

New Haven Review

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Game Theory, or, Not Exactly the Boy of My Own Dreams

An awkward essay about a deeply ambivalent band with a very unpromising name, including notes on nerd camp, fear of sex, Northern California area codes, and autobiographical digressions, with a book review near the end

Stephen Burt

1. Silent Football

The term “gifted children” dates back to the 1920s, to the unsavory, sometimes racist world of early IQ tests, but it took fifty years to find its niche: “gifted and talented” summer camps became widespread and self-sustaining during the 1970s. The Center for Talented Youth (CTY), sponsored by Johns Hopkins University, opened its doors in 1979: about 9,000 students, aged twelve to sixteen, now attend CTY on six campuses each summer. According to its official website, those students discover “challenging educational opportunities,” in Latin, mathematics, neuroscience, and so on. According to reality.org, maintained by alumni, they learn an argot (“flying squirrel,” “CTY-S”) and a set of diversions found nowhere else, such as “Silent Football,” “a complex game involving an invisible football, hallucinations, and tattling.... One CTY-er solved a Rubik’s Cube on stage while reciting the first 200 digits of pi.”

Also in 1979, Alternate Learning, a band formed by the teen-aged Scott Miller, of Sacramento, released its first and only single. Miller went on to attend UC-Davis, where he started the band Game Theory in 1981. Ten years after that, Game Theory took over my brain, declaring themselves the secret second soundtrack to almost everything I write; their records have remained in that position ever since. Miller’s bands, Game Theory and its 1990s successor the Loud Family, did not make the music that brought nerdy kids together (that would be They Might Be Giants, or Yes, or maybe Glenn Gould). Instead, they made songs that described what those kids could do, and could not do, as they grew up; songs that asked whether their lives of intelligent, gleeful, not quite asexual in-jokes could continue, and whether they would fail at whatever came next. With their dictionary words and coinages (“efficacious, B-follows-a-cious”), their synthesizers less than or equal to their ringing guitars,

Miller's songs begin from a kind of nerd home turf, and sometimes they stay there; more often they feel about to outgrow it.

This is an essay about that feeling, an attempt to describe it in my own life, with personal anecdotes stuck here and there below. If you (like many literary readers) began in a mental world dominated by mathematics, or by science fiction, but did not wholly remain there, it may be a feeling you've had too. But it is also an essay in appreciation: an unavoidably awkward attempt to describe some unavoidably awkward pop music, an attempt to pursue that feeling through Scott Miller's music, as it informed Miller's whole career, and therefore to recommend some of that music to you. Mostly, for better or worse, I'll stay with that music, and try to describe a part of my life as refracted through art made earlier, by somebody else: it is, for better or worse, what critics do.

It's a feeling I find in the music itself, sans or pre-words, in its arrangements, its hooks, its ambivalence about clean, clear, synthetic pop and about the dirty charge of rock and roll. But the same feeling can drive Miller's lyrics as well. "I've Tried Subtlety," from *The Big Shot Chronicles* (1986), follows a party run by "MIT-grad alleycats with time on their hands," at the Victoria Hotel (a real hotel in Berkeley) to which "all the kids from 916" (Sacramento and Davis) show up; Miller has joined them, but can't seem to join in their fun—he may be too old, or too lovelorn, or too self-conscious. "Gifted children link your arms in rhyme," the last verse implores, as the big guitar rises beneath it: "better make this world while still it gives you time." Pounding along, for a while, like any teen anthem, "I've Tried Subtlety" works so memorably as a song because it fails as a call to arms: each verse, each break, goes on a measure longer than we expect, as if to accommodate second thoughts.

"I've Tried Subtlety" follows a fragile promise, or a premise, not unique to nerds: that the gang of kids with whom you might belong, who share your tastes and habits, can make whatever you like stay with you for good. That promise—that nerds' special powers and codes can lead to social and sexual success, that Silent Football

can empower adulthood—becomes the subtext to Miller’s whole glorious, brittle, melodious body of work, beginning with the aptly named *Alternate Learning*, and ending (the end seems implicit in how it began) without a big hit, amid a cultish internet following, in a book about music other people made.

