (propagating vertically as they transport energy horizontally), while sound waves are compression waves (information is squeezed together and then released, squeezed and released, in the direction of the wave).

Coming Through in Waves offers the following thought experiment based on the discovery that humans hear language better through their right ears (which connects more to left side of the brain) than their left ears, which process music better (being more closely connected to the right side):

What if, instead of hearing sound (that is, mechanical) waves, we could hear radio (electromagnetic) waves? Maybe we could tune our right ears to AM talk stations and our left ears to FM music. Which would be cool. But then if someone clapped in front of you, you wouldn't hear anything at all.

I often wondered why deaf cat moves his ears like he can hear, and since reading that thought experiment I sometimes imagine that that's just what he's doing: tuning into classical or jazz or rock, depending on his mood, in his left ear, and NPR or some sports radio or conservative talk in his right. (I don't know his politics.) But then I think: with the nonstop radio waves, no wonder he likes to sleep so much.

Oh, and one last fact from the book: the Wi- from Wi-Fi comes from *wireless* (there's no need wires when waves transport information, just as the first radios were called wirelesses). But the Fi part, which many people think stands for *fidelity*, in fact was just tagged on, sort of willy-nilly, because Wi-Fi sounded like high-fi, or maybe sci-fi. So, suggests the author of *Coming Through in Waves*, what we think of as *fidelity* could just as easily be attributed to *fiction*.

Brrrrrrrinnnggggggggg! Brrrrrrrinnnggggggggg! Okay, good news: that bell signals the conclusion of physics class for today. That's the end of this period.

Back to history. Or psychology. Or whatever you want to call it.

Recess, maybe, I suppose.

Back to the ibiwisis, at any rate, who, when they saw Jim, became believers. Say what you will about the ibiwisis, they were true to their name.

Which turned out to be their—as it was everyone's—big mistake.

One is tempted to think back and reassess. Perhaps, one supposes, there's a kind of courage in holding out, in the way the ibiwisis refused to give in until confronted themselves

with the massive fact of Jim standing there, himself not caring one a way or the other whether they believed or not.

Jim was that he was. He really couldn't give two elephantine shits what you thought.

Maybe there was something to be said for remaining a skeptic, for flipping the bird in the face of the world for as long as one could. But the truth of it is, it didn't take courage to hold out.

When you raised the shades in your midtown one-bedroom or suburban split-level or the family farm on the prairie, when you looked out your rearview along a back-country road or when you glimpsed something peeking over the skyline as your cab zipped you up Fourth Ave—it didn't take courage to continue to disbelieve then. It didn't even take courage to admit you were wrong.

Then, like never else, it took courage to accept that the world was not as you'd always held it to be. It took courage to say, in essence, you were wrong about *everything*.

And now, after all that, we have to have that courage again.

We have to go back. Back to unbelieving. We have to return to the world as it was, as it is. Once again we have to admit: we were wrong about everything.

TEN

But first let's go back to the night before.

I was at a bar with my three friends, one of those wall-to-wall carved-walnut corner joints especially popular on snowy nights in Brooklyn, like that one. We were the only ones there not talking about him.

We being Danny and Hayes and Justin and me. Him being you-know-who.

It wasn't that we didn't believe in him. We were no ibiwisis. We didn't doubt he existed or that he was huge. Nor that he was on his way to New York. We just didn't want to talk about it.

It wasn't anything personal. We didn't want to talk about ourselves or each other, either.

No one asked Danny about how he felt being married, even though we hadn't all gotten together since his wedding early that fall. No one asked Justin about how he felt being a father, even though his kid was still less than a year old. No one asked Hayes about his new job, about what it was like quitting his old gig and going freelance.

Just as no one asked me pretty much anything.

Though in my case there wasn't anything to ask about. No new wife or new son or new job. All I had was my old deaf cat, Whitman. Whom they did ask about.

Ah, you know, I said, he's the same as ever. He's home asleep, the lazy bastard. But he was out late last night. Really tied one on. Some girl asked him to take her to prom, and halfway through the slow-dance he took a few steps backwards and started to breakdance. Then right in the middle he froze for a second with his legs up in the air, and started licking his ass.
They laughed. Hayes said he thought prom was usually in the spring.

Maybe he lied to me, I said. Wouldn't that be just like Whitman, though? Telling me he went to some girl's prom when in fact it was just a winter formal. You can't believe anything that fat fucker says.

We ordered another round and turned our talk back to the Knicks. We were pretty insightful about the state of their season.

Those guys couldn't pass a rock if they swallowed a diamond, said Hayes.

They couldn't play D if you ripped the other five strings off the guitar, said Danny.

They couldn't hit a jumper if they were angry at a British sweater, said Justin.

They couldn't crash the glass at a Jewish wedding, I said. They looked at me and shook their heads.

Speaking of which, said Justin, checking his phone, I better get going. His wife didn't think much of us. She said we were a bad influence. I don't know why.

I walked Justin as far as the curb, lit a cigarette, and watched him start to fade into the snow. You could see the flurries coming down slanted under the orange streetlights. It was pretty. The city looked old, or rather, timeless. The city for a second reminded me that it was around before I was and would keep going after I left. It was something tended to forget, as if it only existed when I was there to see it.

Watching Justin, I couldn't help but think of old Rip Van Winkle, browbeaten until there was nothing else to do but climb a hill over the Hudson, have a stiff drink, and sleep until his old lady croaked.

Then Justin, below the streetlight, bent over and unleashed his own slanting, chunky orange onto the sidewalk. Things felt timeless, all right.

I smoked more than usual that night, happy to have a reason to slip out of the bar and stand in the snow. The cold felt good on my cheeks and momentarily cleared the inside of my head too.

I exhaled little clouds as bits of old stories and rhymes from old poems spoke up to me—like that bit about the crow in Frost's "Dust of Snow"—the kind of stuff that only returns to your consciousness when you're alone, conversing with no one but yourself…or maybe with the world at large, or one night in particular.

Ah, fuck it, I might as well share the whole poem with you. It's short and I can write it from memory:

The way a crow
Shook down on me
The dust of snow
From a hemlock tree

Has given my heart
A change of mood
And saved some part
Of a day I had rued.

That's it, that's the whole thing. Nice, right?

Not that I'd had a particularly bad day. I'd spent it like I spent most of my Sundays in the winter, like a grandmother: in a chair, under a blanket, reading. With my cat sitting across the room, giving me dirty looks.

In the summer, I read at the beach, on a blanket. In the winter, I read in my apartment, under a blanket. In the spring and the fall I go to the park. It's nice to be quiet, to be away from a screen. To hold a bit of a tree in your hands and have someone teach you something, tell you something, occupy your mind.

It's nice to have your mind occupied. It's nice to open it up to friendly invasion, to an infantry of characters, the light artillery of words. It's nice not to have to say anything, nice to not have to do anything except turn the page, lifting the lightest thing in the world, like flipping over a snowflake.

Ever try to do that? It's harder than you'd think. I got it into my mind to try right then. Just to take one of the flakes sticking to my black wool coat and turn it over. Goddamn impossible.

Yeah, the snow was working on me right then, just as good as the booze and the smokes. All of it, maybe, sending me swaying a little, sort of the same as the lilting lines of the poem had.

There's something about remembering the lines of a poem, I thought.

The way a poem shook down on me...

I had just finished burying a glowing butt in the accumulation at my feet when a quartet of carolers followed me back into the bar. I held the door and they smiled their thanks, then started in singing for drinks. Must've been around nine or ten by then, I guess. They blew through a few standards about bells and babies and Bethlehem and such before, as a finale, breaking into "Jimmy Swan is Coming to Town." Everyone except us seemed to love it.

Us now being just Danny and Hayes and me. When they started in on Jim, we pretended like we each needed to bum rush the bathroom, trying to blow by each other but only banging over bar stools.

I got off the floor and went out for another smoke. A couple guys were arguing with their friend, apparently an ibiwisi. We'll see tomorrow, they told him. Yeah, said the ibiwisi, we'll see if I'll see.

I woke up the next morning on top of my sheets with a fine little headache, a pinpoint of pain somewhere in my brain, like something had grown big overnight and was pushing to get out. Meanwhile my tongue was a bathmat and my pants had only made it as far down as my thighs.

Empty cartons of Chinese food lay overturned near an empty carton of milk, and my man Professor von Schnackms von Whitman himself was making his high-pitched whinnying snoring sound from his bed near the radiator. He had a little paw curled over his eyes.

I'd fallen asleep with the lights on.

How nice it would be, thought I, to be dead right now. Say what you will of death, it would put an end to that headache. Unfortunately, there was nothing doing on that front, though I did feel closer at least momentarily to death than I had twelve hours before.

But then, death wasn't really what I wanted. Death is so permanent, and I'm not one for big decisions, especially before coffee and a cigarette. No, what I realized I wanted was more like a temporary death. For a day, say, or two at the longest, and then to come back, to flip the switch back on when I felt better.

Though, once dead, it would be hard to flip the switch back on.

I guess I'd have to set a timer, like an alarm. But God I hate waking up to alarms. And that's just awaking from sleep. Imagine awaking from death…

No, not even death, I thought. Just a little white space to crawl into, a little white-sheeted, soft-quilted nothingness. That's all I wanted. You know: a snow day.

But of course there are no snow days. They take that from you when you outgrow school, when you become a grownup. It doesn't matter how much it snows. Somehow the weather's too nasty for kids, but A-OK for adults.

Which is funny because kids, unlike adults, actually *like* being out in the snow. They find it magical. They get to play in it. Make angels and snowmen.

Which is funny, because if adults got snow days, we'd just while them away indoors. Or spend them bitterly shoveling the sidewalk. Which I think is all the more reason to let us have them: we promise we won't enjoy them!

Maybe I should've been a teacher, I thought. Teachers get snow days, they get summer vacations. They get to read books and talk about them for a living. They get to encourage people to learn. Maybe I should quit my job today and go back to school and become an English teacher, I thought. But then I'd have to wake up even earlier. And spend my evenings correcting grammar. And you don't quit a job right before Christmas vacation.

So no snow day. And no quitting. A sick day was an interesting option, though. It was justifiable: I really did feel sick. But I hate wasting sick days on when I feel sick. Plus, as my clock radio was reminding me, Jim was on his way to New York. And if the idea of seeing a sixty-story man walk through Manhattan doesn't get you out of bed, you've got more wrong with you than a hangover.

While part of me aspired to be the kind of person—the kind of New Yorker—so unimpressed by the world that I could later brag I'd stayed in when Jim came, that wasn't me. I like seeing things. Museums, performances, new subway ads, it doesn't matter. In fact, I was the kind of New Yorker who sometimes broke that great, unwritten rule and looked up at the architecture as I walked down the street.

Don't get me wrong: it wasn't like I'd stop in the middle of a crowded sidewalk, head tilted, jaw dropped, clogging up the works. But sometimes I'd look up real fast as I walked, or even sort of pull over and stand out of the way, or else just hang out outside my office building,

have a smoke, and admire the way buildings always seem to surround you, forming a crown of chrome and concrete wherever you go in midtown. Sometimes it was the stonework that got me, its testament to the architects and contractors, and more so perhaps to the nervy construction workers who completed the high-wire acts of creating the urban firmament.

Together, they were the city's heroes, having bestowed upon us—we sinners who had happily traded in our claim to the stars, our nightly birthright—a substitute reason to look up and wonder.

Fun fact: the first skyscraper, the Tower of Babel, might have been based on an actual Sumerian ziggurat called Etemenanki, whose name meant "house of the foundation of heaven and earth."

Etemenanki's seven stories were of different heights, reaching in total about 300 feet into the sky.

You can go see the ruins today, the foundation of the house of the foundation of heaven and earth. Its footprint has become a small wetland, marshes where marbled teal, coots, and kingfishers confer and lift off, soaring through the air where the ziggurat once stood.

I read that in *Ziggurat Star Dust: The Secret Histories of Mankind's First Super Structures*, published by Astoria Books.

ELEVEN

I was doing more of that then, standing around and gazing up at buildings. I think a lot of us were. You'd step out for lunch or a meeting or a smoke find yourself suddenly staring up into the glare, wondering at the windows' piecemeal reflections of square yards of sky, how the structures turned the sky sideways. Or else you'd stand there counting stories, going up as many floors as Jim was tall at the time.

Just two stories in the beginning. When Jim first showed up in New York as a boy he stood just two stories tall. But even then you'd wonder, holy moly, what would it be like to be as tall as those second-floor windows? What would it be like to be twice as tall as everyone else? Wouldn't it maybe be lonesome?

Moly, by the way, is an actual thing. It's a magic herb described by Homer in *The Odyssey:*

> *As he spoke he pulled the herb out of the ground and showed me what it was like. The root was black, while the flower was as white as milk; the gods call it Moly, and mortal men cannot uproot it, but the gods can do whatever they like.*

Some have suggested moly is mountain rue, others that it's wild rue (a.k.a. harmala). Whatever (if any) its corresponding plant in the natural world, moly is classically understood to been born of the blood of Picolous, a Giant who had fallen in love with Circe and was killed by her father, Helios.

When Odysseus sets out to rescue his men who Circe has turned to pigs, Hermes warns him to eat the moly to protect himself against her magic.

In his writings on moly in his book *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery,* the German theologian and Jesuit scholar Hugo Rahner wrote, *Moly is self-control, circumspection in conduct and that ascetical from of life that has a bitter, black root but a flower that is white and sweet.*

Holy moly!

You can learn more about this in *The Roots of Plants: A Collection of Botanographies,* available from Astoria Books.

And then a couple years later we found ourselves counting to the fifth floor. Holy moly, we thought, how can that be possible? But soon we'd be counting to ten. Now *that* is big, we thought, picturing an enormous eye reflected in one of those windows a hundred feet up, shaking our heads at how easily impressed we once were.

From time to time we each paused, tempted for once to do the math, multiplying our own measurements by twenty to approximate the dimensions. What if our own feet were twenty feet long? Our eyes each thirty inches? Men thought of their genitals. Women thought of—who knows what women ever think of. What about Jim's genitals, people wondered, no matter their own.

When Jim hit thirty stories—about 300 feet, the size of Etemenanki, of the Statue of Liberty—it took some time and concentration just to count that many floors without losing track. How trivial it was when Jim was just 100 feet, how quaint! Remember when Jim was closer to our own height than to what he'd become? Those were the days!

At 300 feet and growing, there were ever-fewer things to compare Jim to, to project his height onto. Most tall trees top out at about eighty to a hundred feet. Even the General Sherman

sequoia is only 275 feet. I'd think of people in small towns—what did they have to compare Jim to?

Q: What did Jim then and a blade of grass have in common?

A: They were both the height of a football field.

And then, that morning, as Jim was heading back to New York, 600 feet tall, well, even by looking at a sixty-story building it was—perhaps you'll agree—pretty hard to imagine.

And yet, somehow, that's just what we did!

Amazing, isn't it, what it turns out we can imagine?

In short—ha!—I didn't need to see Jim to believe Jim, but I was curious. After so much time seeing pictures and videos, hearing and reading about him, hell, I wanted to behold him with my own eyes. Besides, it would be something to tell the kids, one day. Should there ever be any.

And, sure, there was one other thing. There was the chance I'd get plucked. It was like winning the lottery: no matter how much you knew it wouldn't happen, once in a while you couldn't help but think for a second what you'd do if it did.

Not that I played the lottery. Not that I gave getting plucked much thought either. But all in all it was enough to get my hungover ass out of bed.

As I showered, the local NPR anchor reported on the various expected delays and closings connected to Jim's looming arrival. He sounded a little different than usual, as if I could hear how large his eyes were, how arched his brows. When I turned on the TV, the Channel 1 anchor's cheeks were somewhat flushed.

I guess I would qualify as a news junkie. It's an addiction like any other: desire snowballing, self-perpetuating, growing as it careens downhill. But there's also in something of the shark, ever hungering, ever prowling for something fresh in the water.

But for me it's a unique addiction, since as a publicist I also feed the news. I suggest stories to producers and reporters and editors about the authors and books I represent, then I watch or read or listen to the news for the stories I've planted. When there's nothing of mine, I think of how I can use the news cycle to plant a story, to land an interview with one of my authors.

Every addiction is ourobic, but somehow this one seems more so. As if instead of the snake shaped like a ring, is twisted into a lemniscate.

But there's no news about books today, no need for authors to offer perspectives or opinions. Today it's all about the visuals.

Channel 1's chopper shows traffic already a standstill, every commuter thinking to beat the gridlock and so creating it. From that they cut to a press conference, city brass pleading with the public to take mass transit, to please refrain from hanging out windows or venturing onto roofs or ledges. The fire chief warns against smoke signals, against using fire escapes for reasons other than emergencies.

The chief of police talks in numbers of cops, of horses, of squad cars. He urges New Yorkers to exercise judgement about where they choose to congregate. It's best to avoid midtown altogether, he says. But that won't be an option for me.

So of course that's where the crowds go, where they've been camped out for hours. The producers cut from the presser to a packed Times Square looking like it's already New Year's Eve. The wide, angled blocks are bursting with fools banking on Jim, despite his size, showing

up there, returning to where he appeared last time, seven years before, as a thirteen-foot-tall ten-year-old.

Not that there'd be a place for Jim to set a foot down, with all those crowds. Either no one's thought of that, or else no one was willing to leave so there'd be room for him. Then again, Times Square doesn't exactly attract crowds based on watertight logic. Times Square is a place that exists as pure destination, a place people go just to go somewhere, because other people are going there too.

A destination, I should say, for tourists. For New Yorkers, it's an area to be avoided at all cost, a vacuum the city has created in its very heart so other people can rush to fill it. Though even when they do it remains empty.

As a kid, I mistook Times Square's name as mathematical: that it was a place of huge things, everything multiplied, where the world was somehow experienced exponentially.

I was wrong, of course, but no more wrong than people who think Times Square is the city's heart. It's actually, if you ask me, the butt. No matter how much you scrub it, it's just going to stink again soon.

If the city does have a heart, it's probably Grand Central Station, with its subway and train lines reaching out in every direction. And if the city has a brain, it's probably also on 42nd Street: the main branch of New York Public Library.

Tourists go to the library, too, especially at that time of year, when they're already on Fifth to see the tree and the window displays and Grand Central.

After all that noise, they reach the library. First they pose for pictures by Patience and Fortitude—who, I must say earn their names with each cell phone flash—and then file through the revolving door. Upstairs they find the Rose Reading Room, where they take photos of all the

quiet people seated and reading and writing. They record—they save—the image of the very people they risk disturbing, as if the folks seated and working are zoo animals, or circus freaks, notable for their strangeness, as if they're there themselves as a kind of windowless window display for the tourists.

Jim visited the library once, on that first tour of New York, when he arrived with Nicole. Back when he was ten or thirteen, depending on how you keep track. They appeared in Times Square, so that's why people returned. From there, Nicole brought him to the places she thought he'd like in which he could also fit without bumping his head: the Museum of Natural History, Central Park, Grand Central and the public library. It was the last he seemed to like best.

He caused a small commotion when he entered, at least in as much as the readers there ever commote: chairs squeaked shrilly and several books were dropped to the floor, and whispered gasps echoed off the wide walls and high ceiling. Jim couldn't fit in a seat, so he sat on the floor, along one of the lengthy yellow oak tables, his head as high as his neighbors' on either side. And there he remained for two hours, contentedly reading Robert Louis Stevenson.

I regret that I wasn't there to see that. Nor were there news cameras, so we just have to picture it. But I see Jim smiling as he reads, feeling quite at home, for once, in that huge silent room, like a barn full of books.

Of course, since then Jim had grown far too large to return. And the library stairs are no place for a party. So it's Times Square that was attracting the jerks in bright rainbow wigs and large neon hats, and the wags waving huge signs ("Beam Me Up, Jimmy," "High, Jim!" "PLUCK ME? PLUCK YOU!," etc.) or sweeping flashlights and laser pointers through the air, the snow lightly falling on them all like confetti.

A drag queen drags kliegs attached to a generator in a wagon through the half-melted, yellowish slush. Kids with ghetto blasters are getting shown up and drowned out by black SUVS spilling speakers from their windows.

The camera shakes with the noise and the reporter's voice can't be heard, so it's back to the studio, where the anchor reports that the prices of billboards have skyrocketed and stock futures are plummeting and folks are lining the bridges for unobscured views.

They cut to a shot from far north of the city, a live feed via an Albany affiliate. At the top of the screen, the sun lights the left side of Jim's face. Hundreds of feet below—mere inches on my television—his seven-league boots hardly seem to break through the surface of the Hudson.

A clock graphic in the corner counts down to when Jim's E.T.A at the Bear Mountain Bridge, the Tappan Zee, and the George Washington.

Replayed footage from that morning shows Jim stepping over a bridge I don't recognize. For those of you just joining us, says the anchorman, this is footage from an hour ago of Jim clearing with the Rip Van Winkle Bridge. Since then, Jim Swan has advanced south about…

I pop an organic vegetarian breakfast burrito into the microwave, and feed Whitman. As I cross my apartment, I hear the voice from my clock radio and my bathroom radio, their waves competing at different levels at different places with the TV, which I like.

While Whitman eats, I squat and pet him on the head, on his crown and behind his ears, where he likes it best. Or at least that's where he tolerates it most as he crunches away at his breakfast—that bowl of brown pellets like milkless cold cereal—and, as always, he pauses halfway through to turn and look up at me.

I like to attribute this to him being appreciative, that he's thanking me, telling me he didn't really mean all those mean things he thought about me since last I fed him, though I know it's much more likely he's just hoping there's another scoop on the way.

Q: How is Whitman like the media?

A: He only needs me for the scoops.

I look down at Whitman and do a little internal math, comparing his size to mine and mine to Jim's. The answer gives me pause: I'd be the height of his paws.

Beeeeep goes the microwave. I turn off the radio and the TV, bundle up, grab my burrito and I'm out the door, only fifteen minutes late.

I drop into the corner bodega for my morning papers and smokes and coffee before getting on the train. Sal welcomes me as I bang the snow off my feet on the flattened cardboard boxes he uses as a welcome mat.

Big guy's coming ta town, Sal says. Sal himself is a little guy, even smaller than me, a holdout from before the neighborhood changed over. He calls everyone big guy, even me, but I today I know who he means. Maybe da Knicks can sign him up, get some help off da boards

Hey, I say, what do the Knicks have in common with an old man who wishes he could trade his saliva for a good dump?

What's dat?

Neither of them can dribble for shit.

Sal gives me a confused look.

I'll work on it, I say.

Don't get me started, says Sal. Those bums couldn't make a bucket if you gave them a pail and a handle.

On the subway platform I compare headlines. “I’m Baaaaaack’” announced *The Post*, above a doctored shot of Jim’s face scrunched between two Manhattan skyscrapers, à la Jack Nicholson in *The Shining.* Clearly it would be a tall order to better the cover they ran the first time Jim came to town, which showed him climbing the Empire State Building, under the headline “King Swan.”

The News’ headline, “Oh, the Jimmensity!,” was accompanied by a shot of Jim entering into the retractable dome in Toronto. Another teaser promised to deliver “The 10 Best Bets to Get Plucked.”

The Journal led with “Markets Divided If Jim’s Bull or Bear.” Jim had never done more damage than downing power lines and causing accidents, yet *The Journal* speculated about possible damage to the city’s infrastructure. A sidebar touted the paper’s JimTracker™ feature, estimating the likelihood of various directions Jim might take, as if he were a storm. True to the comparison, the deepest red locations were along the water, which had become Jim’s preferred routes of travel.

The Times declared “Whole city holds breath as Swan approaches.” Instead of a photo of Jim himself, they ran an artsier shot of his shadow stretching over Toronto. It was a nice move, especially with the CN Tower’s shadow running parallel across the city, a thin dark seam spanning the city, surpassing the length of Jim’s. Maybe the message was that, yes, Jim was huge, but he was also still human. Or maybe the Tower’s shadow was supposed to look like a compass needle, or a clock’s hand. Or maybe I was reading into it too much.

I briefly found myself imagining to the next *New Yorker* cover. Jim as giant bemonocled butterfly, maybe, staring down at a miniscule Eustace Tilley? Or Eustace there with his eyepiece, observing a butterfly as always, but from inside Jim’s ear? Or maybe something with the

famously foreshortened New Yorker's perspective of the world, but judged Jim's vantage? I already looked forward to Wednesday.

Usually on Mondays I went straight for the media article in *The Times,* but I was distracted by a piece touted on the bottom of the front page about the science behind the Jimmies, the name for the temporarily immobilizing effect Jim often had on people when they saw him. It suggested what was going on in people's bodies, from their "short-circuiting" brains to their buckling knees and feet frozen in place, and why some people's bowels gave out.

A psychologist suggested that the freeze was due to twin, conflicting desires within the observer of curiosity and fear, simultaneously pulling the viewer toward while pushing the viewer away. Think of it like seeing your crush back in high school, the shrink suggested. There is confusion. The attraction is so strong the mind suspects it must fight against it. What's more, she added, we are hardwired to fear that which is larger than us. Which is vestigial, of course, since modern man is mostly felled not by external mammoths but by little baddies inside the body.

An occupational therapist interviewed suggested that to avoid getting the Jimmies, people should stretch before going anywhere they might see Jim. If the limbs are limber, he said, you'll avoid turning to lumber.

A second shrink advised people to remember to breathe. I love it when people say that, as if to suggest that it's natural to forget to breathe, but reasonable to remember to *remind* yourself to breathe, that the cerebrum can somehow bully the brainstem into doing its job.

Also, said the shrink, while gazing at Jim people should consider raising their hands in front of their faces and staring at their palms. Think of it like observing a solar eclipse, she said, except instead of protecting your eyes you're protecting your hold on reality.

It will remind you you're real, she said, that the world is real, and that everything is real. She added that having your hand close in your field of vision might also make Jim appear somewhat smaller.

All the papers except *The Journal* ran interviews with "passengers," people who Jim had plucked over the last couple years on his travels across the Americas. They told of what it was like spending time up in Jim's ear, conversing with him, and about how strange it was hearing Jim's thoughts.

And there were interviews, too, with the Protectors of Jim's Sleep, the PJS, who made sure Jim passed his nights unmolested, that he always awoke to his two towering thermoses (one of coffee, one of milk), his daily pack of twenty telephone-pole-sized cigarettes, and to his mound of breads (the so-called "loafs for the loaf"). It was the PJS too, who worked as intermediaries on behalf of the various corporations making products for Jim.

The Times also ran a lengthy piece reiterating Jim's biography, which I'll recount below. For those of you already familiar the facts of his birth and childhood—from memory or by way of other texts—feel free to skip ahead.

Of the many other texts one might consult for further biographical details, I'd suggest *Macro Polo: Jim Swan as Transcontinental Journeyman* as well as *Lord, Jim: The Rise of the PJS, the Jimnasts, and Other Cults of Jim*, both available from Astoria Books.

TWELVE

To be born: to be borne and then bared. A mother provides board for the fetus, whom she bears, who sometimes is bear-sized.

To be born signals the end of the bearing, but there's many types of bear. To bear is to carry (cigarettes home to the son), to endure (the judgements of others), or to move in a direction (away from the house, when the son is grown and no one is looking). The mother bears all.

So, as we think of Jim's birth, let's not imagine it as any great accomplishment of his, but rather a feat of his mother, Belinda. It was said that when she first went into labor (now there's a word that seems apt), folks heard her cries straight across the Northumberland Strait, that the oysters along very shores of Prince Edward Island quaked in their liquor with the force of her screams.

Though others maintain she never made a sound.

That it was July 1—Canada Day, the same day as his nation's birth—only added to the magnitude of the event. Not that the event needed amplification. It didn't take long for word to spread of a child delivered (now there's a term: deliverance!) measuring thirty inches long in the small Nova Scotian town of Tatamagouche.

In fact, the mother's caesarian stitches were barely knotted off when reporters began descending like gulls on the small, former fishing village tucked in along its eponymous bay.

The reporters, crowding the hall outside the maternity ward, birthed nicknames, billing Jim the Titan of Tatamagouche, the Canuck Colossus, the Maple Leaf Mammoth, the

Mountainous Mounty, the Brobdingnag Bluenoser, the Jimmaculate Conception. I was always partial to the Supernova Scotian.

The proud parents, Belinda Swan and her husband, Bert, were of normal height—five-nine and five-eight, respectively—and of quiet, if somewhat shocked, disposition.

But it was less the child's size that surprised them than the attention it garnered. Though when she arrived the doctors had suspected she was carrying at least triplets, Belinda had been had been sure all along there was but one child, and a boy at that. I knew I had one son in there, she said. And I knew he'd be big. I just didn't know how big, she added, the news would be to everyone else.

Reporters continued to report to Tatamagouche, from Tatamagouche, requesting interviews with Bert and Belinda and various poses of the child with the mother, the father, and the yardstick.

The effect, however, was that Belinda and Bert just looked tiny, the yardstick like a one-foot ruler. So photographers came bearing props—hockey sticks, loonies and toonies, even a breadbox. Belinda objected but the photographers persisted. Without these, they said, he'd just look like a normal child.

By the end of Jim's first week, the mother and son Swan were released from the hospital, Belinda swaddling her boy in a sunburst-pattern quilt she'd been stitching over the course of her pregnancy. The newspeople took one last round of photos—the quilt just barely big enough to cover the boy—and went home. The hospital release papers indicated that Jim had grown another two inches over the last seven days.

Months passed, punctuated by knocks on the Swans' pale blue front door, as stringers and photogs for every supermarket checkout mag the world over showed up with questions, cameras, and checks. And Bert and Belinda were happy to reply to, pose for, and deposit them all.

But the biggest crowd amassed in the yard on Jim's first birthday. Bert led them inside one by one for interviews and photo shoots, provided they pay at the door the fee that Bert quoted. At first many reporters bemoaned Bert's terms, but faced with the prospect of missing the story, everyone ponied up.

Sure enough, on Jim's second birthday they returned. But by then Bert had built a great fence to keep freeloading press from even entering the yard.

And so a new Canada Day tradition was born. Like the Fourth in the States, the First in Canada has its share of fairs and fireworks, parades and picnics, barbeques and bathing suits. But who needs a hotdog eating competition at Coney Island when you could tune in to the news from Tatamagouche? Who needs American-style distended guts when you could get Canadian-style expanse?

While some hoped Jim would go down to Brooklyn one day and show the Americans what for, most Canadians were proud to know that Jim need not even compete. At any rate, Jim was a vegetarian, so it made the point moot.

Each year, as press from all around the world flew in to Halifax and hailed cabs for Tatamagouche, there was a kind of comfort taken all across Canada in the news—and comfort too in the inevitable slight shock the news provided—that Jim was well and always, inevitably, bigger than ever.

With each year, too, came the pageantry. They brought out the official Tatamagouche tape measure and the local Lions unloaded their grain scale. They'd set the show up just inside

the great fence, and there on the Swans' gravel driveway they'd watch the scale's needle swing around the dial, further each time, like a clock inching ever closer to twelve.

By age eight, Jim hit nine feet, making him the tallest man ever recorded. The Guinness people arrived bearing a plaque, but Bert was disappointed. It turned out they had nothing to do with the beer company. Of all the corporations that showed up each summer with oversized gifts and oversized checks, Guinness was the one Bert had most eagerly anticipated.

Some of the Swan sponsors were disappointed themselves that day, somewhat dismayed to discover that the boy wasn't just the size of a chimney but smoking like one as well. He smokes cigarettes? asked the reporters. You let him light up?

His life is hard, said Belinda, so he has a smoke now and then, big deal. Show me a nine-foot-tall eight-year-old who doesn't smoke, she said. Anyway, I'm not going to stand in the way of what he likes. Anyone got a problem with that, the gate to the fence is right behind you.

The assembled media, having paid a steep price for admission, seemed not to mind. Besides, the sad fact that everyone knew but couldn't voice was that the tallest people just don't live very long. It was especially on everyone's mind that day, since everyone had been discussing the world's former tallest man, who'd lived only to 22.

What else could you say? That cigarettes could stunt a kid's growth?

In fact, that was precisely the reason Belinda had herself started her boy smoking several years before. She worried about him, worried he'd grow so tall he'd be a freak, that his size would prevent him finding love or happiness, indeed any form of companionship or normalcy.

So she hooked him on cigarettes and coffee and kept him off any foods she suspected might encourage his growth. No milk, no meat, no salmon or celery stalks. She told him he was

allergic to all of it, that they tasted terrible, and that meat was murder—even though she snuck herself fried baloney sandwiches after she put the boy to sleep.

But before you become too cross with Belinda, consider her position. Prior to her pregnancy she worked, like many Tatagouchers, at the local creamery. Her diet, like Bert's—a baker—consisted of copious breadstuffs and cheeses, which they washed down with soup bowls of cream.

Belinda felt she could trust the bread, kneaded and baked and brought home by Bert. But what of the milk? The creamery had recently been bought by a conglomerate that had brought in new cows from Wisconsin, tripling production in under two years. The milk—the daily dairy—seemed to Belinda the most likely explanation for her boy's bewildering size.

So the former milkmaid raised her son on coffee and smokes. So what. So he may not grow up to be a great athlete. Better slightly short of breath than insanely long of height.

When she imagined other mothers watching on TV, tsking her, Belinda tsked them back. Let them try raising a nine-footer on a baker's salary, see if they don't look for ways to keep the boy from growing, and maybe slacken his tremendous appetite.

Let them try homeschooling a child the teachers were too scared to have in their class, worried he'd lash out at the other kids or the teachers themselves. As if Jim would ever lift a hand for any reason other than to put bread or coffee or a cig in his mouth.

Let them try to raise a kid everyone else called a freak. Let their lives be defined by worries about how to keep not just his great stomach fed but his ravenous mind occupied, and on top of that his ever-growing body housed and clothed, even as he outgrew both seemingly by the hour. Those tsking mothers, they'd probably be feeding their brats stogies and whiskey while they kept them locked in the basement.

Because of the creamery, the library was lousy with books about dairy, about raising livestock and boys who were farmhands. Once, when Jim was six, reading one of the books from the stacks the library regularly delivered to the Swans' house, Jim looked up and asked his mother about cows and milk. It says that boy grew up big and strong from drinking milk, he said to his mother. Exactly, Belinda replied, and we don't want that any more than we got it, do we? she said. Her son agreed they did not.

So on his eighth birthday Jim smoked while they weighed him and he smoked while measured his height, and he smoked while he posed for publicity pictures for Guinness, even as the photographer tried to snap only when the cigarette was out of the frame. And Jim smoked next to strange bald men in suits who brought the big checks, who themselves took the occasion to puff on cigars, and he smoked as he nodded or shook his head no at the questions the reporters asked him.

You'll have to excuse the boy, Bert said, he's a shy one. He's just overwhelmed, added Belinda, by everyone's kindness and generosity and birthday wishes.

But the truth was he didn't feel shy or overwhelmed. He felt tired. Tired of being stared at each year, tired of the sense—oh yes, he could sense it—that he was being used. Tired of hearing, My how you've grown. Tired of hearing, The last time I saw you, you were only this tall.

And he was tired of people acting like they knew him, acting like they were his friends, shaking his hand and praising his grip. These fancy city people probably didn't even like him. How could they? They didn't know him. Yet they pretended to. They were pretending to like him and he had to pretend to like them back and pretend to like their dumb gifts. Everything was pretend.

If they really liked him, if they really knew him, they'd give him gifts that he wanted. He'd get a pet poodle or pony or a kitten or a giant dictionary that had all the words in it, not just the words he already knew, and he'd get to keep it and not have to keep renewing it from the library. And instead of taking his picture, they'd take him to the beach or take him camping. They'd take him anywhere. Instead of bringing him checks, they'd bring him friends.

And if he couldn't have those things—a day at the beach, or camping, or friends—he'd settle happily for being left alone. How he'd prefer to spend his birthday alone, lying on his bed of piled up rugs—he'd outgrown his real bed—and read all day long. To be in a book, where so much imagining was done for him, and where you got to be any size that you wanted.

Even sleeping diagonally, his feet hung far off the end of his last mattress, a king, so his parents took it and instead Bert made Jim a bed of rugs from the Sally Ann. Day and night, Jim would stretch out on them and read.

Often, awakened at night by the sound through the thin wall of his mother sobbing, Jim would read by the light of headlamp connected to a helmet. The headlamp and helmet set was one of Jim's favorite gifts, presented to him by a fire chief who said to Jim he thought he could use it, as he likely found himself hitting his head on things all the time, which was true. Without the liner, the helmet still fit.

Sometimes, after a particularly wonderful passage—in something by E.B. White, say, or in *Alice in Wonderland* or *Peter Pan*, or later in books by Mark Twain and his favorite, Robert Louis Stevenson, the books growing in length and complexity as he did—he'd find he wasn't ready to fall asleep, wanted neither to drift off nor read further, so he'd turn over and turn the corners of the rugs.

He'd flip the corners like pages, his headlight illuminating the various geometric or floral patterns as he'd finger the various weaves. Each rug was like a world, one that he could project himself or a character into, or else some combination of both himself and a character.

Some nights, he'd even crawl out of bed and reorder of rugs, choosing a new one to be on top, experimenting to see how its colors and pile and pattern might affect his dreams.

Jim found he liked almost every book he read, although he still wasn't sure about *Gulliver's Travels* or *The BFG.* People kept giving him copies of them, they were silly books, Jim thought. Despite what people said, neither had anything to do with being tall. Nor were they about what it was like to be a person. They were fine, he guessed. They just didn't make him want to pause and run his hands over the rugs, or—if he were outside—along the tops of the blades of grass.

What was it about good books, he wondered, that made you want to touch the world? It was as if you had to wonder how something like the book could also exist in the world. How strange that so much can exist in a story, and all there is to see and touch are the words and pages and cover.

And yet that could be so much. Like a potion: how a tiny amount goes so far. It was like how he never left a book lying open, on its back, for fear the book escape, become diffuse in the world. How he felt that books should only be open when they're being read.

Meanwhile, Jim continued to grow. Clothing companies brought Jim outfits each year, but even when something fit Jim it only did so for a few months. Over and over, Bert built extensions off the sides of Jim's room, often an extension off an extension. With each extension, Bert raised that section's roof, so that Jim's room increasingly resembled a cross-section of a ziggurat.

By day, Belinda was kept busy cooking and cleaning and struggling to homeschool her son, which more and more meant shuttling books back and forth to the library between weekly deliveries. By night, like her husband, Belinda became a builder. But instead of hammer and nail she used needle and thread, as the sunburst-pattern quilt she'd sewn her son perpetually needed expansion to keep him covered.

Belinda obliged by stitching new swathes to it, each scrap taken from an article of clothing that Jim had outgrown. So often sleepless, she'd listen for the sound of Jim's deep, rather sonorous snoring, then sneak into his room and stich by whatever poor light the moon afforded, turning the quilt, growing it radially. The next morning, Jim would awake under a quilt a little larger than it had been when he'd gone to sleep, but he'd be a little larger too.

Before moving on, can we just pause for a moment and appreciate that word: quilt? It's not exactly onomatopoeic, but it seems like its root (*culcita,* Latin for mattress or cushion) could be. At very least, the sound of *quilt* seems to capture its meaning. Like pillow. I'm tempted to say the same for bed, but bed is different. The word bed doesn't so much sound like a bed as look like a bed. It's more onomatoseeic.

Of course, Jim's bed of rugs had neither headboard nor footboard, so it would look more like eeeeeeee. Which, perhaps, if you're generous, might look a bit like a rug up-close. But eeeeeeee neither looks like a word nor sounds like a bed. Not that "rug-bed" or "carpet-bed" are much better. Or much bedder.

Quilts can also be called comforters, which you'd think would be a nicer-sounding word, yet somehow isn't. Quilt beats comforter any day of the week. Quilt sounds more comforting than a comforter, which is something.

In the UK, they call a security blanket a comfort blanket. And they call a comforter a duvet. In French, duvet means fluff.

Quilts are also called counterpanes, a term you don't hear much anymore. Counterpane was an update of an older word, counterpoint, –point coming from the Latin *punctus*, as in "to puncture." The trick was for Belinda to never puncture the boy's sleep.

Punctus also gives us the English punctum, a small, distinct point, like a dot or a period. In anatomy, the lacrimal punctum refers to the two tiny holes in each eyelid through which tears—first collected in the lacrimal lake, the so-called "pool of tears"—are drained out of the eye.

As I've diverted you by quilting these layers of etymology and anatomy together, as I've filled out this section with fluff, our friend Jim has grown a year older, two feet taller, and decided to run away.

But he didn't. When the reporters all gathered and the bigwigs turned out with their giant checks for Jim's ninth birthday, Jim grinned and bore it. And he grinned and bared his teeth for the photos, as his mother requested.

It wasn't until one morning almost another full year had passed, with Bert at the bakery and Belinda still in bed, that Jim snuck from his room and ducked through the back door, swung himself clear over the fence that lined the yard, and went out into the world.

Over his shoulder, Jim carried the quilt like a bindle, and in it all the bread in the house, a dozen cartons of Pall Malls, two dozen pounds of coffee beans, and about three dozen books.

Behind him, Jim left a note telling his parents he loved them, that he hoped they'd understand that he needed more space, and requesting that they please not follow or try to find him. He'd write them again soon, he said, to tell them he was okay.

In one hand, he held six library books, which he slid one-by-one into the library's book return chute, as if feeding a pet.

After that, Jim walked west all day, brushing his head on the outstretched branches of bright white birches and burning red maples, groves of black ash with leaves soft and new and spread wide like benedictory hands. Elsewhere, the pliant needles of hemlocks and spruces combed through his hair, their cones swinging like small, silent bells as he passed them.

And here was a tree, some other sort of maple he'd never seen before: the tops of its leaves were green but their undersides were a silvery white, so that the branches below him looked perfectly normal but those above him resembled blank slips of paper.

All day he breezed through the wood, as much sprite or spirit as boy, ranging over ravines and slushing swiftly through marshes as sparrows and warblers swept out of hiding and squirrels and chipmunks scurried out of his way. He paused only to light cigarettes, or to take bags of coffee from his quilt and toss beans by the handful into his mouth as quick as he could, before they could rush through his fingers like grains of brown sugar.

The cigarette butts he stubbed out on the soles of his massive sandals and left unwittingly as a trail stretching behind him.

That night, already nearing the mainland, Jim laid himself down in the deadfall, ate four of his eight loaves of bread, and, as the story goes, chose a mossy boulder for a pillow. Though here the soft-sounding pillow seems very much the wrong word. Headrest seems more appropriate.

With his remaining cigarette cartons and books, he built a small bedside table beside him, a sort of bookshelf of books. His coffee beans and remaining bread he packed around his body.

His bindle unbundled, he stretched his quilt out above him, billowing air, and fell asleep before it settled completely back down upon him.

For breakfast, he finished his bread, then his beans, which he ground his between his teeth and brewed in his mouth with saliva. That day he strode mostly in streams to avoid the abrading branches. He followed one's curves until it led into another's, then another's, like guides each accompanying him through a territory. Finally, Jim came upon a lake which spread out before him like a kingdom that had flattened and smoothed.

Or perhaps, Jim thought, the kingdom was under the lake, hidden beneath the surface which flatly reflected the late afternoon sun. Perhaps he was looking down at the sky. Or perhaps he was the one under water, in the lake, upside-down, and the lake was a hole to the sky.

He stood somewhat transfixed for a while, amused by his musings, and then it started to rain. But the rain was so light he couldn't feel it: he could only tell it was falling by the rippling water, the innumerable wavelets crossing in every direction, the array of interference causing all sorts of wonderful complications across what had just been so smooth and simple.

Then the rain passed. All was still again.

On the far side of the lake, instead of more woods, the land was clean and rolling. The confusion of the innumerable rises and gullies, rocks and fallen trees, the natural anarchy he'd been traversing for two days was smoothed out into a gently heaving valley of farmland, a furrowed greenness spread far and wide beyond the lake.

Past the valley, set upon the ridge so they formed part of the horizon, were a house and a barn. They looked so tiny, so quaint. Perhaps on the far side of the ridge there'd be more forest, more cover.

But to get there, after crossing the lake, he'd have to span the wide-open valley. Anyone might see him, and then there'd be commotion. The news would spread, and the newspeople would arrive.

He considered going right or left, remaining under the cover of the forest and seeing where it led. But no, he wanted to go straight. He would cross the lake and the valley once it was dark.

As dusk fell, the barn and the house on the ridge faded away until all Jim could see was a bright yellow light, like a lighthouse. It reminded him of the children's poem that Stevenson wrote, "The Lamplighter."

It was a poem I never knew until Jim recited it for me, telling me afterwards how much he'd liked it was a boy, imagining himself the one lighting the lamps, but without the need of a ladder.

He thought of it then, he told me, leaning against a tree just a few feet in the forest, waiting for the darkness to set in over the valley. It was too dark to read but with the moon and stars out too bright to head across the clearing. So he recited the poem to himself a few times, until he guessed he fell asleep its words:

My tea is nearly ready and the sun has left the sky;
It's time to take the window to see Leerie going by;
For every night at teatime and before you take your seat,
With lantern and with ladder he comes posting up the street.

Now Tom would be a driver and Maria go to sea,
And my papa's a banker and as rich as he can be;
But I, when I am stronger and can choose what I'm to do,
Oh Leerie, I'll go round at night and light the lamps with you!

For we are very lucky, with a lamp before the door,
And Leerie stops to light it as he lights so many more;

And O! before you hurry by with ladder and with light,
Leerie, see a little child and nod to him tonight!

The next morning, the media assembled in Tatamagouche weren't particularly pleased to hear that Jim was sick and couldn't be interviewed. They were not only disappointed, they were in disbelief. As a show of good faith, Bert offered to give the interviews himself this year, and at a fifty percent discount.

But the press wanted the name brand, not a knockoff, and turned to the wife, badgering Belinda until she broke down, until tears overflowed her lacrimal lake, overflowed her lacrimal puncta, and streamed down her face. She ran inside, came back out with a hanky and a creased sheet of paper, and made her husband read the boy's note.

Why didn't you go look for him? the press asked, aghast. Why didn't you alert the authorities? Why didn't you sound an alarm? This was child abuse, they maintained, or at least gross negligence.