2. Rational Records

Game Theory released seven EPs and LPs, changing lineups with almost every one. They stayed in northern California while Miller’s early allies moved to L.A.; found national college radio attention around 1985, and broke up after a fractious national tour in 1989. High tenor vocals and big clear guitars linked the band to Big Star (whom they covered) and to 1980s college radio acts like the dBs; proliferating melodies and all too cerebral words set them apart. “We were fairly close to both the R.E.M. jangle camp and the L.A. psychedelic revival camp,” Miller recalled, “but the dealbreaker in both cases was that we had prominent synthesizer. And of course we weren’t within a country mile of synthesizer music that was actually selling, like New Order.”

No, they weren’t: The synth lines weren’t the kind you can dance to, and the people the songs portrayed found it hard to dance. They are, almost all the time, songs about overthinking it, anthems for people who think they think too much and try too hard, who feel at home (if they ever do) only among like-mindedly wordy souls. The tension in Miller’s songs—it’s never resolved—between guitar-driven pop and keyboard-based New Wave is like the tension between heart and mind, between a nerdy identity never fully embraced and a fear of something more.

Most of the characters in Game Theory songs meet the criteria Ben Nugent in *American Nerd: The Story of My People* (the best of several recent books on the subject) sets out: they are “passionate about some technically sophisticated activity,” using “language unusually similar to written Standard English,” averse to overt

aggression and confrontation, “favoring logic and rational communication over nonverbal, nonrational forms” (Miller called his own label Rational Records), and interested in new machines. Miller put all those qualities on display, along with “self-loathing” (another of Nugent’s ways to spot a nerd). He wrote on his own website, “I definitely sound like a nerd when I read my own writing.... I’ve also got mild techie geek tendencies.” When a fan asked, “Where does your fascination with oddball noises and offbeat sounds stem from?” Miller answered, “Being socially inept as a teenager, maybe. There certainly wasn’t much social cachet in making field recordings of random noises at school, but I remember skulking around doing that.... I just wanted the sound of a drain pipe or something.”

Miller’s songs never sounded like drain pipes—they were eclectic, but never avant-garde. Nor did they sound like pipe dreams. If most pop hits are either uppers or downers, Miller explored self-conscious mixed feelings instead: “I wish that I had two minds,” he sang on the midtempo signature track “24”: “Is it because I’m 23 not 24?” He gives an appropriately light touch to what we now call, alas, a quarter-life crisis, but he also knows its sources are real: having felt so at home while he was in school, he doesn’t know where he fits, or to how to live on his own, in a post-collegiate milieu.

When I was thirteen, and again at fourteen, and again at fifteen, I attended Exploration Summer Program, a nerd camp on the campus of Wellesley College, obviously modeled on CTY. The program still exists: “an Exploration classroom is lively and active,” its website declares. “Physics principles might be illustrated by riding large hovercrafts around a hockey rink, or firing five-foot-tall trebuchets on a playing field.” In the first week of my third year there I met T. in morning assembly; within hours I had decided that I was in love with her rapid speech patterns, with her lustrous brown hair, with her softball player’s body in T-shirts and jeans. We spent most of the next three weeks together, speaking very rapidly to each other about the science fiction we had read, and playing Othello and Scrabble (she usually won). T. presented herself as working class, and her

hometown of Lafayette, California, as a tough place, though its median household income, as of 2010, runs well over six figures. Other campers assumed we were dating.

When I finally asked if we were, in fact, dating, T. explained patiently that she was gay. She added that, given the rough time she had in high school, she wanted to grow up to be a police officer, protecting gay teens and showing them that they were not alone. And then we went back to talking about science fiction, in a language so dense with acronyms and in-jokes as to be almost incomprehensible unless you already shared it.

T. and I may have been inventing an argot, but we were doing so in familiar ways; we already belonged to something you might call an ethnic group. In Neal Stephenson's *Cryptonomicon* the male lead guides his love interest through a video arcade, where "a wiry teenager in tight black jeans and a black t-shirt prowls among the tables with the provocative confidence of a pool hustler, a long skinny cardboard box slung over his shoulder like a rifle. "These are my ethnic group," he explains in response to the look on her face." Game Theory's songs all respond to the look on her face.

3. Champions

Nick Lowe made a record called *Pure Pop for Now People*; Game Theory's first LP, *Blaze of Glory* (1981), could have been titled *Pure Pop for Nerd People*, being so true to the wordy awkwardness (anti-sex, anti-body, pro-computer) of the nerd stereotype, and yet true to the visceral power, the sexual charge, in guitar-based Anglo-American pop. The songs, and the people depicted in the songs, attempted to have fun, to act on instinct, but they knew they were too cerebral to make it so, except with like-minded small circles of puzzle-solvers, drainpipe recorders, synthesizer fans (among whom, for a while, all things were possible, if it could only last). "What will you do now / For fun in bad weather / Will you be lonely forever and ever / It's been a bad year, the hardliners say / For tragic heroes at UCLA"; that

song from *Blaze of Glory* (so I learned in 1992, when I interviewed Miller) would have been called “Bad Year at UC-Davis,” except that such a title would not rhyme or scan. (I should make clear that I make no claims for these lyrics as verse, read off the printed page: I care enough to parse them only because I know them along with their music—if I could, I’d stop and play you that music before you read another line.)

A teen’s sense of social exclusion runs through many of Miller’s early songs, but so does his enthusiasm when (to his surprise) he fits in: “We’re not on the fringe/ We’re dead center,” insists one of his rawest, harshest numbers. These well-educated kids know better than to cast themselves as complete outcasts. Self-knowledge defeats their self-pity, but that defeat does not lead to other victories. It might not even help them get a date, despite desperate measures: “Let’s get out the Twister game and get down on all fours,” suggested “Nine Lives to Rigel Five,” from *Distortion* (1983), though its arrangements are hardly four-on-the-floor. It sounds old-school science-fictional, early-digital, like late Devo, or late Yes. The chorus imagines exile via starship, propelled by what sounds like, not a drum machine, but electronic drums, the kind with hexagonal heads.

“Yes is one of those bands that are really good,” Miller told one fanzine, “and one day it became effective culture to hold a gun to people’s heads and say, ‘You can’t like them, you have to like punk because it’s unpretentious.’ And the world bowed down; I bowed down, to a limited extent.” So did I, when I was 23 and 24. When I was fifteen I recommended, incessantly and (it must have been) annoyingly, the music of Yes: I painted their Roger Dean–designed logo on a denim jacket I wore every day.

Also when I was fifteen, A. invited me out one Saturday night to a house in Alexandria, Virginia, for a role-playing game called *Champions*. The game resembled *Dungeons and Dragons*, with dice and notepads on tabletops, but superheroes rather than chainmail and swords. Everyone else in that house was older than high school age; a few were older than thirty. A’s boyfriend was 24. I went back

to that house about every two weeks for two years. There, I thought, were people who understood me; there were people at once invested in being smart, in solving complicated rule-governed problems, and indifferent to practical rewards (get good grades, get into a good college, earn more). There my new friends could pretend to fly; I could pretend to be a teenage girl who could read other people's minds (and, if necessary, beat them up), and if we spent twenty minutes trying to decide how best to climb a skyscraper or decipher an ancient text, we did it because we liked it, not because it would look good on a report card.

When it is not the name of a rock band, "game theory" denotes a branch of applied mathematics, but also the sometimes obtuse application of that branch to human endeavors—war, politics, sex. It's based (like classical economics) on the idea that people, or states, or companies, are rational actors pursuing their interests in quantifiable ways. It's attractive to nerdy sorts for obvious reasons, and it gives some irony to the band name, since the people in Game Theory songs, on Rational Records, are never rational actors, even if they once pretended they were. Throughout the Game Theory songbook, but especially in *Real Nighttime* (1985), you can hear an anguished concentration on language and its rules ("she'll be a verb when you're a noun"), and on the complementary rules of pop song construction, as if all those rules—once mastered—could help solve problems of love and sex, of friendship and estrangement, of bodies with feelings that have no clear names. (Role-playing games, with their dice and books of rules about super-behavior, offer the same kind of promise, more transparently.)

But the music knows better: it follows problems that words alone can't solve. Sometimes we learn what went wrong, as in the song entitled "I Turned Her Away." But sometimes we can't figure out what the wordy songs mean: Miller's lyrics, however clearly enunciated, can get so complicated that they fail to tell a story, his characters so introverted, or involuted, that we do not know what's up. Yet the overcomplication, the sense that you're thinking so hard

you don't know how to say what you feel (and therefore your new friends have never quite understood you) is also what the songs describe: "efficacious, B-follows-acious," indeed. It's a shock to learn that the song with that coinage, "Here It Is Tomorrow," concerns a young man who learns that he has fathered a child.