We did look, said the Swans. We didn't say anything because we thought he'd come back. Also we trust him. Also something's wrong with our car, which wouldn't start. And also the breaks had been making a screeching noise. But mostly because we thought he'd come back for his birthday.

But before the Swans had even finished answering, the reporters were coiling their cords and rushing off their vans, consulting maps of the area and calling their producers for the go-ahead to go on the chase. A couple intrepid reporters remained to request a quick look inside the house, as if a thirteen-foot-tall boy could be hidden in the cupboard or behind a half-emptied bookcase.

Soon those two reporters joined the rest, as did de facto squadrons of media and search-and-rescue helicopters, crisscrossing squares of sky from Charlotte to Saskatoon. And as it was Canada Day to the north and the start of a long July Fourth weekend to the south, families across the continent joined the search, too.

Boots and binoculars and backpacks and sleeping bags were dusted off, SUVs loaded up with kids and coolers and cameras and launched into the woods, or sent easing up switchbacks toward mountain top vistas for bird's eye views of the truant ten-year-old titan from Tatamagouche.

Was it really possible that Jim was somewhere in the States? Americans thrilled at the prospect. But was it possible the border was so porous that someone Jim's size could have simply slip through, certain American talk show hosts asked. What if Jim had been a thirteen-foot-tall terrorist? Was it possible that Jim had become radicalized? If so, Jim had to be taken down.

I'm gonna get me that sumbitch goliath, said a man interviewed by his local news. Gonna get him right in the whatchamacallit, in the gooch. Then I'm gonna stuff him and keep him in my TV room, to scare away any potential intruders.

But for most, the long weekend was more of a lark, an excuse to act out the kind of behavior they'd seen modeled on commercials for their all-wheel-drive vehicles, yet somehow with the flavor of a leprechaun hunt.

It was also an excuse for parents to pry their progeny from their devices, away from computers and TVs, out of the reach of cell phones and into fresh air. It was a chance to look for something that wasn't on or through a screen, that wasn't framed by a rectangle, that wasn't a

picture of reality, but the real thing. Even if it meant searching for a thing they knew they'd likely not find.

There was a time, parents said by way of reminding their kids—certainly not themselves—as they drove out of cities and into the woods, a time that the only glass rectangles were windows and mirrors, like those around this very car. You either looked outside onto nature, or back into yourself. And now there's screens everywhere, but they look into nothing. In fact, they said, what we see on screens are not really even pictures, but dots, arrays of miniscule, colored points that our eyes coalesce into a picture.

We read books and stuff off these screens, some of the children said. Not this weekend, said their parents, this weekend we look for big Jim, and in the meantime we look at other big things, like the trees and the land and the sky. This weekend we're going to look at nature, not nit-sized dots.

But nature is boring, said the kids, nature's so slow! It hardly moves! It doesn't do anything! The parents told their children that they were sure there'd be plenty to do. We'll go on hikes, said the parents, and go swimming. And at night we'll build fires. Look, kids, they said, we've even packed marshmallows. You can make s'mores.

If the parents had read *Let Us Eat Cake: A Collection of Confectionary Tales,* published by Astoria Books, they might even had added that marshmallows themselves once came from nature, that four thousand years ago the ancient Egyptians discovered that they could boil the roots of a certain flowering plant, *Althaea officinalis*, commonly known as the mallow (or the marsh mallow, as it grows in marshes), and eat it as a delicacy.

It was a delicacy, the parents might have added, once strictly reserved for the pharaoh's family and for gods, but now the kids could eat it that night, around the campfire, as they watched glowing embers float upwards, disappearing toward the stars.

But the mere promise of s'mores was enough to quiet most of the children, some of whom even turned their attention out the windows, watching as the trees around them grew denser and taller. Some imagined bears in the woods, or deer. Some imagined Jim joining them that night, appearing out of the dark, roasting a marshmallow the size of a pillow on the end of a telephone pole.

While the odds of any one family finding Jim weren't high, with tens of millions of weekend warriors scouring the landscape, somebody was bound to bump into him. And what if it's us, many families thought.

By the next morning, grainy footage of Jim lumbering through the woods was appearing on the news, coming in from everywhere. From Mississippi to Mississauga, it seemed like just about everyone who went looking for Jim was finding him.

THIRTEEN

Nicole Bergamot had never been much into baking until two years before. But after her husband left she'd caught the bug and it became a part of her daily routine, even if it meant feeding so much of what she made to her livestock. Here's something she learns about farming: Cows love cupcakes. Chickens dig cheesecake.

It was hard to say what exactly had drawn her to it. Perhaps there just wasn't enough preparation in other kinds of cooking, perhaps there wasn't sufficient transmutation of ingredients into a wholly new final product. Sunny-side up eggs still looked like eggs, fish looked like fish, steak like cow, even lasagna exhibited its constituent parts.

But baking bread and biscuits and muffins was different. The egg and flour and sugar and butter and water and yeast and whatever each went in one way and came out differently. They lost attributes but gained something. And not only that, but breadstuffs rose. From a batter of grains and gook something big and solid came out. Loaves like houses, biscuits and muffins and such like little huts. Little homes, every one of them full. No emptiness. And yet they were moist and warm, inviting her to tear them open, to indulge in the pillowy stuff of their insides.

It was also nice that the baking took work, took preparation, took time. There was a pleasure to be had in following the ordered steps: assembling the bowls and cups and spoons and whisks, then each of the ingredients, then the measuring (even if only by eye), the beating and combining and stirring. The stirring she liked best. The stirring was stirring. And then to wait, to have patience, the pleasure in of anticipation, knowing her actions and patience would be rewarded. Then the eating.

Then the cleaning, which she could do without.

The baking, especially at first, came more naturally than the farming. Nicole was a city girl, born and raised, and still liked sleeping in. What was the point of not having a real job, she figured, if she couldn't at least stay in bed as late as she liked? Was there anything more odious than an alarm, an invention designed to cut short one's dreams, and to do so by way of the most dreadful noise its maker could muster?

And then there she'd be, awake—having rushed to silence the noise that pulled you back in the real world—with the sense that something had just been spinning inside her head. That something in her head had been telling her a story, something interesting or important, perhaps—she'd never know—because the alarm said real life needed to recommence. Some people lived to work, some slept to have energy. Nicole lived—Nicole expended energy—to sleep, to dream.

Between dreams she farmed. And she baked. And each, in its way, seemed to be something like dreaming. What was seeding the earth and waiting for ryegrass to grow, what collecting milk from cows or eggs from chickens, what mixing ingredients and putting dough in the oven, than participating in some sort of dreamlife? Warm milk? Warm eggs? Warm bread? These things seemed the very manifestations of dreams. So much so her days often felt more dreamlike than her nights.

And what did she dream about at night? Even without the alarm she couldn't remember. But she knew she was dreaming. Of that she was certain. And so too that one day something would happen—she'd see something, hear something, someone would say something—and it would remind her of her dreams, she'd suddenly remember what she thought about every night.

Still, it was a blessing to be rid of the alarm. Her whole life—first as a student, then as a teacher—she'd awoken to alarms, and then her days were ruled by more ringing, bells clangingly

announcing the end of one period, the start of the next, everything regimented, always somewhere to be, a lesson to teach, a hall to monitor, even the teacher's lounge disagreeable, full of annoying colleagues clamoring on, and all day those goddamn banging bells from the beginning of the day to the end.

She loved teaching. She loved the students and loved teaching them languages. It was the maddening bells—their very wordlessness, their essential meaninglessness, or rather their singularity in meaning that made them meaningless, like an alphabet of only one letter—that somewhat got under her skin.

Because even with all those little metal hammers banging away at the anvil-like bells, what really changed? One class period resembled another. Semesters melted one into the next. That whole period of her life, in fact, seemed as if a single class period, starting with the bell her first day on the job and the bell ringing again when she quit and left Toronto.

Packing up and moving out of Toronto: that was the period on the end of that period. Then, as happens in stories, a new sentence began.

Yes, it seemed there were periods—sentences—to one's life. Sometimes instead of periods, they ended in exclamation points. Or question marks. Sometimes they fizzed out with an ellipse. The sentences could be long and confusing, or else short and—as they say—to the point.

The other term for this was term. You could carry a pregnancy to term. Or else you could terminate it. Odd, though, how your periods end when your term begins, which itself is a sentence of nine months—or time off for bad behavior. This must be what they mean by a confusion of terms. Sometimes words have too many meanings.

Sometimes you just couldn't trust words. It was something she'd often warned her students of, these so-called false friends. In how many Spanish classes had she taught the

meanings of *embarazada,* of *bizarro*, of *comprimiso*? How many times had she gone over *les faux amis* of French, including *blesser*, *sensible,* and *personne*? Perhaps her problem, Nicole thought, was that she'd always taken idiosyncrasies of language as nothing more than that, as if once you learned to keep your lexicons straight, you could never be deceived.

Then of course there's *gateau* and *gato.* She wasn't much into either. Cats were too moody, and cakes were too sweet. In fact, she wasn't much of a dessert person at all, except ice cream.

Timothy had had a sweet tooth. In fact, he ate like he lived: like a picky, moody child. In a lot of ways Timothy had never grown up. Nicole had always known that. It was in part what she loved that about him. And it probably helped make him a such a good painter, and also such a lousy husband and business man, not only failing to sell his work but often getting fired from the house-painting gigs he took to make ends meet when they lived in Toronto.

It was the same childish streak that had convinced him, after his father died, against selling his parents' farm. He and Nicole should quit their jobs and take it over, he said. They could live simple lives off the earth; money would no longer be a problem; he could get back to his art and she could pursue her singing.

It was crazy, of course, but she'd given in. As strict as she could be with her students, when it came to Timothy she could only indulge him. So Nicole gave in and gave notice at the high school and in June she boxed up their belongings, broke their lease, and packed up the pickup. They moved out east to join the hicks in the sticks in St. Ville de Nulle-Part-du-Lac, Quebec.

With that, a new, happy period began. Nicole soon overcame her fear of the large, silent house and the large, silent cows in the middle of the large, silent expanse. On occasional walks

into town, she enjoyed using her French. They kept putting off converting the barn, in part because they kept the animals—which Nicole quickly grew fond of—and in part because Timothy was happy taking the truck and painting on the far side of the lake. Ort least that's what he claimed. It turned out he was having an affair.

He might have even managed to talk Nicole out of leaving him, had he tried, but instead he left her. A taxi pulled up late at night and honked. Nicole, lest she have to watch him walk out the door, left the house first. It was snowing, and she stood with a coat thrown over her nightgown, smoking, shivering, on the edge of the field, her back turned to the house and the car, as she heard one door close and then another, and then the car turn around and head back along the driveway. Timothy left her the farm and the truck. And also—though he didn't know it—pregnant.

She kept the farm and the truck.

She spent the rest of the winter in the living room, by the fire. She found it difficult to read, but easy to watch marathons of black-and-white movies. She hired someone to take care of the animals. She avoided the bedroom upstairs. She started to bake.

As the weather finally warmed, Nicole found herself missing the animals. She let the farmhand go and threw herself into her chores. She spent more and more time in the barn, cleaning and repairing it, and when there was nothing left to do, she started bringing her books to the barn, reading Flaubert to the cows.

Occasionally she visited her family or friends in Toronto, but the city felt like Timothy to her. It was as if everything she'd known about it, had liked about it, had changed. The stink of the barn was beautiful to her. The unscented city seemed to be hiding a secret.

Nicole had never lived alone before, never known such freedom. Each day she did as she pleased, every day was her birthday. She loved this new period, when every sentence was hers alone.

A full year passed before she felt the first pangs of loneliness. This, too, was new to her. Loneliness, she'd always suspected, was a failure of the imagination, or of curiosity, or resourcefulness—that it was merely boredom for the illiterate. Lonely people should learn to read.

But Nicole was reading plenty. And the cows made for lousy conversationalists. Then again, she wasn't looking for a book club. She didn't really want to talk to anyone. She just wanted company. She wanted to play. What she wanted, she finally realized, was a dog. A smart one, like a collie. But then a thirteen-foot tall ten-year-old had shown up instead.

Looking out through her kitchen window, at first she thought she was seeing one of her Holsteins. He was far off in the field, sitting amongst them; with his white t-shirt splotched with two nights of filth he fit right in. Even when he stood up, the idea of a boy that size was so foreign to Nicole that it appeared one of her cows had learned to stand upright on two legs. Or had grown a human face.

But no, this was…an enormous boy…who was…lighting a cigarette. It was that kid from Tatamagouche, whatshisname, Jim Swan, out there on her property, just hanging with her heifers.

Well that sure as shit beats the hell out of a collie, she thought, wiping flour off her hands and heading outside. She approached the boy just as one might a stray dog: smiling, hands in her pockets, moving deliberately so he wouldn't turn tail and run.

As she approached him across the field, his presence amid her cows vaguely reminded her of watching a 3D movie, as if he was right there in front of her, inches away, within reach, even though he was still a hundred meters away. He looked at her briefly, then turned his attention back to the small herd.

At last she passed between the cows and joined him, turning to stand by his side, which somehow felt less intimidating than trying to look up at his face, especially with the sun in her eyes. They stood silently like that for a time, their feet sunken somewhat into the mud of the field, their eyes on the heifers. It was Jim who finally spoke up. These are cows, right? he asked.

Yeah, she said, these are cows. That's Sophie and Jeanne and Audrey and Annette. And that's Isabelle and that's Pina and Simone and Cassandra. And back there's Annie and Beatrice and Laura and Lulu. And I'm Nicole. And you must be Jim.

She extended her hand, which Jim took wrapped gently in his, so gently their skin barely touched. I think it's my birthday, he said. Is today July first?

I literally have no idea, Nicole said, I guess it might be. Jim seemed to like this response. So what are you doing here, she asked. He told her he was just passing through. And your parents? she asked. They were still at home, probably, he said.

Well you must be thirsty, Nicole said, adding that she was just about to milk the cows, and that if he wanted he could come along. If you want, she said, you can even have some warm milk, straight from the bucket.

Without waiting for an answer, Nicole patted a couple cows and started walking toward the barn. The cows followed her and Jim followed the cows. Though he watched intently as Nicole milked the cows, he silently refused her invitation to give it a try himself. And when she sampled the warm milk and then offered him the pale, he recoiled.

Maybe you'd prefer something else? Orange juice? I'm afraid that's all I have besides coffee. His eyes lit up, and she told him to hold tight for a minute while she went back to the house.

When she returned a half hour later with biscuits and coffee, she found him asleep, his great body supine on the hay-strewn flagstone floor, his chest rising and falling, a slight whinnying coming from his nose. She sat down and watched, in awe of his size and vulnerability, and in what may have been the first instance of the Jimmies, she discovered she couldn't leave. Eventually, she lay down beside him, closed her eyes, and fell asleep.

Here, she said, handing him the phone when he finally awoke late that afternoon. I just turned on the news and heard the whole continent is looking for you. And your mother's worried sick. Call her.

Jim hesitated, but after polishing off the full tray of biscuits he relented. Yeah, I'm totally fine, ma, he told Belinda, who then asked about his whereabouts. Come to think of it, ma, he said, I literally have no idea.

She wants to speak to you, he said, handing the phone to Nicole. Jim sat watching with pleading eyes as Nicole reassured his mother, gave the name of what she claimed was the nearest town, but never gave a street address or her own last name.

Then Jim and his mother negotiated. Belinda wanted her boy home, but not if it meant there'd be a scene and her parenting would be called into question. She certainly didn't want the cops involved, and there really was something wrong with their car (though it never occurred to her it might have been something Jim did). So she told Jim that if he promised to return on his own the next day, she wouldn't call the cops or the news. Jim asked for a week. Absolutely not, said Belinda. They settled on three days.

Well, said Nicole, what do you want to do? You could stay here, I guess, but… Her sentence was cut short by the rumble and racket of a helicopter approaching, sounding like a lawn mower chewing up a strip of the sky. Its pitch and volume seemed to rise as with it advanced, then it seemed to hover right outside the barn until finally they heard its pitch and volume seem to descend as it flew off.

That pitch change is known as the Doppler Effect. When the source of a continual sound moves toward a listener, the soundwaves bunch up, since the source is approaching the waves it's emitting. So the frequency—which the listener hears as pitch—seems higher. And vice versa if the sound is moving away.

In fact, the same thing happens with electromagnetic waves. And since almost every star in the universe is moving away from earth, the light waves astronomers see from them are slightly shifted toward the red part of the visible spectrum.

We can't see this redshift with our naked eye, but we hear to tone shift every time a car drives by, if only the slightly shifting pitch of its tires.

And we heard it when Jim blew past us too, much later, when he was huge and moved at incredible speed. However, whether this accounts for why Jim seemed to appear with different skin tones to different people, scientists at the time were unable to say.

Again, see *Coming Through in Waves* for more on this stuff. But also check out *Redshift, Blueshift: Race in Post-Jim America,* the powerful *Jim, Crow: Jim Was Black, Damnit (*and Why You Might Be a Racist If You Didn't See Him That Way),* and of course the National Book Award Winner, *Black Swan,* all out from Astoria Books.

They're looking for you, said Nicole. Why don't we go inside the house. Jim shook his head. Nicole asked if he really wanted to stay in the barn for three days. I don't know, Jim said. What do you think?

I think, said Nicole, you've got to keep going. She got to her feet to add emphasis to her point, to add finality to her sentence, but also to look him level in the eye as he sat. Be pro-active, she said. As much as I'd like to have you around, you have three days to explore. Okay, he said, but under one condition: you come with me.

I'd love to, she said, but I couldn't. I've got the animals to care for. And I really try not to leave the farm if I can avoid it.

It's okay, said Jim, smiling, which she understood meant that he accepted this answer. He reached his hand out and embraced her—he sitting and she standing—his thumb along her clavicle, his palm and fingers spread across back, stretching clear across both shoulder blades, like the backrest of a chair.

It felt so good, this contact, so comfortable to both of them: this boy who needed her, or thought he needed her, or wanted to need her, and Nicole herself needing or wanting, or liking that she felt his need or want.

This is friendship, they each thought. I like this person. I want this person to be a friend and maybe now we are. It was simple as that.

Nicole reached high and hugged him back, her hands just meeting behind his neck, making a circuit, her little head sinking deep into a smooth, deep nook in his neck, like an indent in a pillow, somehow both soft and firm, both boy and man, and she closed her eyes and exhaled—and like that he stood up, lifting her into the air along with him.

Oooooh, Nicole said, suddenly lightheaded and happy and weightless, quick as that high off the ground, aloft like a little girl, and Jim gave her a little nudge under her butt with the palm of the hand, just an open palm—not cautious or nervous or sexual, just thoughtlessly utilitarian, just friendly, just helpful—and lifted her higher, so she was perched on his left shoulder. Nicole wrapped one arm around Jim's head to secure herself as he ducked out the barn door and stood in the soft mud outside, in the wide-open sky of the bright summer day.

Where to? he asked.

Nicole laughed and named the first place that came to her mind. Ever been to Times Square? she asked.

And like that, they walked all the way from Canada.

Or so the story goes.

Although that's how Jim eventually did cross the earth—one slightly lengthening stride after another—in fact Jim hadn't even reached the driveway when Nicole had him put her down. They'd take a car, like normal people, and she had to pack.

Nicole ran inside, called the farmhand, and then stuffed the cab of Timothy's old pickup with food, a change of clothes, and books—she was one of those sensible people who brings books everywhere—and covered the bed of the truck with hay. Jim stepped in and laid out with his pillow and smokes and books—he too was one of those sensible types, and looked forward to a few hours in the company of David Balfour—and hid himself under his giant quilt, trying to find a way to keep his body bent comfortably.

So okay, maybe they didn't travel exactly like normal people, but close enough. My first road trip! yelled Jim, as they rumbled along the gravel to the road. Nicole slid the back window

open and told him she was glad he was excited, but to keep his voice down. My first road trip, he said, in a bass.

As they passed through town, Nicole pulled into the market and cleaned out the store. She bought all the bread and chips and milk and Pall Malls they had. She dumped the bag in the bed and made for the highway.

They made good time despite the unusually heavy traffic on the highway. Every lane was a line of SUVs loaded with families, pillows pushed flush against rear passenger windows. Was everyone in Quebec going camping for the weekend? Had she so insulated herself over the last two years that some new outdoor fad had sprung up? Helicopters buzzed overhead but she couldn't imagine any connection between them.

Every so often, from between the insulation of pillows, she'd see kids going berserk, pointing at screaming. When she caught sight in the rearview mirror of a bit of Jim's head sticking out from the quilt, she told him to get back down under the quilt. But he pretended not to hear and kept it up, confident as only a kid can be that the parents in the neighboring cars would never believe the excited screams of their children.

Several miles from the American border, Nicole curved off the highway and took a side road along the Aroostok. They pulled in among some trees and Jim hopped out, smiling, somewhat ecstatic not just with their going to New York, but with hiding, with their secret mission to go undetected, and simply to be in this new stretch of woods.

When Nicole explained that she'd meet him a mile or two upriver, across the border, he started to pull off his shirt. Actually, Nicole said, you better keep that on. The cops might get wise if they see an XXXXXXXL shirt in the back of the truck.

Forty-five minutes later, she had a few dry cigarettes and his quilt waiting for him when he strode out of the river, and like that they were in Maine. From there, with but a few quick stops for Jim to find a tree or Nicole to find an otherwise empty gas station, they shot their way down to New York, straight to Times Square.

They arrived close to midnight. It was, Jim thought, peaking up from under the quilt, something like the inverse of an eclipse. Like somehow the sun, instead of disappearing behind the far side of the earth, shone right through it in the middle of the night.

They had driven through lit cities earlier that evening on their way there, but those had nothing of the brightness, the illumination, the star power of New York. No wonder they called it the City That Never Sleeps, thought Jim. How could you with all the lights on? It felt like a place where it was perpetually day. Maybe they call it Times Square, he thought, because in this square it's always the same time. Or it's night and day at once, maybe it's all times square.

Jim's appearance there then, suddenly shedding his quilt and standing in the bed of that red pickup on 42nd Street beneath all the flashing advertisements, his quilt in his hand ("half security blanket, half cape," as it was later described in the *Times Magazine* piece) caused an immediate stir, then a clamor, then complete pandemonium. Thanks to the truck, Jim looked even taller than he was, and from all sides sailed forth gasps and squeals of excitement as masses of tourists pushed in from all sides, as if drawn to Jim, as if he and they were suddenly magnetized by his size.

Mounted cops called for backup, news crews materialized, flashes flickered like pixie dust, and within moments there was Jim's giant head, except even bigger, amplified, shining down from overhead, across the width of a building.

And the light beams emitted from that billboard lit Jim's face brighter, the picture illuminating the subject, which further brightened the billboard, and then one by one around Times Square other billboards lit up with Jim's face, broadcasting his broad grin, multiplying him at all different angles but each of angle live, each pixel a glowing dot, a piece of an aspect of him, all coalescing, the boy appearing many times around himself, and in as many different sizes, but each enormous.

As the spectators continued to flock, training their eyes along with the media's cameras on the boy's face, Jim looked up at himself too, saw the first time his own immensity, and was awed by his own size.