Other songs' overt topics stay true to Miller's cerebral innocence. Their context is collegiate, their references literary ("Here Comes Everybody," taken from *Finnegans Wake*) or mathematical: "Like a girl Jesus, she's undefined." Miller's melisma, sliding four notes into the long "i" in "undefined," gives listeners time to pursue double meanings: (1) the boy doesn't know what the girl is really like (since he worships her), (2) some operations—division by zero, for instance, or his dating her—cannot take place in a given system of rules. Math joins up with physics in "Erica's Word," where "Erica's gone shy, some unknown X behind the why... All is soulless today, mass not conserving in the old way": Erica probably turned some of it into energy.

"Erica's Word" is energetic indeed, the should-have-been breakthrough hit from *The Big Shot Chronicles* (1986), which also contains "I've Tried Subtlety." "Erica's Word" even has a conventional video—the band mimes the song, and Miller tosses his hair. He sounds almost happy to be so frustrated, since it gives him a reason to sing; he sounds even happier to be led, or misled, by the charismatic Erica, whom he says he has known since high school, when they were photographed in her car, going nowhere.

4. Falsetto

Miller later called his early songs, dismissively, "young adult hurt-feeling-a-thons." *The Big Shot Chronicles* had its share of hurt feelings, but the album also shows emotional range: exultantly happy, regretful, resentful, worshipful, confused, or hurried, or all these at once, as in "Crash Into June," with its sped-up backbeat: "If I answer to a different hunger / Than the one I did when I was younger/

Please remember that it's still just me inside." One emotion is missing: never does Miller sing about anger at anyone besides himself. Nerd passion, instead, becomes nerd passive-aggression, barbed puns and pulled punches, never more so than on "Never Mind," which brings out the tensions in the repeated line: "The things I do for you girl I ... never mind." That is, (a) "I never object inwardly to all the things I do for you," (b) "I never pay attention to what I do for you (serving you has become my second nature)," and (c) "I expect you to pay appropriate attention to what I do for you (but I know you won't, so forget I brought it up)." Can they go on like that forever? Who knows?

Had Game Theory continued to ascend—as R.E.M. did—the career ladder of 1980s alternative rock, *Lolita Nation* (1987) would have been their *Life's Rich Pageant*, their *Unforgettable Fire*, jumping to nearly arena-level success. But *Lolita Nation* was Miller's least accessible, most involuted, most Yes-like album, a double LP full of academic in-jokes and backwards tape loops, the worst possible place to discover the band. It's awkward and eager and overambitious, much like the people depicted in Miller's best songs, who take too long, try too hard, pursue too many ideas: trying too hard becomes part of their personality, part of their point.

Another part is self-hate. "Lord knows that I'm not exactly the boy of my own dreams," Miller croons in the bridge to "The Real Sheila," *Lolita Nation's* best song, before the two-line chorus: "Nobody knows the real Sheila / I do." He seems to be her chaste best friend: he's one move away from the acceptance, sex, romance that he seeks, just as the songs are always one step, one bar, away from resolving into the kind of guitar pop that really could have climbed the charts. "The Real Sheila" makes a good example, with its fifteen sixteenth-note introduction, its stop-just-short chorus, and its high point just before the chorus: "If I were a girl with dreams, I'd have dreams as big as you please." You can hear in that apology, as it breaks into falsetto on the last note, masculinity as an unwanted constraint, as something that gets in the way.

Being a boy, or a man, usually gets in the way. There is, Miller offers with reference to Sheila and Erica, to a girl Jesus, to Carol and Alison in “We Love You Carol and Alison” (a song full of celebratory bells, though in 1987 they cannot be wedding bells), a balance of body and mind, intuition and reason, available in modern teenage life, but it’s available only to or for (or could it be *from*?) women and girls. On an album called *Lolita Nation*, the real Sheila (who has a room, not a house; who spends a great deal of time on the phone) may still be in high school. And the fantasy in that song is the fantasy commonly held by the male best friend of the cutest girl in school: he knows her better than her boyfriends do, because intellectual connections are more important than intuitive ones, because minds are more important than hands and thighs, because what words say matters more than what bodies can do—except that they aren’t, and they aren’t, and they still don’t.