Then came the interviews, of both Jim and Nicole. What were Jim's plans (Jim: I don't know); who was Nicole (Jim: She's my friend; Nicole: I'm his friend); what was her last name (Jim: Errr; Nicole: Rouault); and why'd they come to New York (Nicole: Where else do you bring someone the whole world's looking for?). Had Jim called his parents (Jim: Yes), did they know he was here (Nicole: they will now), why'd he run away (Nicole: Why does any kid run away?; Jim: I wanted to see things), where had they been and where were they staying (both: shrugs).

Before long, word was relayed from the Plaza that the hotel was offering them free rooms for a week, and another for Jim's parents, should they want to join. Jim called his parents, woke them way up in Tatamagouche with the news that he was safe and in New York and they could come down and join him. That's very nice, said Belinda, but we're already asleep. And our car is broken. See if they'll fly us down tomorrow. Have a good time. Good night.

It was only after he hung up, as the crowd around him suddenly serenaded Jim with "Happy Birthday," that he realized his parents had not wished him the same thing either time he'd called that day.

And then, after the song, despite all the lights and the excitement, big Jim let out a big yawn ("Bigger than a lot of parking spots in this town," *The News* would report), and everyone smiled, brought back to earth for a moment by this reminder that they were looking at a ten-year-old kid past his bedtime.

With the crowd like a teardrop around and behind them, Jim and Nicole were led by the mounted police to the Plaza, whose staff showed commendable effort in installing a second bed in Jim's room. Even so, Jim decided he was more used to floors than mattresses, and he spent the night atop the room's several beautiful rugs, which he piled himself.

The next morning, Jim banged on the door to the adjoining room, awakening Nicole from a dream and plunging her into another, a waking one, where before long she was standing beside Jim—who was squatting—in an elevator as they shot to the top of the Empire State Building for a private tour.

From the observation deck they beheld the city from a perspective that not even Jim could imagine he would one day approximate unaided.

Then a horse carriage ride (top-down, of course) through thousands of fans in Central Park to the American Museum of the Natural History, where a docent provided them with a special tour, complete with a press photo-ops of Jim next to the T-Rex (they were the same height) and then again beneath the blue whale.

Over the course of the tour, dozens of children and their families joined the group, though few besides Jim found themselves impressed by any of the stuffed or statuesque skeletons on

display when this marvel of Canadian natural history roamed their midst. At the end, they all sang Jim "Happy Birthday" again, and the museum sent him home with a geode.

Even though his feet hurt from the museum, on the walk back through Central Park Jim decided against another buggy ride, preferring to run around the lawns and paths a bit. Out in the open air and grass, he suddenly had energy again.

But before long he was winded, and he joined Nicole for a quiet moment in Sheep Meadow, stretching themselves out on the grass, feeling the warmth of the sun on their skin, enjoying the look of the late-day light as flared off far-away buildings or glowed the wispy hairs along their forearms. Jim had never noticed he had hair on his arms. He felt suddenly quite proud of himself. An adult in the city, with a friend in the sun, and the cool grass making the earth like a soft, slightly hairy, giant friend below.

But no sooner had he caught his breath and enjoyed this moment's peace than the crowd grew so large that Jim felt the urge to race back to the hotel. So he picked Nicole up and threw her laughing over his shoulder, then righted her so she could ride piggy-back as he charged briskly south, leaping fences, bounding boulders, moving so fast that anyone rushing him quickly found himself hopelessly giving chase.

Once again, a long teardrop tail grew behind them, stretching northward as Jim and Nicole rushed southward, as if the pair were the head of a snake that didn't so much move but rather kept stretching forward: instead of advancing, just growing.

Scores of messages awaited them at the Plaza's front desk, including invitations to appear on every TV and radio program in town, tickets to every Broadway play, and even a note encouraging Jim to participate in the hotdog eating contest at Coney Island two days later.

But Jim didn't have much interest in answering questions, or sitting still while people performed for him (Nicole: Ugh, you must be the worst at theaters. You'd probably just wind up annoying the hell out of ten rows of people seated behind you!), or eating even a single hot dog.

Instead, the next day they returned to 42nd Street to tour Grand Central Station, whose vaulted ceilings easily fit even Jim. He was amused by the constellations painted across the ceiling. But there was something sad to Nicole about the choice of design.

It reminded her—it seemed intent on reminding everyone—of just what cities lacked: a view of the stars. And so the architects had them painted here, as if to recreate by hand what they themselves had destroyed by building this building—by sealing off the sky with this very ceiling—in the first place.

Equally sadly ironic, she thought, was how they painted these stars above a room meant not for standing still, not for star-gazing, not for looking up, but in this wide space meant more than any other in the world for people rushing every which way, trying not to bang into each other.

What made the room lovely was how everyone was heading in different directions, everyone moving freeform. There were no paths through the space, just entrances and exits, and somehow everyone shot by each other at strange angles colliding.

The whole mechanism of the space, the magic that kept people from bumping into one another, was that everyone kept moving. That was the deal: everyone moved, everyone watched where they were going. No one daydreamed so no one bumped into each other.

And then they painted this ceiling, why? Just so people would feel what they were missing by running around, unable to look up? Was I a cruel trick? A reminder of what urbanites gave up?

Look, said Jim, there's Taurus, the bull.

Let's go, said Nicole, I'll show you a place that will make this whole place look like bull.

So they crossed the street and headed west for a block, and entered the public library.

I told you about that part of his trip already. But I wish I could've been there then. That's a scene that gets stuck in my mind: Jim sitting on the floor, along one of the 42 22-foot marble-footed yellow oak tables that line the 300-foot long reading room, reading *Kidnapped*. Nicole their next to him, in a yellow oak chair, reading Balzac, with no noise anywhere in the room but the clicking of laptop keypads, the flipping of pages, the occasional nose being blown.

Every so often, Jim set down his book wondered at the beauty of the reading room: at the other patrons reading and writing, at the books lining the walls, the large arced windows above the books. Then, as at Grand Central, he again found himself gazing upwards.

Even at thirteen feet tall, the 50-foot ceiling dwarfed him, not only made him feel small the way few other ceilings could, but made him feel more like those around him than unlike. Somehow, the building helped him feel more normal, the thought. Not only that, but it was beautiful. Unlike Grand Central's, just a few hundred yards down 42nd Street, the library's ceiling was flat, with intricately carved frames enclosing large paintings of charmingly partially cloudy sky.

So in a way it looked to Jim like just another flat wall, like the side walls with their windows. Except out the side windows you could only see buildings. To see the sky, you had to look up, at the painted ceiling.

Nicole, too, set down her book, exhausted after the hectic two days, and looked around.

She'd been to New York twice as a girl: once with her parents and once on a school trip, and both times this room had been the highlight. She loved its size, its space, its quietude, she

loved the smell of the wood polish that she remembered but couldn't summon until she inhaled it again. And she loved the idea of the pneumatic tubes shuttling books, books floating in air, acres of books hidden below Madison Square Park, supporting the park, pushing up the grass, seeding the lawn.

And she loved knowing that the library and park stood where once there lived a giant reservoir, with walls that were themselves 50 feet high, as high as the ceiling of this library, and there was a walkway up around the top of it that people strolled on Sundays, high up above the city to get a bit of a breeze, with books open before them so they could read while they walked, oblivious to the world around and below them.

It was still something of a reservoir, Nicole thought, a giant reservoir of books, as silent as under water.

And she loved too how the elements of this room seemed to all fit together: the yellow oak of the table matching the chairs, the dark books in the dark shelves and the Jacob's latter light sailing down through the windows, reflected off of office buildings, settling on the spread open books before the content, quiet patrons concentrating on their work. The windows, in fact, gave the room something of the feel of a train station, but without the bustle. Come to think of it, Grand Central had its soaring windows at the end of the hall. It was like the library and the station were opposites.

Like Grand Central, they'd even painted the ceiling of this reading room like the sky. But look upwards here and it's a cloudy day, and look up there and it's a cloudless night. And yet how alike: again the ceiling masked as sky, made deliberately false, making a show of what it blocked out.

Well, she tried to reason, the stars were useful for navigation, so perhaps they made sense in a train station. And these clouds looked thick with dreams, busty and bulgy—she supposed the word was pregnant, though what a horrid word for clouds—for what did the bear? Rain? Inspiration? Strange to see the same clouds every day, and for them never to move or drift or change shape or open up and rain upon the patrons. Was each an unopenable book?

Strange, too, Nicole thought, that the clouds were painted against a blue sky, such that they hid parts of the daytime sky, and the daytime sky itself hid the stars.

The room was beautiful because it felt airy, because it was lit so well with natural light, because it had paintings of clouds and wooden tables the size of trees with chairs branching out that curved sort of like bushes.

The room was beautiful because it was almost like reading outside, for people who didn't want to actually be outside.

Ready to go? Nicole whispered.

One more second, whispered Jim, just let me finish this page. But even when he did, he just closed the book and looked back around the room.

I would have also liked to see Jim's meals in New York. Every restaurant in the city wanted to feed him. Many sent invites (Jim Swan c/o The Plaza) offering free meals. A Latin place in the Lower East Side tried to tempt him with a "Jimpanada" the size of a backpack. An Italian spot in the theater district advertised their "Swantipasto," served in a punchbowl. And several midtown barbeque joints offered to cook Jim one of everything on the menu. Jim turned them all down, but plenty of average-sized people showed up to try these challenges for themselves.

I'm sure Jim could finish these without a problem, Nicole told the concierge at the hotel, who was enumerating the various propositions, but Jim's a vegetarian. What he really likes is bread.

Through the Plaza's revolving doors, Nicole watched as Jim signed autographs. Scores of fans jumped up and down, many waving markers that day's *Post,* which showed Jim hanging off the Empire State Building with Nicole in his hand.

His hairless legs, like a pair of pale yellow oaks, protruded from a pair of navy Nike trunks. The shorts had been delivered with piles of other heavily-branded clothing to their rooms that morning. Nicole herself had spent a half hour trying on various jeans while Jim, through the door that connected their rooms, backed up against a far wall to see himself in the mirror as he went through his lot.

Now she watched as Jim bent and returned something he signed. Magically, what was a golf ball in Jim's hand turned into a baseball in an adult man's. The man spun it, inspecting it, then showed it off to the crowd. J.S. was written in big, blue letters that stretched across the stitching. Jim's handwriting was not very good.

That's too bad, replied the concierge, straightening the fanned pile of menus and notes into a neat pile before depositing them in the trash bin behind him.

Nicole asked if there wasn't perhaps a bread restaurant that might have an offer something like that. He really likes bread, I think, she said, and coffee. The concierge, attempting to fashion the politest way to inform mademoiselle that no, there was no such thing as an all-you-could-eat bread restaurant, suddenly cocked his head and smiled.

There is a place in Times Square that might suit the young man's taste, he ventured. Have you heard of The Olive Garden? I believe I've seen on offer something they call never-ending breadsticks…

Unfortunately, the never-ending breadsticks did not live up to their name. Gary, the manager, apologized to his two illustrious guests (Gary: I want you to know I'm a really big fan—I was always tall for my age growing up, so I get it). Jim smiled equably from his cross-legged position on the floor at the table. A line of additional really big fans hoping for tables ran out the door and around the corner, snapping photos through the windows.

Jim seemed content with plate after plate of spaghetti, but Gary repeatedly returned to reiterate his apologies. Corporate just called, he said, and reassured me that if you come back tomorrow this won't happen again. Also, your dining experience tonight is on the house, as will be any future dining experiences you choose to share with The Olive Garden. All we ask is that you kindly provide us with 24 hours' notice in advance of those future experiences.

And so it was that the next day at noon, as a new hotdog-eating record was being set at Coney Island, a new record for Olive Garden breadsticks was established in Times Square. Only one of those two records still stands.

That night, as the rest of New York turned its attention to fireworks over the river, Jim and Nicole snuck away.

As for me, I thought it was all pretty silly. Sure, the kid was tall, and that was unusual, but was that any reason to go chasing him around town, begging him for an autograph? I had nothing against him, but what had he done? He'd grown. (And, as it would turn out, not even a fraction of how much he eventually would.)

Would I one day have kids, and one day much later have grandkids, and find myself in each instance in such need of validation by my own brood that I'd have to show them a shot of my face beside a boy's belt buckle? Gimme a break.

I suspected most New Yorkers felt the same. Surely it was only the tourists who were taken by the "Towering Teen from Tatamagouche," as the *News* described him the day after he arrived. Tourists could afford to go gaga over him: they were on vacation, they came to New York to tilt their heads back and gawk upwards. He was just part of the show.

Of course, in the office Kid Colossal was already a hot topic with the editors. One had been working Jim's folks for months, hoping to set the boy up with a ghostwriter. When he showed up in town, another camped out by the Plaza, trying to cozy up to Nicole. A third was waiting on manuscript she'd bought about gigantism.

The first two never came to fruition. But the oversized coffee-table book, *Colossi: A Cultural History of the World's Tallest People* was a bestseller the following Father's Day.

Whether *Colossi* was any more perused than any other coffee-table book (that is, whether it was ever opened after more than a couple times before it was relegated to a state of semi-permanent hibernation in a dusty pile on the lower shelf with other coffee-table books), I cannot say.

Which is why I've always somewhat pitied coffee-table book authors and editors. So much work goes into those books, just so they can be looked at, and yet they are perhaps the least looked-at books in the biblio-kingdom. For decades after we acquire them, all we see is their spines, and with each new one we buy the old ones are weighed down the more, and are that much less likely to ever rekindle our interest and imagination.

But for most of us, Jim was strictly sideshow stuff. And for me, he just got in the way. The (not-so) little twerp had invaded the news cycle. I mean, he was really screwing with my livelihood.

There I was, just minding my own business, which is to say minding the business of the books I was trying to publicize. All I wanted was to secure a few last interviews for my June and July titles—*Barbie-Q: A Girl's Guide to Grilling* (for which we had high hopes, following the success of her previous cookbook, *Skinny Dips)* and *High-Diver: A Gold Medalist's Struggle with Addiction* (from the author of *SummerSalt: A Gold Medalist's Guide to Kicking Hypertension*)—and all anyone on the news wanted to talk about was Jim.

One reporter did call me early on Friday, July second, asking for an interview with the author of a backlist title, *Hit the Road, Jacques: Road Trip and Camping Destinations in Quebec & Eastern Canada,* but that was it. Otherwise I spent the day editing press releases for three of our fall titles:

Readers of *Walled-In, or Life Inwood: Two Years, Two Months, and Two Days in My Upper Manhattan Studio Apartment,* will appreciate this thorough guide to simple living in today's fast-paced world…

The New Astoria Anthology of Short Fiction Anthologies is an update of that "indispensable" (*The Cincinnati Enquirer*) and "handy" (*Library Journal*) compendium first published…

Readers of the bestselling *Fiber Optics: Why You Should Never Order a Salad in Front of Your Boss and Other Secrets from a Fortune 500 C.E.O.* will find even more good for thought in *The Art of Warm: How a Strategy of Room Temperature Lunches Will Increase Your Productivity & Profits*…

It was a summer Friday, so I left work early. But the trains were all screwed up, and after waiting for my train for an hour I gave up and walked home. It was a nice stroll, and I still got to the bar in time to watch the Mets lose, but it you'll forgive me if I admit that I wasn't totally enthralled with Jim at the time.

Danny and Justin and Hayes were already there, half-drunk and laughing. And why not? Danny and Justin weren't married yet. Hayes was still unhappily (though gainfully) employed. Someone handed me a drink. This fucking Canuck kid, I said, he fucked up all the trains. Justin said he heard there was a fire on the tracks, that it had nothing to do with Jim. Yeah, I said, and the starting rotation doesn't have anything to do with why the Mets are in the gutter.

They're in the gutter, said Justin, because they couldn't scratch out a hit if they had John, Paul, George, and Ringo in the lineup.

They're in the gutter, said Hayes, because they couldn't make a play with Shakespeare and Chekov and Ibsen in the lineup.

They're in the gutter, said Danny, because they couldn't make a pitch if they had Caruso and Pavarotti and Plácido fucking Domingo in the lineup.

They're in the gutter, I said, because they couldn't draw a walk if they had Da Vinci and Rembrandt and, shit, I don't know, someone else good at drawing.

Saturday and Sunday I spent as I did most of my summer weekends: at the beach, reading. Most people don't think of New York as a beach town, but it is, and they're easy to get to. Just swipe your MetroCard and pull out your book, and an hour or two later you're hotfooting it through the sand. It's not exactly Grand Cayman, but not bad considering it's a two-buck fare from Grand Central.

Not only is there no rush at the beach, no concrete or steel, new subway steam rising through sewers, no honking cabs, there's really nothing that takes its place. There's just flat sand and flat water and flat sky: the world goes two-dimensional. And as long as you don't turn around and look back at the city, the world goes on forever.

Astoria Books' *A Big Apple a Day: How Urban Living Affects Your Health*, the author notes that urbanites can go years without seeing the horizon, or only see it rarely. As the eye focuses at different distances, it actually changes shape. When looking at something close, like these words, the ciliary muscles around the lens are contracted. For them to loosen all the way, the eye must look at something far away, like the horizon—or those other things metropolitans don't see much of— the stars.

And so, argues the author, with a city one's eyes are always somewhat strained or tightened, like pairs of hands always holding things, never fully relaxed, never able to fully let go.

I'd think of this—and feel certain I could sense the very changing shape of my eyes—each time I arrived at the beach and looked out, my eyes suddenly free to take in the great emptiness of the water and sky.

The beach most people think of first is Coney Island, which is hardly empty, hardly a place of peace and quiet. It's mayhem there any summer day, packed with people blasting bad music, blankets abutting blankets, umbrellas everywhere, and the little sand there is peaking from between the patchwork of sheets and towels and bodies is always strewn with trash. It's Times Square on the beach. And what New Year's Eve is to one, Independence Day is to the other.

Next door to Coney Island is Brighton Beach, a half-mile east and only a tenth as packed. And, for a bonus lots of beautiful Russian bodies sunbathing around you, so when you set your book down for a moment you can look far-off at the horizon or focus your eyes on something in-between. Even the older, wider, looser, hairier, saggier bodies at Brighton Beach are interesting, beautiful in a way, in their Russianness, in their essential foreignness. And to cap off a day of books and beach and bodies and bouncing in the waves, I'd recommend bopping into one of the Russian groceries for ice cream. That was my Saturday.

Sunday being the Fourth, Brighton Beach would be full of Coney Island overflow, so I made the two-hour train ride to the Rockaways. But the train's just half the haul. Then, to get to the good spot, you've got to hike for a while through dunes. Not only is it further than most people want to go, but there's no lifeguards on duty, so families with kids keep away.

But the kicker is that stretch has become semi-nude. Toptional is the word. So even if you're out there alone, just you and your book and your bag of grapes, and skin and sky and sand and surf.

On the Waterfront: A History of New York's Shorelines (from the author of *Littoral Literal: A Biography of the World's Beaches*), includes a fascinating tour of the etymologies of these names.

For instance, Rockaway Beach, takes its name not, as I'd always assumed, from either some British beach or—as I'd pictured it—some historic day when settlers cleared the beach of boulders by rolling them into the ocean. Rather, its name seems to have come from the Lenape name for the beach, "Place of Sands," which might have sounded like Rechouwaackie, from *l'eckwa* (sand) and *auke* (place).

While Brighton Beach does take its name from Brighton in England, Coney Island likely takes its name from the Dutch for "Rabbit Island." Good luck finding a rabbit there now. More fitting, I'd say, was the old Lanape name, Narrioch, meaning "Land without Shadows," which likely refers to Coney Island's south-facing beach.

Narrioch, the author adds, can also be translated as "Point."

Of course, the whole "toptional" thing is a quagmire, because you want to look, in a way you're *encouraged* to look, but you're also not supposed to look. In fact, it's the same even if a woman is wearing a top. And it's the same with me in my bathing suit. Look but don't look.

That's the whole game of the beach. It's sort of the same unwritten rule of the subways. Hey, pal, don't you see I'm standing here? But don't let me catch you looking at me standing over here.

That's why it's smart to read on the subway—it's a safe place to direct your eyes. The same thing with the beach. And yet, if you only look at your book, you'll never see anyone.

The nice thing about looking at screens, I suppose, is that you're welcome to stare at someone's face, at someone's bare body, even. You're invited to do so. That's the whole point. Perhaps in a coy way, the beach is the closest most of us get to that, unmediated, amongst strangers.

Finally, after a full day of reading my book and sunning my body and peeking at others and splashing around, I took the long subway ride home back to Red Hook. (Red Hook, from the Dutch *Roode Hoek,* meaning Red Point.) I fed Whitman, grilled myself a burger on my tiny hibachi out on my fire escape, and took a beer to the roof when I heard the fireworks start bursting over the Hudson.

About a dozen of my neighbors and their friends were already up there. I waved and they waved back. I guess that's when you're supposed to walk over and join people, but I didn't. It's not that I'm shy, exactly. I spend my days cold-calling producers and editors, pitching them stories. I'm basically a professional schmoozer. But in that capacity, I have a clear mission. I know it and whoever I'm pitching knows it. It's strictly professional, even as I try to hide it by talking to them like friends.

But in social situations, what's the goal? To befriend someone? To try to date or sleep with someone? How awkward! How exhausting! It's natural enough, I guess, to want these things. And some people can do it just fine. Yet somehow I always feel like a creep. And (perhaps for that reason), I fear I come off like one, too.

So instead I kept to myself. Besides, I wasn't up there to make friends. I was up there to stare at little dots of light as they rocketed into the air and became thousands of smaller dots. I was there to hope that each one would explode bigger than its predecessor. I was there, I think, to project myself onto each of those fireworks, ascending with some secret cargo and then bursting into a thousand shooting stars, then never to be heard from again.

Jim watched them, each smaller than the last, from the bed of the pickup as Nicole drove north. Before long he fell asleep, a tuckered-out ten-year-old after a long holiday weekend in the city, as Nicole pressed on through the night. He woke with the sun in his eyes the next morning, the gravel of his driveway in Tatamagouche crunching under the tires beneath him.

Belinda welcomed her boy with a smooch, and Burt briefly returned from the bakery to receive his son. Over fresh bread in the backyard, the three Swans caught up, Jim animatedly telling his parents about his adventure, Nicole quietly observing the reunion. Belinda and Burt thanked her for taking care of their boy, but when Nicole got up to go Jim asked her to wait.

Mom, he said, Dad, I love you so much, but it's so hard to live here. And it's so hard to learn. Nicole is a teacher. Do you think I could live with her? She says she'll tutor me if I help her around the farm. Besides there's so much more room there for me. It's so hard being stuck here at home all the time.

Nicole looked at the boy, her eyes widening with surprise, and with joy. Belinda looked at Burt, who looked back at Belinda, who asked Nicole if it was really okay with her. Nicole said it would be an honor, that Jim was in fact as bright and promising as a student as he was tall, and with all the resources of her farm, he'd be no burden at all. You could visit us whenever you like, she said, and I'll be happy to drive him back here for holidays, or whenever.

Burt admitted that the boy could use the exercise, and Belinda said the same about book-learning, and with that they gave the arrangement their blessing, promising to come out and visit as soon as they got their Buick LeSabre repaired.

So Jim stayed with Nicole through the fall, then the winter and spring. He slept in the barn with the cows, even in the cold, despite Nicole's gentle insistences that he treat her home as his own. It was true the barn was heated, but she disliked the sense that he was living like an animal.

But I read in the barn, Jim said, so how can I be an animal? Besides, I like the cows' company. Nicole, sensing that perhaps she envied the cows their company, eventually let it go.

During the days, though, the two were inseparable. Jim followed Nicole around, helping her milk the cows and clean the coops and tend to the rest of the chores, and also address the many repairs around the farm that Nicole had been putting off. Jim especially seemed to enjoy any job that put his size to good use. Gleefully he cleaned the gutters of the house and reinforced

the buttresses in the barn. And together the pair repainted both the house and the barn, Nicole up on Timothy's old ladder so she and Jim could work shoulder-to-shoulder.

No matter the activity, Nicole sprinkled her English with French, with Spanish, and worked in retellings of her favorite myths, reciting her favorite poems. She'd assign him readings each night, ordering copies of her favorite books and rereading them herself, then discussing the readings as they worked.

Jim ate it all up, and soon Nicole was reading and teaching books of history, math, physics, anatomy, biology, geography, etymology, and the rest. Books she'd long but only vaguely wanted to read she now found herself reading one after another, as if unable to quench her appetite, or else relapsing into an old, pleasant addiction.

Finally, Nicole even prevailed upon him to try some milk, which eventually joined coffee and cigarettes as one of Jim's addictions, though by far the most benign. *Regarde ça*, she said, one morning that March, sliding her head under a cow, opening her mouth, and tugging. He laughed, but kept his distance.

Va ici, et essaie toi-même, she said, or else no muffins for you today. Besides, look, you're hurting poor Lulu's feelings. Listen, if you try it and don't like it, I'll never pressure you again. Deal? She offered her hand and he shook it with his thumb and forefinger.

Somehow, despite his huge mouth reaching around the udder, half of the milk ran down his cheek and chin. Jim wiped it away, licked his hand, and smiled. *Oh là*, he said, *J'ai du lait sur ma mouton.* Close enough, said Nicole.

The next morning, entering the barn with a bucket of coffee, she found him the same way, like a mechanic under a car, taking turns sucking the milk and his cigarette.

His birthday arrived, and Jim submitted to returning home for the media event, as much to keep his new home a secret from the press as to appease his parents. Whether due to the milk or the exercise or genetics, Jim had grown substantially over the past year, and clocked in at twenty feet. The world was amazed, though Nicole, who kept clear of the house and drove him back to the farm that night, had hardly noticed.

The next spring Nicole had the barn renovated and enlarged. For his next birthday, she rented a horse trailer to hitch to the pickup to get him back to Tatamagouche. The next year she had enlarged the barn again, but had Burt cancel the birthday festivities. There was simply no way to get Jim back home. Undaunted, some press still arrived on July first, only to find the Swans' home abandoned.

Instead, Burt and Belinda had come to Nicole's. As they joined Nicole in the barn to serenade Jim and Burt and Nicole compared recipes for the two tremendous birthday cakes they'd baked. Jim's parents gave him a telescope, which he pretended to be able to use, and Nicole gave him a novelty lawn chess-set, with two-foot-tall pieces, which she promised to teach him to play.

When Burt and Belinda wondered at the barn and the fence, Nicole explained that she'd sold off a chunk of her property to pay for them. It was too much land to manage, anyway, she said. At first I worried that it might raise suspicions, but no one really comes out here. You're the only visitors we ever get.

Not only was the telescope's eyepiece too small for Jim, but within a few months he was having trouble reading books, so Nicole started ordering him large-print editions. Then he outgrew even those, so they devised a new method: projecting text onto the wall of the barn like

a movie screen. He'd also outgrown cigarettes, unable to hold one without putting it out, and carved a himself a pipe from a sweet shadow sugar maple.

The barn doors were 30 feet high when Jim, the summer he turned fifteen, broke their frame trying to crawl through them one morning.

Nicole was in the kitchen baking cinnamon rolls when she heard the commotion. Outside, she saw that the front half of the barn had caved in. Jim sat cross-legged beside it, near where she'd first seen him with the cows, years before. Are you okay? she yelled. He nodded. The cows?

Jim confirmed they were fine too. He took out his pipe and took a puff to try to calm himself. Don't worry about the barn, Nicole said, when she reached him. We'll just build it bigger. He reached out his hand, picked her up, and set her on his knee. Standing, she almost reached his chin. I think I should go, he said.

Nicole tried insisting he stay, or at least bring her along, but there's not much you can do to force a teenager to do anything, let alone one who stands a hundred feet tall.

And so Jim left. And Nicole was left alone again. As soon as Jim got old enough to act like a man, Nicole thought, he acted like one and split. And yet she knew it was not the same. With Timothy it was one sort of love, one sort of hurt. With Jim it was something else. Still, she thought, how in the world is one supposed to let go?

Like the day years before, she smoked and turned her back, again standing on the edge of the field almost exactly where she'd been then. But it was late July, the soil cool and soft beneath her bare feet, the air warm and fragrant, and it was day instead of night.

And this time she watched it happen: Jim stepping one leg, then the other, over the forty-foot fence. She'd hated having to put up that fence, but believed it was the only way to keep out

potential gawkers. Now, staring at the section that suddenly separated her from Jim, she wondered if she'd put it up to keep him in.

This too, she thought, stubbing out her smoke, was the end of a period. But this hadn't felt like a sentence, it was much fuller than that. It was more like a *paragraph*, maybe. From *para*, meaning next to, and *graph*, meaning writing. Like she'd been next to something as it was created, as it was being written.

Or likely the last few years with Jim had been even larger, richer, more complex than that. It was, Nicole sensed, as she watched Jim's head shrink toward the horizon, what people were wont to call a *chapter* of one's life. Coming from the old root word for head. The same word that formed the base of chaperone, of cape, of cap. And caput.

FOURTEEN

Thus began Jim's Wanderjahr. But it's trickier than you might think to globe-trot when you're a hundred feet tall, at least until you get the hang of it. Grasslands and patties are a piece of pie but fording forests is fatiguing, if not impossible, they so often impassable with their treetops poking your eye, or your groin, and even where the brush is lower there are animals to watch out for, not so much for fear they'll attack as of concern you'll squash one underfoot.

Roadkill is bad enough, but off-roadkill, Jim wouldn't have been able to bear it.

As for roads, they come with worries too. There's all the traffic one must look out for—drivers likely not be anticipating the appearance of a pair of eight-foot-wide ankles occupying entire lanes in front of them—plus telephone wires and power lines that—Jim learned this the hard way—won't trip you up but are liable give way and snap on you, shooting sparks like fireworks far below, flaring about your feet, like you're kicking up fire.

Once, out near Ottawa, distracted by a couple bald eagles flying circles around his head, Jim got zapped, blown back off his feet and onto his ass. It took a second to regain himself and several hours before the capital figured out the cause of their blackout. But by then Jim was well over a hundred miles away, leaving nothing but two downed poles near a pair of prodigious callipygian dales.

So Jim once again took to wandering by watercourses, which kept him safe and cool, and additionally took any decision-making out of the process of walking. Runnel inevitably ran to rill, rill to creek, creek to brook, brook to rivulet, rivulet to river, on and on, here perhaps dilating into a pond, or a lake, here perhaps cascading down falls, and yet you could follow the water, step in and keep pace with the current, let it direct you any direction on the campus, and yet

always one way: always (even if infinitesimally, Jim thought, even if essentially indescribably, Jim thought, walking wetly) it will always take you down.

Down, down, down, and meanwhile growing, growing, growing, until at last the water could go no lower, could grow no larger, and disappeared into the ocean.

The fish in the streams, he felt, he needn't worry about. The fish were fast enough to fend for themselves. Sometimes he'd see them down there, streaking silver before his footfalls.

As Jim traveled through the world, so did word of his travels. Attention, like waterways, grew, feeding on one another, gathering speed. He was a current event.

He'd been hard to miss that first morning, clearing Nicole's fence, then clearing the clearings, heading out across the farmlands, staying clear of the forests. Those first few hours and days, people mostly left him alone. I mean they marveled. They mooned when he maundered as he sauntered by. They oohed and ahhed, shocked by the sight of him, the sight of him *in person,* his bigness released from the shrinking constraints of the screens they'd always viewed him through. What a different experience, as their eyes continually refocused, changed shape as he approached them or departed, no longer at ease to stay fixed on a mere image of him assembled of pixels.

Some tried keeping pace with him as they drove, but his forty-foot strides propelled him at speeds only cars on the highway could challenge. And then traffic would only back up, the instinct of most being to slam on the brakes when they beheld Jim bounding by.

Several news helicopters briefly broadcast footage (ha: Jim's footage!), but Canadians—unlike their neighbors to the south—soon acknowledged the need to protect the boy's privacy. Leave the kid be, wrote viewers. Besides, he wasn't doing anything very exciting, just walking around. Let us know when he starts playing hockey!

But international news channels kept buzzing around, bothering the citizens, and likely the wildlife and Jim as well. So Parliament passed a law preventing the distribution of the likeness of any citizen over eight feet tall without the express, written consent of the citizen him- or herself. As quickly as Jim had reappeared in the news around the world, he vanished again.

Meanwhile Jim meandered across pastures and prairies, sporadically stopping to sit in a field, to commune by some cows or hang out with some horses, or simply lean his large frame against a few fir trees and nap. Local farmers or ranchers or families inevitably introduced themselves and provided him food or drink. Sometimes lone men, happy for company who wasn't looking to chew their ears off, emptied cigarettes or poured home-grown tobacco into Jim's giant pipe, and joined the young man for a pleasant, silent, midafternoon smoke.

If it rained, Jim got rained on. Which was no big deal, since to Jim even the heaviest downpour felt no more than a mist. And if he spotted lightning tearing the sky in two several miles to the west, Jim found that with a little light jogging north or south, he could usually skirt right around it.

By night, Jim laid himself down somewhere, often in a field or along a riverside, and in the morning awake to light sounds of water or birds or the wind through the trees. It was perhaps less than ideal, rising without food—how he missed Nicole's baking and coffee and milk—but before long a miraculous thing happened: he opened his eyes one morning to a feast.

Along the edge of the riverside clearing, barrels of milk and coffee and sedan-sized loaves of bread were all neatly arranged beside him. He looked around, but found no one there. Thank you, Jim bellowed into the air, wiping coffee from his lips with the back of his hand.

Don't mention it, answered the woods, in what seemed several voices at once.

Where are you? asked Jim, but no one replied.

The next morning, over a hundred miles away, he awoke to a similar meal, plus a chest, which he opened, finding it filled with tobacco. There was even an enormous match: a broomstick with a hundred matchsticks taped around the end, plus a two-by-four with the striking sides of several matchbooks glued along the length of it. Jim stuffed his pipe, tamped it down, and struck the match: it worked like a charm. Thank you, he bellowed, after a few pleasant pulls.

Really, came the response, converging on him from myriad obscure points in the woods, it's our pleasure!

And likewise the next morning, except instead of a match there was a lighter, fashioned somehow from an old fire extinguisher. Thank you, all, Jim bellowed, whoever you are! But really, who are you?

You're very welcome! again came the reply, but not a word more.

The next morning, just west of Winnipeg, Jim awoke under an enormous, multicolored sheet, sewn together of what appeared to be many parachutes, or perhaps hot-air balloons. It reminded him of his old quilt, which he still carried with him in his pocket and used a couple times a day as a handkerchief. I'm blown away, Jim bellowed.

It's really nothing at all, replied voices from the woods.

But I can't except it, said Jim, unless you tell me who you are.

For a few moments the woods whispered to themselves, rustling with hidden debate.

We're the PJS, someone called out.

Shhhhhhh! issued forth from a bush.

Shhhhhh yourself, responded the first. He has a right to know!

But we promised! hissed a spruce.

No, we're the Jimperial Guard, someone cried.

Yeah, we're the Jimps! echoed from under a juniper.

We are not. We settled this! We're the PJS!

That hasn't been ratified yet.

We're the PJS. Until it's determined otherwise.

That's P-J-S, by the way.

That's Protectors of Jim's Sleep.

We make a ring around you at night.

We're here to make sure no one fucks with you while you're sleeping!

Language! cawed several voices.

Sorry!

So you just follow me around? Jim asked. How come I never see you?

A few of us move place to place. But mostly we're locals, from wherever you wind up, one night to the next.

It's an internet thing!

We've got chapters in all ten provinces.

I don't get it, said Jim.

It's easy. When word spreads that you're about to bed down in some chapter's territory, they come out and you.

Not that you need it, but you know, just in case.

And anyway, we figured it might be nice for you to wake up to breakfast.

We brought you bread, but we've also got pancakes and syrup.

No way, said Jim. Pancakes are my favorite!

Way! They're right over there. To your right.

Through the woods, Jim spotted a pickup piled high with kiddie-pool sized pancakes, plus a pitchfork propped up against the bed.

You guys are the best. And you're really good at hiding! Why don't you come out so I can see you. I'm happy to share these, he said, his mouth already full of flapjacks.

That's kind of you, someone said, but we can't. One of the rules of the PJS is to keep hidden.

Really? Why?

Because we're not here to try to be your friends.

What he means is, we're here to help you. We don't want people to join just because they want to be friends with you.

Why not?

Because that's not what our goal is. Our goal is to protect you while you sleep, and get you some breakfast.

And tobacco!

And anything else you might need.

As a fellow Canadian!

As our nation's favorite son!

Well, him and Gretzky.

Obviously.

And Neil Young, of course.

As a fellow human being!

I love Neil Young, said Jim.

Yeah, he's great.

Except, someone said, except we're really not supposed to talk to you.

Oh, said Jim.

Except to say you're welcome!

Which you totally are! someone added.

Or to answer questions!

That was still under deliberation, a dogwood declared.

But you can ask for stuff and we'll pass along word on the website, someone said.

As long as it's nothing illegal.

Speaking of which, someone said, is there anything else you might like?

Well, Jim said, I kind of miss cigarettes. The tobacco for the pipe is okay. I mean totally appreciate it but…

Gotcha.

We'll see what we can do.

Anything else?

Umm, said Jim. Uh, maybe like some toilet paper?

Cigarettes showed up the next morning. He'd wandered north the day before, and fell asleep in a grassy clearing at the top of a hill, beside a 15 foot statue of a cartoonish man in a green jacket and wide-brimmed hat. Everything was big up in this part of the country, apparently including the cigarettes: in a wooden box he found 20 of them, each about two inches wide by a foot-and-a-half long.

These are amazing, said Jim, lighting one and taking a long drag with his morning coffee.

Glad you like them! came a reply, somewhat shaky with age, from somewhere in the tree line.

We heard you were here and we did what we could, said another voice.

You guys! said a third. We agreed!

Don't tell anyone we talked to you, okay? said the first. Those Winnipeg guys caught a lot of flak in the forum.

My lips are sealed, said Jim.

Each of those cigarettes is a whole pack of Pall Malls rolled together in rice paper. We cut the filters off first.

That's two cartons' worth.

There's bread too.

The coffee's Tim Horton's.

Well it's all great, said Jim. You guys are amazing.

We're sorry we couldn't figure out toilet paper. But there's a stack of old pillowcases you're welcome to use.

They're in those big trash bags. Just put them back in the trash bag and some other PJS will take care of it.

Jim blushed and changed the topic. I know you can't tell me where we are or who you are, but can you tell me who this statue guy is?

We really can't, someone said.

But there's a sign right behind you! You're using it as a headboard.

Flin Flon, Manitoba, Jim read. But I can't make out the smaller print.

A tall, brawny old man with a long gray beard walked out of the woods, humming a song, ignoring Jim completely. Tom! someone gasped. But the old man kept walking, right up to the space between Jim and the large wooden sign beside the statue.

Oh, look, said the old man, a sign. I wonder what it says. Hm. It says here: Flin Flon is named after Josiah Flintabbatey Flonatin, an adventurer in *The Sunless City*, a novel by E. Preston Muddock. In 1914, a copy was found in the wilderness of northern Manitoba by a party of prospectors. A year later, these men working claims near the present site of Flin Flon came upon a comical—no, sorry, that's conical—came upon a conical hole having rich showing of gold.

I think maybe they left out an indefinite article, the old man said. Should rightly be *a rich showing,* I figure. Anyway, Tom Creighton, recalling the adventures of Flintabbatey Flonatin, who escaped from an underground lake through a large gold studded hole in the earth's crust—hmm, sounds like a good read—suggested the claims be called Flin Flon. The others agreed and that is how Flin Flon got its name.

Oh, there's one more bit, the old man said. Erected in 1962. Designed by Al Capp. Fascinating!

The old man turned and regarded the statue. I suppose that must be Josiah Flintabbatey Flonatin himself. That would put us not only in Flin Flon, but in the Sunless City itself. Or above it, I guess. Yep, that Sunless City was under a lake. Maybe we are under a lake and don't even realize it. Makes ya wonder, the old man said. Either that, or it's all a load of flin flon.

With that, the old man turned around and walked back into the woods. Jim chuckled, picked up the pack of smokes, and got to his feet. Well, he said, thank you guys.

You're welcome, replied the woods. Safe travels, young man, added the old man's voice, hidden as well.

As Jim continued to wander, clothes started appearing with his morning bread and coffee and milk and cigarettes. New shorts and shirts, short-sleeve and long, hand-sewn from bedsheets and blankets and curtains, quilts of quilts, patchworks ensembles that—no matter how garish or clownish in their assorted colors and uneven sizes—always looked all right on Jim. He was one of those folks that whatever he put on, he pulled off.

For his feet, they made him tube socks—which they even occasionally washed and darned—and sedan-sized fur-lined moccasins. Boots, however, were a tall order.

We're still working out the kinks on your kicks, Jim.

But don't worry, we'll cobble something together.

One morning he awoke to the sight of a great, handmade rainbow-colored backpack to match his rainbow blanket. But the most remarkable article was tailor made for Jim and donated to the PJS anonymously: a grayish blue windbreaker which, like the of water, seemed to shift colors with the weather, often dissolving into the same hue as the sky. When that happened, the shoulder straps of his rainbow backpack seemed to float through the air, so that if you saw him from either the left or the right, just his head was visible over the arcs.

As no pictures were circulated of Jim, the so-called "invisible jacket" or "jacket of clouds" and "the double rainbows" went, like Jim, unseen outside of Canada.

Summer turned to fall and warmer clothes started to appear. And then a pair of mukluks.

Mukluks take their name from Inupiaq word for the bearded seal whose skin is used for the shoes' soles. The English name for animal refers to species' long, devil-may-care whiskers, which look rather like moustache. And yet, sadly, bearded seals do not actually have beards.

That Jim's mukluks were made in the traditional fashion, with bearded sealskin soles led—as many details regarding Jim's appearance did—to confusion. To wit:

Q: Did Jim have a beard?

A: Yes, he had one.

A: No, he didn't.

A: No, he had two.

A: Yes, he had three.

Come to think of it, the bearded seal's whiskers look not unlike my cat's. This might lead us to thus consider the paradox of Whitman's beard. But let's not.

Let's return instead to Jim, wandering the provinces, the PJS chapters increasingly proactive in preparing for his arrival. As dusk fell on evening, just east of Edmonton, Jim spotted a flare go up on the edge of town.

Approaching, he found a large hangar with JIM spelled out in Christmas lights across the long, wide roof, along with an arrow pointing toward the door. Bending low, Jim was able to enter. Inside he found a sort of bed, consisting of enormous patchwork sheets, pillows sewn together into larger pillows, all atop a half-acre of artificial grass.

From outside the hanger, voices rang out together: Make yourself at home!

Thank you, PJS! called Jim, as he stretched out. And almost at once the ground surrounding the hanger began to gently shake, rumbling with the sleeping guest's snores.

Soon so-called bedhouses like this cropped up in towns across Canada, with local PJS setting of flares or fireworks or using kliegs to alert Jim of their locations. And to help save both Jim and the PJS (and sometimes unsuspecting bystanders) from what had become a series of rather embarrassing episodes, so-called Porta-Jims started appearing alongside the bedhouses,

often complete with sink, hand sanitizers, and thirty-five-foot-high toilet seats above hundred-foot deep holes. And toilet paper! A smartass up by Whitehorse hung up a sign at the Porta-Jim up there that read Little Boy's Room.

It was a system that seemed to suit everyone well. Jim seemed pleased to have a warm, private place to rest and residents relished proving themselves hospitable hosts. The bedhouses were also popular tourist attractions, impressing visitors with their collections of Jim-sized accouterments. Ticket sales not only offset construction costs, but provided funding for the bedhouses to continually improve their furnishings: rug-sized doilies for the water glasses, clothing hangers constructed of telephone poles, clothespins the size of alligators.

There's something eternally magical to both young and old, announced an editorial in the *Calgary Herald*, in experiencing the world in uncommon proportions. The bewitching lure of the dollhouse need not disappear as we advance in age. In fact, the new Jim "bedhouse" hangar reminds us pleasurably that we're not necessarily so grown up as we think.

Jim never stayed in the same bedhouse on consecutive nights, no matter the weather. It was as if something compelled him toward motion, even if only to double back over territory he'd crossed weeks before. It was if he were a tiger, and all Canada was his cage, and there was little to do but walk it, back and forth, all day long.

Still, with the short, frigid days in the north during the winter, he spent less time outside. So to the essentials like food and clothes and shelter and cigarettes, the PJS added movie screens to the bedhouses, complete with satellite cable and rowboat remotes on the nightstands. While these accessories proved popular with the public (how had no one thought before of offering movie theaters that showed not just films but regular TV, and where a couple dozen people could all lay out on one huge bed and watch at once, with children changes channels by stepping on the

buttons?), Jim was unenthusiastic about it. Instead, on one of the great notepads they left him, he scratched out a barely legible note: THANKS FOR THE TV, BUT WOULD A BOOK BE POSSIBLE? MAYBE PROJECT SOME TEXT?

The PJS were only too happy to comply, and developed a system for Jim to select from a number of books and turn pages by pressing buttons. Whenever word leaked about what book Jim was reading, the titles became instant bestsellers all over the world.

Needless to say, I wasn't the only book publicist pushing my company's titles on the PJS to load up for Jim. It was a challenge for me, especially, since Jim preferred fiction, and Astoria Books is a strictly nonfiction publishing house. (Plots are for dead people, goes one joke around the office.) I had Emily in production make up digital files of a half-dozen we'd published over the last several years. I wanted to send more to the PJS but the .JIM files were time consuming for Emily to create. I brought them up to the PJS' office in Halifax myself. Of the six I pitched they accepted two, and three months later, just as I'd given up holding my breath, news came down that Jim was reading one.

Overnight, sales of *Waltz, Whitmen: Dancing with the Multitudes* skyrocketed. I was stunned. Overjoyed, of course, but stunned. I'd chosen it as part of the six not because I had any real hope for it, but out of hubris, or pure sentimentality, or guilt. It was my favorite book I'd tried to publicize, and it (I) had been an utter failure. It hadn't helped that the author croaked before the book came out, so I couldn't book him for interviews. Nor that he'd not died of natural causes, but been killed, stabbed to death by a young man he met on the internet, so that a sort of cloud perpetually followed the book, a traveling thunderhead floating above, always ready to strike.