Two Steps from the Middle Ages (1988) was Game Theory’s last chance for a national hit: if you own a cut-out copy of *Two Steps*, as I do, it probably came with a big black sticker telling you which songs the DJ should play. Had its three-minute wonders come right after *The Big Shot Chronicles*, could Game Theory have become as big as the Cars, the chart-hit band *Two Steps* most resembles? Probably not: *Two Steps* sounds too sad, too much invested in its own defeat. The people in the songs feel too grown up, too old, too self-conscious, too reflective; they entrap themselves further the harder they try to be, as one song has it, “The Picture of Agreeability” (“get that original,” Miller warbles, “far away from me”). *Two Steps* was only the picture of a hit.

Two Steps sounds like the Cars in its textures, though not in the shapes of its songs. It’s also (coincidence?) full of songs about cars: “Rolling with the Moody Girls,” “In a DeLorean,” “You Drive.” Yet the singer never drives, never decides where his friends, or his former friends, go. He sounds more comfortable in school: when you have to instruct people to “make our mistakes young,” as Miller advises with “In a DeLorean,” you are already too old for that advice,

and you might feel as uncool, as outdated, as that high-performance car, now known first and last for its bit part in *Back to the Future*. And if you felt too old, too cerebral, too awkward, at 23 not 24, what do you do with your art once you get past 30? According to *Two Steps* the answer is that you stop making it—but first you show just how much you share with the other grown boys, and maybe a few grown-up girls, who spent their teens overthinking it, just as you did.

5. Analogies

It's time to make explicit the SAT-style analogies that have held this essay together (if it has held together) so far: nerd camp is to high school as synthesizer is to electric guitar as teen life is to adult life as being a girl's best guy friend, her real confidante, is to being a proper boyfriend as innocence is to experience (including but not limited to sexual experience) as amateurism is to earning a living as indie-rock, cult, college-chart success is to the kind of success that makes it easy to quit your day job. In each case the first term seems safer and easier, with clearer rules, and we are supposed to aspire to graduate from it and join the second, whether or not we can make it there. Those aspirations, along with resistance to them, stand behind every one of Miller's songs.

The very conditions, the MIT-grad alley-cat skills, that let you record drainpipe sounds, let you have fun at nerd camp, might (the nerd worries, not without reason) unfit you for adult romantic and economic life. And the very conditions that make Miller's songcraft stand out—overthinking it, uncontrolled allusion, melodic excess—are the conditions that prevent his songs (as against, say, R.E.M.'s) from becoming big hits, just as the conditions that made us "gifted" were the same conditions that (according to the story we told about ourselves, the story we have now been told in retrospect) prevent us from becoming popular, except with one another, in the wordy, rickety, sometimes defensive subcultures we could build.

Two Steps finds its aesthetic peak, and its emotional low, in its penultimate song, “Throwing the Election,” where Miller concludes that all his intellectual work can now get him neither joy, nor love, nor light, nor certitude, nor peace, nor help from pain. It’s simple, compared to his usual fare (you can find the chords on your own piano—I have, and I’m not much of a piano player), because it’s the song where he’s finally come to the end, laying all those odd words down for good, admitting that adult life is less like an MIT-grad alley-cat party, less like a table-top role-playing game, than like a lottery, or perhaps like an election. If you don’t already feel popular, comfortable, confident, if you don’t think you can win, you can’t win: “there won’t even be a fight.”

Game Theory imploded, in part due to drummer Gil Ray’s back problems, in part due to band members’ love lives: singer and keyboard player Donette Thayer, brought in for *Lolita Nation*, left Miller for Steve Kilbey of the Church. “Steve taught me how to groove,” Thayer later recalled; “his objection to Game Theory was that the minute we caught a groove, we would be off on something else (and indeed most Game Theory songs had about sixty zillion chords, forty bridges and two hundred different verses).” She might as well have said that Game Theory were great for conversation, but no good in bed.

I look at the photos in the 1989 Game Theory fan club booklet that prints the words to almost all their songs, and I see what look like photos from nerd camp: Scott on a lawn with high socks and floppy hair, shot from odd angles, and then at a mixing board, and then with sunglasses pushed down over his eyes. (And there is Thayer, all too prominent, eyes right on the camera lens.) Where did they think they were going? At whom is Scott looking? At the mixing board? At the fan club, dispersed, and patient, and long-lasting, as it would become?