But oh, what a book, tracing as it did the author's coming of age with Whitman's verse as a guide, and then finding in *Leaves of Grass* means to meet the challenges of his life, "to embrace the variety in the world around me, and within myself." In one chapter, the author, who was an amateur ballroom dancer, glides around the room at a dance at the upstate addiction recovery center he'd checked himself into, dancing with patients and staff, one after another—many of whom he had been feuding with—as the poet's lines now swirled in his head.

And now, by virtue of crossing the Great White North while reading about the Good Gray Poet, Laddie Longlegs made *Waltz, Whitmen* a bestseller. And earned me a sweet bonus. I even started to like the kid.

Isn't that amazing, how no matter what you think of someone, if you find out they love the same book you love, it's hard to dislike them. Nothing else does that. You like the same musician as me? That's nice. The same movie? Whoop-de-doo. You're wearing the same tie as me? Hold on while I change. But you love the same book? Hell, let's go grab a beer!

It's something we're losing, I worry, as few people are reading actual, physical books: you can't see what they're reading. In *PostScript: Notes On the End of the Book*, published by Astoria Books, eleven eminent authors offer essays about the future of reading. In one, a writer imagines a time several generations from now when no one will read physical books, everything will be digitalized, but in an effort to alert other people (say on the subway or at the beach) to the book one is reading, people will take to wearing hats with the title of the book their reading on it.

When you download a book, predicts the essay, you'll get in the mail a little lapel pin. The pin will have not just the title but cover art on it. And when you're done reading the book, you can display the pins in your house, on "corkboard bookcases." If you download the book temporarily from a library, she writes, you have to return the pin when you return the book.

It's too bad we're not there yet, as I'd have liked to outfit Jim with a gigantic *Waltz, Whitmen* lapel pin. Not that I'm complaining.

Sadly, the next year, Jim didn't choose Astoria Books' follow-up book, *In the Johns: Dreaming with Mr. Bones and the Berrymen.* Yeah, that was not our best title. Though if you're looking for a name for your band, you could do worse than Mr. Bones and the Berrymen.

It didn't help that by the summer we published the Berryman book, Jim had already crossed into the States. He simply showed up one morning, not far north of Seattle, and without any restrictions in the U.S. on broadcasting Jim's image, he was immediately all over the news.

You didn't have to be a publicist to see the marketing opportunities. And a hat with a title of book about a dead poet was small potatoes to what the big corporations cooked up.

American PJS chapters sprung up and into action, but instead of small, local affairs, they were bankrolled by hotel companies who erected enormous bedhouses overnight. Bright signs spun high overhead, welcoming Jim on one side and brandishing the hotel's logo on the opposite. And they weren't shy about bumping up room fees in their human-sized hotel rooms next door, or showing Jim entering or exiting their buildings in advertisements.

Gone was the need, too, for the PJS's home-cooked and homespun offerings, as the hotels paired with restaurant chains and clothing companies to furnish their JimBnBs with bed-sized black bean burrito bowls, designer denim, sneakers with swooshes, and 40-league cowboy boots.

Even his smokes were now professionally produced. Every morning he woke to an assortment of options, but preferred those labeled with the tall letters of the Pall Mall logo, which he withdrew over the course of each day from a shiny new red Pall Mall box.

Meanwhile, Jim's image was everywhere, inundating the airwaves. And though rumors and the occasional image had leaked out of Canada over the last year, few were able to easily digest these new pictures of this new incarnation of the kid, now standing almost two-hundred feet tall. This marked the beginning of ibiwisism, with some would-be politicians even running on a new Ibiwisi Party ticket in certain parts of the country.

But like the corporations, most politicians in office saw something to be gained by luring Jim to their constituencies. What a boon for local business, what a revenue stream he could be. He could attract tourists, help revitalize the downtown. Jim as the ultimate job creator. If only they could get him to visit, and then to stay put.

But Jim was nothing (ha!) if not peripatetic. And while perhaps his new duds were technically trendier, most people agreed that he looked somewhat silly in pre-torn jeans, not to mention a wool beanie in the middle of winter.

And what, some people wondered, was the point in spending public funds to subsidize private hotel chains to lure Jim, when hundreds of homeless people were already there needing housing? And what might Jim do to a city if he ever tried to walk through one?

But these last fears proved groundless, as Jim never came close to entering a city. In fact, he seemed to be increasingly avoiding them, perhaps steering clear of people altogether.

He was lumbering somewhat sullenly, actually, many observed, as if losing steam. He wandered southeast, into nowhere, crossed salt flats to the Salt Lake, followed one waterway to another continually southward, and descended the Grand Staircase all the way to the Grand Canyon, in a crack in the earth big enough, if not quite to hide him, than at least, as many suspected, to help him feel hidden.

There, for once, Jim rested, remained there for days, an attraction in an attraction, a lion in his den, a chimera in a chasm.

He'd been exploring a cave, a curve in a cliff, when a big of Bright Angel Shale gave way underfoot, cracked and opened into a hollowed out hole in the sandstone, and he climbed into that lair protected from sight, covered in crystals, hidden from the helicopters, beyond the reach of cameras, as if he'd vanished into the earth. Tourists gathered along the ridge, awaiting his exit from wherever he'd disappeared to. Mountaineers closed in, but then the PJS arrived and successfully inveighed upon them against invading his privacy.

The mountaineers, many of whom had dreamt of being the first to enter to the cave, seemed to remember what first drew them to their sport: the desire to get away, to be alone with the rocky world. So instead they joined the PJS, made themselves useful, helped deliver food and coffee and milk and smokes to the mouth of the cave. In Jim they saw—as many of us did, eventually, one way or another—one of their own.

Days turned to weeks, to months, and the news devoted less time and fewer inches to Jim's disappearance. As long as the food kept disappearing, it was clear he was alive. He'd have to come out sometime, people figured. Meanwhile there were sports and sitcoms and plenty of other celebrities to occupy the popular imagination.

But it was bad for business for me. Not only did *Berrymen* flop, but so did several other books Astoria rushed into print following Jim's appearance in the States. Both the biographies, *Swan Top of the World: A Life of Jim* and *This Guy's the Limit* (get it?), plus our food book, *Black & White & Fed All Over: How Jim's Two-Tone Diet & Unusual Eating Habits Could Be the Cure You're Looking For,* came out that spring. I couldn't even manage to scrounge up one measly review for any of them. The market was saturated and the fad was over.

Which is not to say that any of those books are worth skipping. They're all fantastic, and all can be found in paperback edition wherever better books are sold.

But it was, if you'll pardon the pun, a lean time for Astoria Books. Our only book to crack the bestseller list that season was *The Cannibal's Cookbook: Not That You Should (But, You Know, Should You Have To),* part of our very popular "Just in Case of the Apocalypse" series, which also included *The Cookbook Cookbook: How to Cook Any Cookbook (Including This One)* (which came bundled with a seasoning packet and three bouillon cubes) and the considerably less palatable *How To Skin A Cat (If and When It Comes to That)* (which, if one can take any measure of reassurance in it, at least did not include a seasoning packet or bouillon cubes).

That's how it goes. Sometimes it's wizards, sometimes it's zombies, sometimes it's giants, sometimes it's post-apocalyptic cookbooks. The only surefire, evergreen bets are books about Lincoln or cats. And yet *Abraham Lickin': The Story of Tabby, the First White House Cat*, published by Astoria Books, totally bombed. Go figure.

Maybe it should've included recipes.

And then, one mid-May night, Jim got up and left. The PJS watched it happen, but kept the news to themselves, driving a ways behind him as he crossed westward under the stars through a long stretch of ponderosa pines. When morning broke, he stayed far from the roads, and it wasn't until later that day, when hikers captured footage of Jim halfway through Joshua Tree National Park, that the world discovered Jim had come out of hibernation.

In the video, Jim could be seen striding high overhead, and then pausing and stooping low to the ground. At first it appeared like he was bowing, or tying his shoe, but as he stood up again it was clear he had picked something—or rather someone—up in his hand.

The popular names of trees, by the way, often lead to interesting stories. For instance, according to *Arboreality: Understanding Trees to Understand Ourselves,* published (naturally) by Astoria Books, ponderosa pines take their name from their ponderous size, which often stopped people in their tracks, sending them into a reflective reverie.

Joshua trees, says the book, were so-titled by Mormon settlers, to whom the trees resembled their Biblical namesake, his hands raised in supplication to God. But why Joshua and not his tribesman who more famously stretched his arms, Moses?, questions the author. Perhaps, he says, so as not to confuse the tree with Moses' burning bush. Or perhaps, says the author, the Mormons were displaying an ear for names, as Moses tree clearly lacks the poetry of Joshua tree.

But in the footage that aired, which I watched on repeat on my computer, it was Jim's outstretched hand, not Joshua's, not Moses', that got people pondering.

And like the rest of the waking world, I watched all day from my office, and tuned back in again the moment I got back home and fed Whitman.

It was late on the East Coast by the time Jim set Kala Dixon down in the beach outside Tijuana. Within moments there were dozens of microphones fanned out before her at all sorts of weird angles.

As the news feed showed Jim confined to a small box in the bottom corner of the screen, the focus and sound stayed with seventeen-year-old Kala. Fortunately, unlike Jim, Kala was the talkative type, and only too happy to tell the world what had happened. How she'd just been sitting there on the top of a small rocky hill, smoking a, um, tobacco cigarette, she said, when she saw Jim approach.

And how she, like, totally bugged the f out before regaining her chill. I mean, she said, I thought he was still in that cave or something, hiding out or whatever, and then there he was.

So she started waving, she said, real gently from her spot on that boulder but she didn't think Jim saw her until he was super close, like almost on top of her, even though he was still also kind of far away, and then how he reached out and offered his palm, how she stepped into it, stood in his hand—one foot on his lifeline, the other on his fate line—as he raised her up high, but how he then seemed not to know what to do with her.

From my bed, I watched Kala tell the reporters how she, like, totally loved the *BFG*, and I thought to myself for about the millionth time how nice it would be if Astoria Books held the rights to that novel.

So I told him, Kala said, to put me on the top of his ear, and he did it!

This last part was no revelation as we'd seen her up there, standing in that crux between his ear and head, or holding on to the top of his helix.

He told me he wasn't wild about the book as a kid, Kala said, but he couldn't really remember the plot. So I told basically told him the whole story, except not that much actually happens in that book, so it only took like five seconds. So then he started asking me all of these other questions.

Like what, the press was eager to know.

Like at first he wanted to know what my favorite books are now. So I started telling him about *Pride and Prejudice* and *1984* and *Catcher in the Rye* and *Jane Eyre*, but he'd already read all of those. It was pretty dope, actually, because he said those were some of his favorite books too. And I was, like, yeah, I guess they make everyone read pretty much the same books in school. And he was like, actually, I was home-schooled. And I was like, no wonder you're such a weirdo. Like in a good way. And then I was worried I'd hurt his feelings but he totally understood what I meant.

Then he was like, tell me your favorite parts and then I'll tell you mine, and it turned out we liked so many of the same parts. Like when Jane first meets Mr. Rochester, and when poor Holden walks alone through the snow to the train, and then can't help but lie to that kid's mother about what a good kid her son is. It was like, I feel you Jim!

And then we were both like, that rat in *1984* is the worst! Which I thought was wild, since Jim is so big, it was hard to imagine him being scared of a rat. But I guess some things in books, it doesn't matter what size you are.

After that we walked in silence for a while. Or rather he walked. And then he asked about me, where I was from and everything, and I told him about myself, and how I ditched school for the day and drove out to Joshua Tree, which I do sometimes, just to be away from everything, and he said he knew how that felt.

He is just really, really sweet. And we're almost the same age. And I asked him what else he wanted to know and he just said Anything, he said to just tell him whatever, just to talk about my life. So I told him about my family and my dog and how I was trying to decide about college, and whenever I stopped talking he was like What else?

So I kept talking, which is one thing I'm good at, I think maybe I'll go to school for speech pathology or something, and we were like practically flying through the desert, and I was afraid he couldn't hear me with the wind, but he could hear me just fine, and it was absolutely magical. And then he asked me where I thought we should go.

And I was like, I don't know, the ocean? Because I love the ocean and the beach and, you know, I figured it was big and easy to find.

Kala continued her story, but we'd all seen the footage: after hours of the unusual images of Jim moving with lightness, smiling, occasionally speaking as he bounded across the desert

with this pretty young woman atop his right ear, we'd watched as he arrived at the beach, crossed the sand in two strides, and waded into the ocean.

That was when he reached up, took Kala gently in his hand, and brought her in front of his face. Then we watched as he put her inside his mouth.

But he didn't close it.

I'd found myself then thinking of another of my favorite books we've published, *Srorrim No Snoitcelfer*: *Reflections on Mirrors.* It's a book I often reflect on, particularly the opening line: For practically the entire history of humanity, from its birth 300,000 years ago until just about 5,000 years ago, if a person wanted to see himself, he had to look at water.

But as I watched Jim, as I lay in bed with my own jaw hanging open, my own mouth wide like the rest of the world's, like Jim's, I thought of a different section of *Srorrim No Snoitcelfer,* from a chapter called Self Portrait in a Flat Screen Mirror. In it, the author discusses the psychological phenomenon of mirroring, how humans often subconsciously take cues from and mimic people they're watching, and how this can occur as one watches TV.

I reached to my bedside table, lit a cigarette, and smoked.

Though it wasn't Jim who was smoking on screen. It was Kala.

It was my idea, Kala said. I thought it'd be cool to give it a try. How often do you have the chance to get a giant high? How often do you get the chance to get high in a giant?

The image, captured by a helicopter in front of Jim's face, showed Kala, sitting on Jim's tongue, smoking and exhaling a cloud of smoke into Jim's mouth, and how, as Jim inhaled, her long seemed to be drawn inwards with what she'd exhaled.

After a few breaths like this, Jim raised his hand to his mouth as if blowing a kiss, and Kala stepped into his palm, her legs slimy. Jim lowered his hand to within feet of the water, which reached his mid-thigh, and Kala swan-dove into the Pacific.

He said he didn't feel anything, which was too bad, Kala told the reporters in Tijuana. Then we swam around for a bit and he asked where to next. And so now we're here.

So just to be clear, the reporters asked, she was there of her own free will, because it's illegal to transport a minor across state and national lines without—

I'm older than he is, Kala exclaimed. And even though he was carrying me it was more like I was transporting him, you know?

And had she called her parents? How could I, she asked, you guys swarmed me the second I got down. Hi, Mom! Hi, Dad! Hi, Rodney! Love you guys!

Her plans now? I guess I'll take the next bus to Lake Havasu, she said, unless someone wants to give me a lift in their chopper…

And Jim? Had he told her where he was heading next?

Actually, said Kala, he offered to take me home himself, but I said he should keep heading south. I said if it was me, if I didn't have school and could go wherever I pleased, I'd make for the Mayan stuff in Mexico, and Machu Pichu and the pyramids, and not turn around til I got to pet the penguins in Tierra del Fuego. But you know, that was just like my opinion. He should do whatever he wanted.

And he said that was just the problem. Without school or work or whatever, he never had anything he had to do, so every day he had to wake up and make a decision. But that the Mayan stuff sounded pretty cool. And he always wanted to see penguins.

So go, I said. Although I'm not sure they'll let you pet the penguins. Then again, who could stop him? And then he thanked me and put me down. My only regret is I didn't ask him to prom.

Jim, she said, if you're listening, give me a call!

For a full account of her time with Jim, I'd recommend the two books Kala wrote, *Swan Dive: The Story of the First Girl Jim Plucked* and her sequel, *Smoke in Our Mouths, Smoke in Our Eyes: The Truer Story of My Fake Day with Jim Swan*, both available from Astoria Books.

Jim didn't make Kala's prom, but he did meet some penguins. Over the course of the rest of the year, he thumped all the way south, all the way to the colony of King penguins, all the way to the very tip, to the sign that announced he'd reached the end of the world. Then he turned around, retraced his steps, more or less, all the way back to the northern reaches of Canada, from one extreme to the other, a human Arctic tern.

It even timed up with an avian migration, departing Patagonia at summer's end in February, passing through Panama in April, and arriving in the Alaskan arctic in August.

Along the way he kept growing, covering more ground with each step, gaining speed with each day.

He kept picking up and dropping off passengers, too, plucking (which became the word) up anyone, anywhere, except children or the elderly. Some theorized Jim displayed this preference for fear of causing injury. Others speculated it was more a concern about their potential incontinence. As it turned out, it had more to do with passengers' ability to tell a good story.

Along the way, his Spanish came in useful. And as easily as he picked up people, he picked up Portuguese. He had a gift for languages, people said. Or was it just that he was such a

good listener? Or was this a kind of ultimate immersive experience: having the language delivered all day to your ear, passengers saying the word for everything that you pass: town, house, farm, cow, river, city, ocean, home.

Almost every day, Jim picked up someone new, always asking the same first question: Wanna go for a ride?

A small minority turned him down, most often wordlessly, one even bursting into tears.

But this was exceedingly uncommon, as it seemed that most people, once swept up, felt safe, secure in his hand. A hug from your best friend is nice, said a Nicaraguan woman, but this is better. His hand is like a cocoon, like the perfect bed, like you're being supported and floating at once. It's like feeling the warmth of the sun, that light pressure of heat, mere heat, all around you at once.

And once they agreed—with a nod or yes or a *sí* or a *sim* or just a big, goofy grin—he'd tuck them atop his right ear and ask where, and also that they tell him something.

Tell me something, Jim would say, tell me anything. Tell me a story. True or made up or some mix, I don't care.

He's kind of like a cabbie, said a man from Medellín, the first thing he wants to know is where to. But then, instead of paying him pesos, he wants words, he wants his ears fed.

And so up and down the Americas, people started awaking with a new dream: merely to see Jim, but to join him in the sky, to tell him their life stories, to entertain him with what entertained them.

To lure Jim, towns prepared and advertised feasts, spreading the word on the ground in the hope that Jim's passengers might tell him about it when they had his ear. Indeed, much was awarded to passengers who lured Jim one way instead of another. And like potential suitors,

cities spruced themselves up in hopes of wooing him to spend a night in their bedhouse. Slums, if not necessarily solved, were swept under the rug.

Hotel chains offered massive rewards to passengers who convinced Jim to stay in one of their bedhouses, but increasingly Jim chose less polished accommodations which were offered, along with local gifts, by various municipalities. Jim could be spotted sporting t-shirts or baseball caps bearing the names of places he'd spent the night. One day he drank coffee from a thermos that said Lima on it in a thousand-point font. He amassed massive keychains though he had no keys, thimbles (sometimes curiously similar to a local park's trash cans) though he did not sew. But pins he affixed to his backpack. And giant lighters were of course always appreciated. (A snow globe given to him in Santiago he left behind, as the people-sized people inside gave him the creeps.)

There were other slight missteps. In Cochabamba, they tried to build him a bed with actual springs, but the mattress went haywire. In Montevideo, they made Jim a hammock. The result was earth-shaking, and embarrassing, both for Jim and the city. But far worse for everybody was Belize, where something Jim ate did not agree with him.

But if you could host Jim successfully, the world took notice. In fact, two tourist industries boomed simultaneously: one anticipating his arrival (drawing people hoping to see and perhaps be plucked by Jim) and another following in his massive footsteps (drawing those taken in by images of obscure destinations). Travel agencies even created continent-wide "piljimages."

Despite being several years old, Astoria Books' *Get Lost! Uruguay and Get Lost! Suriname* became surprise bestsellers.

Yet, for all the civic pride and pesos and reals at stake, there was another reason for the grand offerings of fresh milk and hot coffee, the soups, sandwiches, salads, and smokes, the

outhouses constructed the brass bands and cheerleaders bussed in at breakneck speeds over backcountry roads. There was also the way, the next morning after breakfast, that Jim, with a pleasant smile, would arc a thank-you wave over everyone's head before he left.

It's like a blessing, said a mechanic in Ecuador, except it means something, because he you can tell that means it, that he'd come back and help you if you needed it. Maybe blessing is the wrong word, then, he said. Maybe it's more like the sign of a promise of friendship, which is even better.

Back up through Mexico and the States roamed Jim before returning to his native land, where the PJS met him warmly. In fact, millions gathered outside Vancouver to throw him a birthday party—the date of his homecoming happened to fall on the First—and millions more across the country celebrated as well. They even built him a brand new bedhouse, bedecked with balloons, batting, and a *Bienvenue!* banner.

For gifts, they replaced his old rainbow backpack and sky-colored jacket, both of which he'd outgrown months before. Thank you! bellowed Jim from inside the bedhouse, after unwrapping his gifts.

You're welcome! replied a million joyous voices, converging from a million directions all at once, all together, at one central point, on their native son.

And by the way, called the voices, just look how big you've grown! Why, the last time we saw you, you were only this tall!

Onwards, northwards, he went, reaching Juneau, then Anchorage, continually plucking people up every morning and putting them down somewhere by night. It was one of those passengers who put it in Jim's mind—or in Jim's ear, for by then he'd grown so large as to start

placing passengers *inside* his ear (a practice he picked up both for their safety and so he could hear them)—that Jim could just pop over to Russia.

The image on Russian televisions of Jim standing there, bearing west, staring off across the Bering Strait, was enough for Moscow to offer to bear him across by battleship, but no one relayed that message to the kid.

Instead, he turned around again, embarking on a final cross-country tour of Canada, every day plucking another Canuck, each recounting new stories.

By now, Jim, at his new height of about 300 feet, had outgrown almost all the old bedhouses, and the logistics of constructing new ones were untenable for most towns. Worse, it was then that people started getting the Jimmies when they saw him, as if 300 feet surpassed the limit people could handle, tripped some wire in people's brains, making most people that saw him shut down.

People posted pics of themselves, of each other, falling to their knees, but it was a challenge to record it, as the second the one taking the picture saw Jim, he too almost always lost control of himself.

This, too, presented a paradox about Jim, as people now found themselves unable to capture a picture of him, his appearance instead capturing them, arresting them in mid-motion, as if in a picture.

Meanwhile the weather, too, turned freezing, as winter set in. With ever-fewer bedhouses for Jim to take refuge in, a passenger suggested he try the domed stadium in Toronto. The baseball season's over, the passenger said, might as well park your ass in the ballpark.

Jim arrived outside the field and the passenger relayed the request to the authorities. In under an hour the great, arcing roof was retracting, and Jim climbed inside, as if stepping into a clamshell.

He lay down, they closed the roof back over his head, and now it was Toronto's turn to surround and serenade Jim. In a way it suited everyone well: Jim got to relax inside, and Torontonians got to know he was in there while still being able to move around themselves.

Jim liked the arrangement so much he hung out there all the next day, and stayed there again the next night.

Jim spent the following night in the dome in Montreal, then stayed in stadiums in Detroit and Syracuse. The next thing we heard, Jim had agreed to an invitation from the mayor to come down and visit us again, and then there he was the next morning, heading down the Hudson River, making a beeline back for New York.

FIFTEEN

That's as far as *The Times* article got. I might have embellished a bit here or there, but that's the benefit of a book over the news: you don't have to cut stuff out just to squeeze in some ads.

In the meantime, I'd only gotten as far as the middle of the East River. The train had been stalled there for a while. But that's the benefit of a slow subway ride: you get a lot more reading done.

We sat there, me and sixty strangers, in silence, perusing newspapers or magazines or emails, or else playing games on our phones. Just a couple were reading books. I wanted to believe that, with Jim coming, book readers had for the day set aside their novels for the news.

But books of all sort were becoming scarce sights, as too were magazines and newspapers. Reading *material* was on the way out. Our reading, our words, how the world was mediated to us, had become immaterial.

Then again, here we are, you and I.

With only this—immaterial—between us.

Several passengers dozed, one against my shoulder. Sleeping and commuting simultaneously—let's call it taking the Z train, riding the slumberground—must drastically improve cities' productivity. Think of the time it saves, how much more rested the workers. And how magical it is to nod off one place and awake another, the world moving above you as you sit still.

It's also a pleasure to watch others around you nap, to observe their peacefulness, their vulnerability. And how lovely to feel yourself trusted as your neighbor slumbers beside you,

against you, to feel the weight of their trust against your shoulder. To feel useful, part of a community.

Also, when people sleep, you can stare at them with abandon.

Best of all, sleepers are silent. They let you read. They leave you alone. So the subway car is something like a library reading room, everyone reading or dozing or focused on their screens, everyone in his own little world, yet sharing a space. Beaches are like this, too. Whitman (the poet), I'm confident, would have agreed. I recall a letter of his, excerpted in *Waltz, Whitmen:*

> *Long ago, when I was a young man, Coney Island was a favorite spot. At that time Coney Island had not the reputation it has now—it was then a desert island—nobody went there. Oh yes! when I read, it was in solitude, never in frequented places—except perhaps, Broadway, on the stage-coaches, where a little more noise more or less made no difference. Have you never tried it?*

Indeed I have. And I recommend it as well.

Of everyone onboard, I was the one making the most noise, struggling to refold my *Times.* Ah, but it's such a lovely racket, that, like wind on a kite. There's something in it, I think, of the soundtrack to dreams: like one ear rustling along a pillow case, sheets creasing across the other.

The paper, like most things nowadays, is shrinking. Which is too bad. Over the last century, it's dwindled from 18 inches wide to 16 to 15.5 to 15 to 14.5 to 13.5 to the current 12.

I remember, as a child, seeing my father on the couch, hidden (hiding?) behind what seemed like a square yard of gray, a great fence of tiny words there was no getting around.

I like the feel of the pull of the folds on the fibers, the air resistance as I turn the page, the smear of the ink on my fingers. And I like it when my fingers smear the words, articles running into articles, everything running together, or else outward, into the white space.

Laid out, *The Times* appears as a map of Manhattan, the columns lined up like city blocks. The text like tops of buildings, the gutters the avenues, the leading—those thin horizontal spaces between lines of text—like city blocks. The left margin's the Hudson, the right the East River. The masthead's up the Bowery's down.

If so, the large daily photo under the masthead could be the south end of Central Park, putting the Plaza toward the top right, just under the day's lead headline about Jim: "Whole city holds breath as Swan approaches."

My office near Union Square would be practically in the center. And there I would be just then, on the train, off to the right of the bottom of the page, in the vast nothingness around the island of news.

What a cute little city, I thought, looking down at the paper from a Jim's eye perspective.

Or you could take another tack, put the paper parallel to your eyes, see the city as if from the Staten Island Ferry, or the Statue of Liberty, or the west side of Red Hook, with each of the paper's columns like a skyscraper, lined up side-to-side. Now the text the architecture, the buildings composed of letters, the windows of words, the stories the stories.

Finally, without a sound, the train started moving. Slowly, then picking up speed.
I read a piece about how one of the mayor's aides had managed to sneak an invite to Jim in Syracuse two nights prior. I turned to *The Post,* which hated the mayor, and so was in a tough spot. Despite the threat to the city that Jim represented, it was hard to be anything but excited by the prospect of his return to town.

Every hotel was suddenly booked, which meant money for restaurants and cabs and shows. The promise of that day being different, of impending irregularity, only to the

anticipation. What's the use of paying through the nose for every square foot of space, one woman said, if we can't look out the window and have a little excitement?

Even the sportswriters seemed okay with it. The back page of the *Post* announced, "Finally Someone Worth Watching at MSG."

Maybe *The Journal*'s JimTracker™ had the right idea. Looking around the train, there was an energy—at least among those of us awake—like that before a storm. If something bad were to happen, it would happen to someone else. Like any disaster, if one came, it would be watchable.

The world, we'd come to realize, was like a rollercoaster: it only *looked* scary, it only *appeared* out of control. In fact, everything was safe, everything was monitored, everything was pre-screened and screened and then shown on a loop. The world was increasingly childproofed. The world was a show. You couldn't get hurt if you wanted to.

It helped that Jim had shown remarkable delicacy in his travels. He tended to stick to cities' outskirts, walking in rivers and along shorelines, and when he had to walk on a street he moved so deliberately he'd sometimes hold his great foot high above the ground for several breaths—waiting patiently as little old ladies, oblivious, doddered across the street—before he'd set his heel down.

If anything, people craved a little destruction. Wouldn't it be cool if he let Wall Street have it? Or leveled Times Square of its corporate gimmickry? Maybe he'd raze the Port Authority or Penn Station! Or better yet: one's own office building. Now that would be a real Christmas miracle.

Yet, warned *The Post,* despite Jim's attentiveness, there was sure to be trouble. Traffic accidents would be unavoidable. And who knew to what stupid lengths people might go, what danger they might do to themselves, in their attempts to get plucked.

The real question, though, was if New Yorkers would come down with the Jimmies. Somehow I was sure that if Jim thought New Yorkers were going to be bowled over, he had another thing coming. Sure, as a cute, thirteen-foot-tall, ten-year-old kid, we'd been taken with him, but that was old news. We'd become used to seeing him on TV every time he left Canada. Besides, we were New Yorkers; he could walk clear down Broadway, I figured, and only tourists would spot him up there.

But of course I hoped to see him, and I hoped whatever ibiwisis there were in New York would see him, too. Not that I knew any. You didn't run into many of them in the publishing world, or in the city in general. Mostly you heard about them through friends who'd grown up far away, and whose friends or family back home argued about Jim's existence over Thanksgiving dinner.

When I got out of the subway and climbed the stairs up toward Union Square, though, and climbed the stair up to Sixth Avenue, you couldn't tell where anyone was from, or what they believed. And it was clear New Yorkers were no more immune to the Jimmies than they were to the flu.

Up and down Fourth Ave and Broadway—from where, evidently, Jim had recently been visible to the west—the scene was as bad the footage had been from Syracuse, Montreal, and elsewhere: traffic at a standstill, cars wedded at their bumpers, smoke rising from hoods, but the streets eerily static and silent.

Along the sidewalks and throughout the park were people standing, seated, or on bent knee, but all motionless as the stars in Grand Central, as the clouds in the public library. Snow was falling upon them, but disappearing the moment it landed. The only folks moving, it seemed, were those like me, who'd only recently arrived on the scene.

We, the few moving, walked around the immobilized as if they were statues in a museum, gawked at them as if they'd become artwork, or architecture, or performers. They barely blinked. Their jaws still ajar, their breath—like the smoke from the hoods of the cars and the sewers below and the chimneys above—plumed in pale clouds before fading away.

I picked my way through the people and traffic, stepping over spilled handbags and limp totes. It wasn't easy: it turns out it's tough to move if no one else is. It was as if everyone had become a tourist, all of them blocking the sidewalk at once.

Then I stopped, too, stood frozen myself, surveying the scene, until I turned and followed everyone's eyes to the west, to where he must have been, to what was just empty sky.

At my feet, a Salvation Army tripod lay toppled, its red legs splayed and glistening, its attendant kneeling beside it, his bell silent motionless in his hand.

The cars were, too, were silent. The drivers and passengers, still wide-eyed, stared out through their windshields and windows, or at reflections in rearview and side-view mirrors, into the sky-blue sky.

I'd been avoiding the Salvation Army attendant for the last week, crossing on the far side of the street, even, just so as not to make eye contact, to not feel guilty for not donating. Though it's a church, I would tell myself, organized like an army, headed by a CEO, and they're homophobes! And I was already barely covering rent. And I'm cheap. And that horrible, clamoring bell drove me bonkers! Donating would just encourage him to keep up that racket.

But now, his eyes distantly focused, his bell mute, I approached and asked if he was okay. He seemed needy himself now, vulnerable. Though possibly I was more curious than concerned.

He made no sign he'd heard me. I waited, but he just blinked. The snowflakes fell onto his gray hair and red apron and disappeared.

I thought of another poem about snow I like, even shorter than the Frost, which also rhymes, or at least seems to. It's called "Snow" and it's by Frederick Seidel:

> *Snow is what it does.*
> *It falls and it stays and it goes.*
> *It melts and it is here somewhere.*
> *We all will get there.*

That's it. That's all there is.

A lot of folks don't like Seidel's poetry. They don't like it just because it's bad.

But sometimes what else is there to say?

Snow is what it does.

Poetry is what it does.

Hey, guy, I said, bending to lift the attendant from under his elbow, you okay? Can I help you up.

No, he whispered.

So I crossed the street and hurried up to my office, hoping perhaps I might have a better view from up on the eighth floor.

I found a clutch of my colleagues huddled around the two west-facing windows, though several of them were consulting their phones. Snowflakes didn't so much fall as sail by, as if happy to lengthen their lives by delaying their descent.

What's going on? I asked.

A few of them turned around and vacantly greeted me, and I caught some of them peeking at my pants.

You missed him, said an assistant in marketing named Heather, as if she was both informing me of the fact and confirming it for herself. We all did.

When? I asked.

Maybe fifteen minutes ago, apparently.

Where is everyone?

A lot of folks called in sick. Theo and Mary and Freddy are working from home.

More faces I guess I won't see today, I said. Or maybe they don't exist either.

Heather looked at me to see if I was kidding. Then she turned her attention back to her phone, open to a map of Manhattan with a red dot to the southwest of us, a bullseye with two thinner lines around it.

He's either in the Hudson or on the Parkway now, she said. Closing in on the Battery.

Maybe he's stuck at the entrance of the tunnel, I said. Traffic's a bitch out there.

Lindsay says she saw him, said a young editor named Theresa. She says she's going to work from home today, if that's okay.

Sure, I said, of course, even though Lindsay worked in foreign rights and I had no authority over what she did.

I stood there a moment longer, rather stupidly, staring out the window like everyone else, though it struck me as foolish. The sun reflected brightly off opposing windows, and I felt my headache return.

I'm going to try to get some work done, I said. Let me know if he returns, I added, rather pointlessly, and retired to my office.

I shut the door behind me, grateful for once not to be blessed with a window. I'd have been glued to it all day, probably, and besides, I needed the dark. I kept most of the lights and my computer turned off, silenced my phone—not that anyone was texting me—and pushed my pens and press releases and sales reports and prospectuses and manuscripts and books and half-ironic photo of Whitman (my cat, not the poet) to the corners of my desk.

I took off my boots, laid my head on my hands, and closed my eyes.

I awoke maybe an hour later, my mouth linked to my desk by a spaghetto of spit. I'd had a strange dream—clearly inspired by Jim—that the whole world had grown huge, that I alone was tiny, everything enormous above me, including my coworkers, looming so high I could only sense they were there. I stood on a manuscript atop my desk, shouting at them, but they didn't hear me, or ignored me, or else I'd lost my voice.

It was somewhat pathetic dream, both in its implications and as a display of my imagination, but I was pleased to have dreamt it; I hadn't had a dream in years. Or else I never remembered them. Maybe I needed to nap more, I thought, or break my sleep into segments, turn the long blocks of unconsciousness into short paragraphs with white space in between.

I was so impressed with myself that I took my notebook from my tote bag and recorded what I remembered. But the dream seemed to evaporate faster than I could set it down. I somehow suspected the more I tried to remember it, the more it receded, racing ahead like the tortoise before Achilles.

So after filling a page I did what any sensible person faced with such a paradox should: I returned my cheek to the cool, wide flatness of my particle board desk, and went back to sleep.

This time I was out for hours, but whatever I dreamed—if I dreamed—was gone.

I found the rest of the office deserted, the lights off, the computer screens showing sheer mountain cliffs and ocean sunsets and desert dunes and kaleidoscope mandalas to no one.

I could feel the low pile wall-to-wall carpet through my socks. I'd never walked around the office shoeless before. The carpeted cubical walls looked a tiny bit taller.

Through the windows, day was fading, the sun's arms spread wide. The snow was still falling, but faster. Or had it quit some point, left and returned? The streets were still clear and glistening black, but the tops of cars and lampposts were covered white.

I flipped on the lights, bathing the furniture and monitors and keyboards and mouses in the wan halogen tinge, bringing them into color just long enough for me to lace up my boots, pull on my coat and hat and scarf, and turn the lights off again behind me.

Crossing Union Square, everything looked back to normal. It struck me as similar to a scene hours after a parade, after the streets are swept and the barricades hauled off, when the seam briefly opened in the city's usual fabric is cinched back up, good as new, as if it never happened.

The subway ride home was emptier than usual. I wondered who had seen what. I typically do the crossword on my return commute, but instead I closed my eyes. Almost at once, new details from my dream surfaced—or possibly I was inventing them anew.

I awoke somewhere under the East River, I took out my notebook, and continued where I'd left off. Deep in that place where the debris of dreams float about, grasping at images and words to describe them, my stop passed me by. Almost all Brooklyn came and went—first above me, then around me, out the windows as the train had risen aboveground—without my notice.

When I looked up, the doors were closing against violent gusts of snow. Beyond, snow was piling on the platform, on the benches, obscuring even the map of the system.

We'd surpassed all the named streets, all the numbered streets, and most of the alphabet avenues. We were ditching Avenue U for Avenue X. After which there'd only be Neptune Ave before the end of the line at Coney Island.

Neptune, the farthest planet from the sun. Neptune the god of the sea. And yet they give you Coney Island-Stillwell Avenue after that. As if Coney Island were actually an island in the ocean. Or as if to assure you that you could leave land behind, and remain still well.

Or as if Coney Island retained any of the wellness, of the stillness, of its desert island days of Whitman's youth.

I thought to get out at once, to brave the snow on the platform at X Ave, to catch the next uptown train back home to Whitman and the warm glow of the evening news.

But I sensed I still had a few more pages in me, and anything not set down would be whisked away by the wind and snow.

Snow is what it does.

It was as good an excuse as any, at least, and I was searching for one, for reason not to head home, to romantically ride to the end of the line, to go to the last place I should in a snowstorm: the beach.

I have to sit and write, I said to myself, which meant I suddenly had to see the ocean, to see the hidden sand, its tan expanse whitewashed, woolen with the snow on the first day of winter. Those Berryman lines bounced into mind:

> *All the world like a woolen lover*
> *Once did seem on Henry's side.*

Was a woolen lover a good thing or bad? I never quite could decide. But I wanted that now, sought it, sensed it at the snowy shore.

So I stayed put, rode with the four other remaining passengers to the Coney Island depot, where there's always a strange pause—an inexplicable delay—before they finally open the doors. I stood at the doors and waited, my notebook tucked back in my tote, my hat back on my head and hands back in my pockets. Finally the doors slid open and I stepped out into the snow.

Outside the station, waiting to cross Neptune Avenue, I watched a couple, both in black parkas, pause, embrace, and kiss under a streetlamp, their bulgy forms melding together, lit yellow and red from the streetlight and stoplight.

I walked toward the Wonder Wheel, daguerreotype silver against the dark sky, its high, iconic signage a strange sight behind the falling snow. It looked old, dated, as if in a black-and-white photo, the flakes like flecks of dust.

I was reminded of a very fine book Astoria had recently published, *A Brief History of Dreams,* which describes how, during the age of black-and-white movies and television, most people reported that they dreamt in monochrome. It was only with the advent of color movies that people began dreaming in color.

However else you want to think about Dorothy's time in Oz, says the author, it must be appreciated for helping to usher in a new age of technicolor dreams.

There's no record of how people dreamed before film and television, no one thought to ask. The book—by the author of *The Inclined Plane: How Reality Ramps Up Our Dreams,* and *Popular Oneironautics*—conjectures that before moving images, dreams very probably played out in color. Static images (like photography, paintings, drawings, and sculpture), he supposes, would be unable to compete with the dreamer's full-color experiences.

Color-blind dreamers, of course, being an exception, as even today, as one would expect, they report dreaming in only the colors or shades they can see. And yet they, like the rest of us,

can dream of other things they cannot see, suggesting that unseen colors—and perhaps unsmelled scents and untasted flavors and unheard sounds and unfelt feelings—might exist outside the realm of the imagination. Amazing, no? That we can dream an object—or a person—we've never seen, but not in a color we've never seen?

If the author's supposition is accurate—if for eons people dreamt in color, then switched to black and white, and then reverted to color—the ramification is shocking as well: we still may be (most likely are) dreaming in the dark ages.

In other words, not only do we dream based on how the world is mediated to us, rather than on our actual experiences, but that our dreaming is impoverished by the limits of our technological ability to reproduce the world to ourselves.

Imagine the kinds of dreams our descendants may have, the book suggests, based on better TV. Perhaps we are all dreaming in 2D, and that we won't realize it until we start watching all our TV and film in 3D. Or perhaps our dreams will be told more by smell if/when we start broadcasting smells along with images. Our technological innovations are limited in part by what we can dream, and our dreams are limited by our technology.

He calls this the Fluz Paradox: we can't dream in full fluz until we create fluz. Until then, all we can do is stretch and twist and shift what we know in the ways we've already come to do.

And yet, says the book, some people still report dreaming monochromatically, even those born after the advent of color movies and TV. Was I one of them, I wondered, ascending the snow-covered ramp to the boardwalk, the whole world around me now in black-and-white.

Though it was not yet six, the sun had long ago set, the falling snow only visible as it slanted through the pockets of light hanging from the streetlamps**.** The wind blew cold, blurring the world, the night like gauze.

With each step, the accumulation clumped beneath my boots, and the planks below me creaked. Foolishly, I feared the boardwalk might give way, as if a few inches of snow and my weight alone could overpower this strip of ipe that, every summer day, regularly supports thousands of bodies; as if I was the first ever to walk there.

Soon, the wooden beachside fence, itself coated with snow, fell off, turned and sloped into the sand, granting access to the shore. I was heading east, toward Brighton Beach, but I veered off to the right, stood at the top stair, the water.

The beach spread out before me as an endless sweep of white, an inverse swath of the black sky above. Beyond the beach, the ocean, too, spread out in darkness, so that the horizon seemed to be not where the ocean met the sky, but where the snowy beach met the water. Past that, there was only darkness, no telling sky from sea.

Never before had I been at the beach in the winter, let alone in the snow, at night. I was struck by the silence, the desolation, and—now that the snow had stopped, or else I was unable to see it falling through the darkness—the clarity of the two-tone landscape.

Why hadn't I thought to do this before? Why wasn't all New York down here, at Coney Island, at the Land without Shadows, at the Point, seeing this serene strangeness?

The sight was like the images of the moon landing, just white and then black, but without the flag or Neil Armstrong in the foreground, or the earth in the background, nothing but empty white ground and infinite darkness beyond. But it was like before the moon-landing, since there was not a footprint anywhere to be seen.

The three snow-covered stairs looked like a ramp, like bedsheets slanting off a pillow. I descended slowly, worrying each step, unable to see the wood, holding tight to my tote over my

shoulder. How foolish! How many times had I taken these slight stairs every summer? How far did I think I might fall?

I headed not straight for the waterline, but on an angle; both, I think, to increase the number of steps—each one a little breakthrough, the delectable crush of the boot through snow, then feeling below it the sand, itself giving way, compressing, conforming, yet hidden, invisible beneath the veneer of sheer white—and to prolong that distinct brand of pleasure which only intense anticipation is capable of providing.

Whenever was anyone in New York City as alone as I was then, as far from anybody, savoring such nothingness in every direction, so ecstatic with wonder at the solitude one could find without leaving Brooklyn? What New Yorker had last looked so far in any direction—any direction but backwards—and seen and felt such fulsome void?

I hope I'm wrong. I hope many feel it, daily. I hope for every desperate moment of lonesome solitude in a crushing crowd, there comes soon after such an antidotal experience as mine then.

I stopped and turned and marveled at my footprints, the only stitch-marks in the great white quilt, a diagonal perforation in a great sheet of paper, a dotted line. I'd made a crease.

I wondered if, when the snow melted, my footprints would remain in the sand, if the beach then, like now, would be smooth but for where I'd gone. Probably not.

At the water's edge, wavelets broke whitely, almost silently, laying bare the sand in overlapping arcs for a second or two, just a foot or two at a time, revealing swept-up strands of seaweed like strands of hair, clamshells worn smooth as fingernails.

One shell, large and unbroken, glistened inside-up as the water receded, like a glossy gibbous moon at my feet. Careful to keep my tote dry, I bent to pick it up. I wanted the shell but

also to feel the icy brace of the seawater, so I let my fingers linger as another wave swept around my hand.

I straightened and brought the clamshell, painfully cold in my hand, to my face to inspect it, to use what little light there was, but failed, distracted by the feel of my coat and scarf closing around my throat, constricting my breathing. I gasped, my hat fell off my head, but fell at twice the speed it should have, as I myself was rising through the air.

Noooooo! I cried, kicking, coughing, my voice and body and mind somehow oddly resistant—indeed fighting—the very moment of my rapture.

Soaring higher, shooting skyward, my instinct was to clutch the shell and my tote, as if they could support me, ground me, as if—should I drop either one—I'd fall myself.

My ears popping, the very air in my head seeking escape as my lungs ached to be filled, I tilted my head back get in a breath and saw closing in on me from above Jim's huge head, dark and dim in the night.

Higher Jim brought me until he twisted his hand and pulled me near and there we were, face to face—or rather body to eye—and we paused like that, frozen for a moment. Him looking at me. Me looking, oddly, at myself, my reflection in his pupil.

Heya, he said. Wanna go for a ride?

Unable, for a host of reasons, to summon a verbal response, I give him a thumb's up.

I couldn't see his mouth, but I could sense he was smiling. He brought me around and, with surprising gentleness, deposited me in the gooey cave that was his right ear.

Hi, I heard him say. From inside his ear, his voice sounded like it was coming from all around me, from every direction at once. It was as if it was he who was in my head.

Hello? I said. Can you hear me?

Yeah, he said, loud and clear. You don't have to yell.

Ah, sorry.

It's okay. I didn't hurt you did, I?

No, I said. I'm thrilled to be here. I'm honored.

What are you doing out here?

I don't know, I said, as I wondered myself what I was doing in there. Instead of snow-covered sand, I was now standing in snow-covered earwax. I told him I guessed I'd missed my stop on the train. And what about you, I asked. Aren't you supposed to be at the Garden?

I don't know what they were thinking. They opened up the loading dock, I couldn't have fit in there six months ago.

Should've seen that coming, I said. Nothing ever goes right over there. Sixty-point lead, sixty story man, it doesn't matter: they blow it.

Huh, said Jim.

So what are you doing at Coney Island? I asked. I wanted to make a crack about the freak shows there being more of summertime thing, but I checked my tongue.

I picked up a guy who thought I should try the airport, Jim said, but that didn't work either. Then I wandered over here and picked you up.

You sound like a cabbie, I said.

Yeah, I've heard that before.

What was wrong with the airport?

Something about flight patterns. You have any ideas? I'm kind of tired.

Man, I wish I could put you up at my place, I said, but the sofa bed's got this bar that nobody finds comfortable. Let me think.

So there I am, standing in his ear. I felt torn: I was scared shitless of falling out, but I didn't want to touch anything, either. And even if I could've sat down without getting wet with snow and wax, I felt awkward about it. The same way you feel awkward about sitting down in someone's apartment the first time you walk in, until they invite you to do so. But was I supposed to wait for him to tell me take a load off, to make myself at home, to say *mi cóclea es su casa?*

Not that I could see that far in. But through the darkness I could just make out the edge of his ear canal, like the entrance of a crawl space.

Jim was facing south, out over the water, as I'd been before he plucked me. So now, looking out, my view was perpendicular, westward, towards Manhattan. I looked over, wondering if there was a place in there for Jim. Every place I considered was either too small, or didn't have a way in.

But the sight of the city was stunning. It felt like I was on a flight home, coming in low over the Hudson, heading for LaGuardia. I always flew home at night, in a window seat, on the left side of the plane, just for this view. But this was different. We were stationary.

Which, come to think of it, made it more like another experience: viewing the Panorama, scaled-down model of the entire city, building for building, all five boroughs, up at the Queens Museum, which you can walk around and view from above. It was strange, the actual looking more like its model. I hadn't been up to see the Panorama in a while, not since the summer, as I tended to go see it after Mets games or U.S. Open matches.

Aha! I said. The tennis center, by LaGuardia! There's a stadium with a retractable roof. You can step right in.

The second I said it, I regretted it, because I knew it would work. And while it felt nice to help the kid, I'd really just been excited to solve a problem, to show off what I knew of New York. And I'd solved it so well it meant we'd go up there, and that'd be that.

So when Jim asked which way to head I told him I had a favor to ask first. I know it's cold, I said, but can we just hang out for a second? In fact, I said, I lied to you before. I came down here because I come down here at the end of every day, just to be alone, to enjoy a moment of peace and quiet and have a smoke.

You want me to put you down?

No, I said, unless you want to. What I'd like is to just take a second and have a smoke, look out at the water, enjoy the moment. Then go. I always see you on the news, I said, hauling ass all over the place. Which is cool, but you must be tired as hell. I mean, you don't mind if I smoke up here, do you? Because God damn, I can't think of a place I'd rather have a smoke, if it's cool with you.

You smoke? he asked. Practically no one smokes. All these people keep telling me to quit. It's like, it's a free country.

Exactly, I said. In fact, I share your taste for coffee and milk, too. Except I don't eat much bread. At my age, I try to lay off the carbs.

How old are you?

Thirty-four.

I'm seventeen.

So I've heard.

Hold on a second, he said, which I thought meant he wanted to think about it, but he meant it literally, as suddenly we were moving. I grabbed onto a ridge as he turned and tiled his head.

I couldn't see what he was doing, but soon I heard the sound of the lighter, and smelled the tremendous scent of his cigarette as he exhaled.

It's weird, he said, everyone knowing so much about me. And I know so little about everyone else. And sometimes I think about how everyone down there can see me, but how I can't really see any of you. It's exhausting, always feeling like you're looked at. Sometimes I wish I was invisible.

Well, I said, lighting a cigarette myself and realizing that this would be one smoke I'd remember for the rest of my life, if it makes any difference, I can't see you too well right now either. And that's the thing about this place. There's no one around.

What's your name?

Ludy. Ludy Bosko.

What kind of name is that?

Czech. Or Moravian. It's short for Boskowitz.

I mean Ludy.

Oh. It's short for Ludwig. As in van Beethoven.

So you're real name is Ludwig Boskowitz.

No, my real name is Ludy Bosko.

I like Ludwig better.

Well, do me a favor and call me Ludy. Unless you want me to call you James.

Okay, Ludy, he said.

To see the ocean, I had to peek my head out around Jim's targus, that bump protruding from the outside of his ear, as if I were peering around the edge of a cave. In fact, I sort of was doing just that, as the small hollow I was standing in was called the concha cavum.

While concha cavum comes from Latin, targus arrives from the Ancient Greek for goat, so-called since it looks like one when a tuft of hair sprouts from it. (Jim's targus, though the size of a goat's head, was still bald as a baby's.)

With my free hand I smoked, occasionally resting my elbow on the edge of Jim's antitragus, the smaller bump just a little lower down. My feet I kept planted in the muck coating against the small round groove below, known as the intertragic notch.

I didn't know any of those names then, which is too bad: one should probably be aware when one is occupying another's intertragic notch.

Much more on my mind was the view. Looking down, there was the white of the beach stretching to the black of the ocean, and the ribbons of white-tipped wavelets shifting the border between them slightly back and forth.

The back half of Jim's right boot was on the snow, the front half in the water, though far above the waterline.

My own boots were half covered in the slushy mix of trampled snow and dirty, puddled water in the notch. Even with the mess, I felt bad treating the kid like a sidewalk, so I reached my arm out and tapped the ash from my cigarettes over the abyss, the cinders flurrying off. Each time I exhaled, I imagined the sight, like those cartoons of characters so angry that smoke shoots out their ears.

Which was silly, because Jim was so calm, so serene, I could feel it.

This is nice, he said. I can see why you like this place.

Yeah. It's actually sort of warm up here. And hard to beat the view.

Hey, he said, do me a favor and don't look for a second?

A second later I heard a great splashing sound down below. I peeked out and saw the end of silvery arc curving into the ocean.

Nice to finally get a moment's privacy, he said. I've been holding it in for hours.

Especially in this town, I said, as I suddenly heard sound of helicopters closing in. I guess we should get going.

We flicked our cigarettes almost simultaneously. His somersaulted into the ocean. Mine disappeared into some snow piled on his shoulder.

Ready? I asked.

Let's do this, he said.

Couldn't be much easier to get there, I said. Just turn right and follow the waterline. We'll skirt the edge of Coney Island, then the rest of western Brooklyn, then Queens. Where there was room—like along beach, or beside the Belt Parkway—he walked on land. Otherwise he seemed fine walking in water, which never reached his ankles.

He—we—moved so fast that no one could congregate below or ahead of us. Several choppers swarmed, shining spotlights in our eyes. Between their bright light and propeller noise, they seemed like film projectors, each projecting a movie upon us, like we'd become screens.

We rounded Bay Ridge, scooted past Sunset Park, Jim's feet increasingly finding purchase on the old shipping docks that jut out into the water like stepping stones, like a staircase north.

This water here's called the Upper Bay, I said. And there's a great little old bar down there to the right, and that's Owl's Head Park. Then I pointed out Green-Wood Cemetery.

Basquiat's buried there, I said. So is Leonard Bernstein and Boss Tweed. And another composer I like, less famous: Louis Moreau Gottschalk. A lot of famous New Yorkers and Brooklynites are buried there.

Is Whitman buried there?

Oh, shit, I said, I forgot! Remember that book you read about Whitman? *Waltz, Whitmen*? That was me!

You wrote *Waltz, Whitmen?!*

No, I mean, I helped get that book to you. I worked on that book. My publishing house published it.

You're an editor?

No, not exactly. But I love that book. Actually, I live right over there, in Red Hook. And I have a cat named Whitman.

You have a cat called Whitman?

Yeah.

But wait, said Jim, is the real Whitman buried over there, in that cemetery?

No, he's in Jersey. But he used to visit the cemetery. It was a popular place for picnics. Once, in a huge carriage drawn by six white horses, he took a bunch of orphans there, and they played all day and rolled on the grass and drank lemonade and ate strawberries and cake.

He took orphans to the cemetery? They ate cake in a cemetery.

It wasn't that unusual then. He also loved Coney Island. It was his favorite place as a young man.

I wonder if he ever went there in the winter, said Jim.

Me, too, I said. Me, too. Hey, do you want to see my cat? You want to meet Whitman?

Jim slowed down momentarily, as if considering it. Thanks, he said, but it's been a long day. Truthfully, I'd really just like to lie down.

Like an airplane returning to the city, we continued north just east of the city. Except instead of looking out to the left, over Manhattan, I faced east, over Brooklyn, and located my building as we soared past it.

It was as if I was looking down at myself, imagining myself at home, beneath the snow-capped roof, in my apartment, reading on the couch, perhaps, with Whitman asleep on my lap. Or there I might be, already in bed, watching myself on the news, as I blew by overhead.

And blow by we did, Jim bounding along piers and parking lots, towering over the cranes in the port, or stepping here or there in the East River. Soon he was arching one leg, then the other, over the Brooklyn Bridge, as I marveled at the rows of white headlights and red taillights, bumper-to-bumper across the span.

In fact, the traffic was at a standstill on every street, everywhere I looked, as if the city had learned that the best way to deal with Jim—to survive Jim, to enjoy Jim—was not to move. It was part like they were encountering a bear in the woods, and part like were watching a bear balance on a ball.

Except for the helicopters, Jim and I seemed to be the only ones moving in all of New York, maybe the only ones in the city alive.

Then we careened past the carousel, over the Manhattan Bridge, and rounded the Navy Yard. All the while I kept up my tour guide act, telling Jim briefly about the building of Brooklyn Bridge (and Roebling's case of the bends, a.k.a caisson's disease), about Dumbo's name (being an acronym and not an eponym for that other famously macrotous mammal), and

then, of course, about my cat's namesake, who lived and worked right down there, in Fort Greene.

In fact, I said, you see that big park over there with that lit-up column in the middle? Whitman pushed to have that park created.

I think I remember reading about that, said Jim.

What else do you remember about him?

I don't know, Jim said. But I remember wanting to know more. Like everything I read just made me want to read more. Especially his poetry, because there wasn't much of it. Like his poem "Song of Myself." Do you know that one?

I do, I said.

You do? Could you tell it to me?

I meant, I said, I know about it. It's a really long poem. I know the first few lines, and a couple others here and there. But just the most famous parts, the parts that are all probably in *Waltz, Whitmen.* The rest I'd have to pull up on my phone.

That's okay, he said. Just tell me what you remember, if you don't mind.

So I did. So we made our way past Williamsburg, past Greenpoint, and over Newtown Creek into Long Island City, crossing into Queens as I recited Whitman.

It opens like this:

> *I celebrate myself, and sing myself,*
> *And what I assume you shall assume,*
> *For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*
>
> *I loafe and invite my soul,*
> *I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of grass.*

And then much later he says

Listener up there! what have you to confide to me?
Look in my face while I snuff the sidle of evening,

I love that part, I said, I snuff the sidle of evening, and then he goes on

(Talk honestly, no one else hears you, and I stay only a minute longer.)

Do I contradict myself?
Very well then I contradict myself,
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

Oh yeah, I remember that last part for sure. But what does that other part mean: I snuff the sidle of evening?

Yeah, I admitted, part of what I like about that is just that: how it's kind of hard to pin down. But I explained how snuff is a contronym, that it can mean two opposite things. Snuff can be to breathe in, like to inhale tobacco, and breathe out, like to extinguish a candle. And how a sidle is an act of coming along side something or someone, like to cozy up to someone.

So the way I see it, I said, if you take it literally, night is there, by his side at the end of the poem, and he's either breathing it in or out, he's accepting the end of the day and also extinguishing it. He's either accepting the end of the day so that he can go on with the listener and have fun during the night, or he's rejecting the advance of the night so he can hear a story. Either way, he's telling the person he calls the listener to confide in him, to speak up, or to confide physically.

So it makes sense, I concluded, when he says perhaps he contradicts himself.

I am large, said Jim, I contain multitudes.

Exactly.

So is that his best poem?

Well it's his most famous. But there's another one I like more, called "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry."

But by now we'd crossed over the 59th Street Bridge, the Triborough, the Hell Gate, and were curving around the north edge of Queens. Where before I'd been facing north, now I was facing south. Somewhere, miles in front of me in that direction, was Coney Island.

Closer, the helicopters had kept pace with us, forming a sort of ring around Jim, at least as far as I could tell. There were so many strange aspects to being a passenger, not the least of which was the restricted vision. Unable to ever see what was happening to Jim's left, or even to hear it directly, I kept imagining the scene, building it out from what I perceived from the right.

The choppers finally fell back, like guards delivering us to royalty, as we approached LaGuardia. I noticed for the first time the many planes circling higher in holding patterns. "The stadium is just ahead," I said. "Right there next to the baseball stadium. We should probably try to make this part snappy."

Jim picked up the pace along a well-lit stretch lining the north side of the Grand Central Parkway, the traffic here as bad as everywhere else, cabs backed up for miles, but I took some comfort in knowing no one would miss their flights out. Besides, a moment later Jim skidded to a stop and took a seat cross-legged in a plowed patch of the parking lot outside that other destination I so associated with summer, the Mets' stadium.

I was still over a hundred feet off the ground, but I suddenly felt practically my own height again. I guess I always was my own height, but you know what I mean.

There's no beach in the area, but they do have a boardwalk, running from the stadium parking lot to the Willets Point subway stop across to the tennis center. From one boardwalk to the next. From one point to another.

That's the tennis stadium over there?

That's it, I said. And see that big metal globe just past it? That's the Unisphere. Dedicated in 1964 to man's shrinking world in a growing universe, or something like that.

You know so much about the city, Jim said.

I used to bring girls here on dates. In the summer the park over there is full of grassy lawns and fountains and food trucks. And that ugly building over there's the Queens Museum, which holds the Panorama, a model of the entire city. Add a ballgame into the mix, and you've got the who shebang: sports, food, culture, flowers. There's bound to be something for any kind of girl.

Shebang, said Jim.

I laughed. There's a zoo, too, I think, I said. But I've never checked it out.

What are those tall things? Jim asked.

Observation decks. Though they've been closed for decades, so you can observe them from below, but you can't go up there and look down. They've gone from offering a view, to being the view.

They look about ready to fall over.

Well don't lean on them, I said. Or use them as chairs. Although I suppose you could use the taller as a table for your breakfast tomorrow.

And that big low thing that kind of looks like a crown?

That's the Tent of Tomorrow.

It looks like the Dump of Yesterday.

Ain't that how it goes, I said.

Sirens closed in all around us, like it was the end of an action movie. Our time together was coming to a close. Before long, some EMT would be covering me in one of those tin foil blankets, and then the credits would role, and I'd stop being a character and just be an actor again.

Well, I said, it's been real.

Thanks for the directions, Jim said.

What happens now?

The PJS will probably be here soon. Those dudes are fast. I can put you down if you want. Or you can wait.

What happens if they can't open the stadium?

I thought you said they could.

I mean just in case.

He said he wasn't sure, so I told him I'd wait just in case. Anyway, I said, don't have anywhere to be, which was true. Besides feeding Whitman and having some dinner myself, I didn't have many pressing plans. Besides, I added, I'd kind of like to see what it's like to step onto center court.

So Jim sat on the ground and smoked and I sat in Jim's ear and smoked. I offered to try to get a large file made for him of *Leaves of Grass,* but he said the PJS had stopped setting up reading theaters for him.

I'm sure if you asked, I said.

That's okay, he said.

Where are you going tomorrow, any idea?

Nope, he said. Depends who I pick up. I kind of like the randomness of it. Although, he said, if it's not somewhere warm, then I might not be up for it.

Can I ask you something? I asked. I had about a million questions for him, but the one I chose was: What do you talk about with people? Like when you pick up these strangers? How do you make friends with everyone?

I don't know, he said. I don't really think I make friends with anyone. I just ask them to tell me something, whatever. Sometimes people don't know what to say, so I tell them not to worry, it doesn't even have to be interesting. I mean, it helps if I'm interested in it, but I'm pretty much interested in hearing about whatever other people are interested in.

Like what, specifically? I asked.

Like all kinds of things. Everything you can imagine. Except poetry. No one ever wants to talk about poetry. You're the first.

Sorry about that, I said. Occupational hazard. Anyway, I don't even know what I was saying before. Truth is, I don't really understand most poetry. Probably even the poems I think I understand. I just like reading it and thinking about it. And talking about it, maybe, I guess.

Yeah, Jim said, me too, maybe.

I was just about to tell Jim about *The Fear of Poetry: How to Boldly Embrace the Most Bewildering Books,* published by Astoria, which suggests that readers should welcome the confusion of poetry as a model for living. Who can see a tree, says the author, and fully understand it? And what fun or magic would the world offer if one could? And should one stop looking at trees, or flowers, or butterflies, because one is afraid one might not fully grasp them? Of course not. One stops and regards any of those things, just as one should a poem, because

once in a while, for a split second, there is beauty, beauty even in the face—or rather because of!—the lack of complete comprehension.

A lot of poets took issue with that book. But poets take issue with everything. That's their job. (Literally. As *The Fear of Poetry* points out, the word "verse" comes from the Latin *versus*, a line or a furrow, probably alluding to the way a plow turns, since it's related to the Latin *vertere*, to turn. Making versifiers, by definition, adversarial. As opposed to prose writers: prose coming from the Latin *prosa*, straightforward. Although even *prosa* comes from the Old Latin *prōvorsus,* which comes from *pro-*, or forward, and *–vorsus*, a past participle of *vertere*, to turn. So they're related. Also coming from *vertere?* Vertical. Which arrives by way of *vertex.* Vertex now means the highest point, or the topmost part of the head. But *vertex* used to mean whirlpool. Vertex used to mean vortex.)

Not that it mattered what the poets thought. That's the other thing about poets: they're inconsequential. (See Auden, in his poem for Yeats: "For poetry makes nothing happen.") Even if every poet the world-over had loved it, that book would still have sold bupkis. We knew it and we published it anyway. Why? Well now that's a dumb question. If there's anything that makes even less sense than poetry, it's the business model of a publishing house.

Publishing in general, I often think, makes nothing happen. And that's to say nothing of book publicists. I mean, look at the day I'd just spent at work.

Like I said, I was going to tell Jim about that book, about not worrying about totally understanding poetry, but I didn't. I was cut off by the arrival of the cops of the firemen and the ambulances, their sirens all wailing, their lights flashing like crazy, the black and white world awash in color, streaked in blue and red.

The sirens were so loud I covered my ears, and then Jim covered his ears, kind of cupping me in, throwing me into silence and darkness for a moment. When he removed his hand, the world was quiet again.

Next to us, the lights around the ballpark came on, and then they evidently figured out why we'd shown up there because this they lit the tennis stadium up. Then they started opening the roof. Everyone kept their distance from us the whole time.

Jim got to his feet. It was a straight shot to the tennis center along the boardwalk, but I was sure if Jim stepped on it, he'd bust his foot through it. And since they'd built the boardwalk as an overpass for a large subway train depot, I took Jim on a slightly roundabout route.

The extra quarter mile meant I got to enjoy an extra ten steps as a passenger before he swung one leg, then the other, into the tennis stadium. He sat down cross-legged, his knees past the base lines. An image captured by one of the helicopters at the time ran on the cover of the *News* the next day with the headline: (Table) Tennis, Anyone?

Around us, scores of people were busy removing blocks of seats. About half of those assembled wore bright yellow vests with PJS emblazoned in bright red across the back, and bright yellow nightcaps, from which dangled red pom-poms.

I'd never seen the PJS before. Either they had some deal with the press—which seemed impossible—or else the press was so taken with Jim's presence whenever the PJS arrived that the media never looked at anything else. This too struck me as incredible, especially considering their bright yellow and red outfits. Unless this was the first time they were outfitted like that.

The one book about the PJS Astoria Books had published, *No We Lay Jim Down To Sleep: Two PJS Tell All*, hadn't mentioned anything about clothing.

Nor was there any mention of this curious headgear in *Whence the Rabbit: A History of Hat Matters and Mad Hatters,* published by Astoria Books a year before. This scene would have fit in well in the book's chapter on nightcaps (which are long, it turns out, so that they can be wrapped around one's neck, like a scarf, but present less of a choking hazard). I remember that chapter well, as it included an amusing poem about them by the author:

> *All right chaps in nightcaps drink nightcaps all right*
> *And all tight chaps in nightcaps sleep tight through the night.*

Discussion of these PJS' hats could have also suited the chapter in *Whence the Rabbit is Pulled* on pom-poms (which were first attached to the tops of beanies, it turns out, worn by men on submarines, to protect their heads from low door frames). I wondered if the PJS were referencing this fact—the wool ball as protection, as a sort of mobile pillow—as pom-poms were not traditionally part of the nightcap.

Regardless of the degree of their sartorial savvy, the PJS moved with quick, decisive motions, their backs to Jim. But many of the other workers, it seemed, couldn't help but turn and take a look. And once they did, as with the folks I'd seen that morning at Union Square, it was as if they'd seen Medusa. They stood there like pillars of salt, until one of the PJS came by and waved his own salts under their noses, bringing them back to life.

Meanwhile I kept quiet, hoping Jim might forget I was in there. It had grown colder, windier, or else there was less to distract me from the chill. I moved further inside his ear and found it warmer in the crawl space of his ear canal. I curled up, bringing my knees to my chin. The wax was thick, less oily, almost doughy, and dark. Soon I was sweating, so I took off my scarf and opened my coat.

You can just sit on my finger if you want, Jim said. I saw his hand raised to his ear. Please make sure you've got all your belongings.

His voice, despite my being farther inside his ear, boomed louder than before, frighteningly so. At first, I figured this was because I was several feet closer to his mouth, was getting the soundwaves reverberating through his skull. Perhaps this was so, but it's also true that the ear, starting with the spiral-shaped auricle, works like a vortex, focusing and amplifying sound. There was also some low crackling sound, which seemed to be coming from further inside. I wondered if that was the workings of his inner ear. The old hammer and stirrup model I recalled from high school biology.

I grabbed my wax-coated scarf and tote, but then paused.

Hey, I said, before I go, do you want to hear the end of "Song of Myself?" They're good parting words.

Sure, he said, as long as it's not too long.

I pulled up the poem on my phone, the screen glowing bright in the dark, and I read:

> *I depart as air, I shake my white locks at the runaway sun,*
> *I effuse my flesh in eddies, and drift it in lacy jags.*
>
> *I bequeath myself to the dirt to grow from the grass I love,*
> *If you want me again look for me under your boot-soles.*
>
> *You will hardly know who I am or what I mean,*
> *But I shall be good health to you nevertheless,*
> *And filter and fibre your blood.*
>
> *Failing to fetch me at first keep encouraged,*
> *Missing me one place search another,*
> *I stop somewhere waiting for you.*

Not bad, right? I said.

But Jim, by way of a response, only emitted a light snore.

If I were a more daring man, I might have tried to climb down. If I was a more honorable man, I might have yelled in Jim's ear, woken him up, and had him put me down. But instead I

stayed still, stayed silent, as the lights went off in the stadium and the roof finished closing, sealing out the night, like a blanket.

I stripped off my coat, arranged it like a pillowcase over my tote bag, laid myself down in the canal, and joined Jim in sleep.

Sometime later, I—we—awoke with a start, as Jim jolted his head.

Ludy? he said quietly. Ludy?

Through the darkness outside his ear, I saw his finger, which he brought gently to his intertragic notch. Ludy? he repeated.

Then he sighed and lowered himself and lowered himself onto his back. Fortunately he slept like that—supine, his head facing straight up—or else I would've spent the rest of the night standing up, or upside-down. But instead I, too, was horizontal, but prone, in the warm muck, like a baby.

[END OF PART I]