The gamers in Alexandria were the first group of people (not just one friend at a time) with whom I thought I had both tastes and interests in common; the first group, too, where tastes and skill and

specialized intellectual proficiency had nothing (so I thought) to do with social class, or with material success in adult life. The second such group (so I thought; so we represented ourselves) comprised college radio DJs and other hangers-on in Boston indie rock, among whom I heard Game Theory for the first time. Both the gamers and the indie-rockers seemed to promise not only devotion to shared interests, but something like independence from the adult economy, from adult hierarchy, what the skeptical sociologist Sarah Thornton calls the “classless autonomy of youth”; in both groups, the supposed independence was partly (but only partly) a crock.

6. Family

Game Theory and Miller’s later band the Loud Family weren’t so different—people who care about one always care for the other—but they remain clearly separate, for me, because I encountered Game Theory, in 1991, as a finished body of work; the Loud Family then became a source of new records every few years, each one unavoidably compared to the best of the old. All but the last were too much like *Lolita Nation*, superb cuts interrupted by digital bells and whistles, redundant moving parts. *Plants and Birds and Rocks and Things* (1993) worked as a cyclopedia (19 tracks) of Miller’s stances and modes: the all too self-conscious show of defiance (“Aerodeliria”), the belated display of inward-turned resentment (“Inverness”), the promise to stick around and enjoy adult life (“Give In World”) undermined by an even better song about giving up, called—with unusual bluntness—“Slit My Wrists.”

That song described living in Berkeley and watching other artists, other musicians, succeed: “The more alone I felt the more the celebrations grew / All the way down Van Ness Avenue... What I need is not cut costs / What I need is a life where I’ve won all the times that I’ve lost / What I need is not ways to go on / What I need is to slit my wrists and be gone.” It doesn’t sound quite like a literal suicide note (though if somebody sent me a letter like that, I’d get

help): it sounds more like a frustrated writer striking back at his unhelpful friends, the ones who have told him and told him, against apparent evidence, that he could still make it big.

Live, the Loud Family had more energy, covering songs without a trace of hipster cred—the last time I saw them it was “The Story in Your Eyes,” by the Moody Blues, played very fast and hard and irony-free. Live shows also brought out the frustration that all the computers on the albums could mute. When you hear the keyboard-driven studio version of “Curse of the Frontier Land,” on *Real Nighttime*, you might believe it’s about California: the pivotal chord change, underneath the line “A year ago we called this a good time,” gets lost in the rush to the chorus. In the Loud Family’s live version, from 1998, later released on *From Ritual to Romance* (2002), the same line becomes a great snarl, and the song turns resentful, even vindictive: the Frontier Land, so long and tough to reach, such a letdown once Miller discovers he got there, must be adulthood itself, the condition in which you’re supposed to make a career and a romance that won’t disappear.

Attractive Nuisance (2003) was the last thing the band owed Alias Records before their contract ran out, and it was understandably billed as a swan song, by a songwriter who had come to specialize in digital nostalgia, vanished futures, all-too-complicated swan songs. It avoided exhaustion by seeking variety, in other band members’ contributions and in Miller’s own songs, from lounge-combo lite-brite to grinding faux-anthems to the kind of midtempo bittersweet tune you hear at the end of an indie date-movie about two young people who can’t quite make it work. “Backward Century,” whose soaring synth line is (like “Rigel Five”) a nod to old science fiction, makes cracks about life in the Bay Area during and after the tech boom: “I look around and see ... the early version of things in redesign; two Stanford student with laptops on the street” create “ten-foot-biocubes” to insulate Miller from any future heartbreak. “Motion of Ariel” (the credits-roll song) surveys Miller’s sense that, having been too young and too analytical, he’s now too old, and too

shy: “I can say what I want to say, I forget what I think is true,” he warbles in the verse, then reaches the crux, behind an agitated electric piano: “I don’t know what the radio wants.” It’s a sign-off and a meta-sign-off, a way of saying (to quote one more Game Theory song), “I’ll drop out; I mean it this time.” And he did; the Loud Family never toured again.

By then, though, the web had made it much easier for Miller’s most serious fans to keep up a cult. That cult turned out to include Sacramento songwriter Anton Barbeau, who collaborated with Miller on *What If It Works?* (2006). It’s Miller’s best album since *Plants*, his sunniest since *Blaze of Glory*, the first where the other songwriter seemed to fit. And it starts by telling us that Miller lacks the visceral, instinctive, partly sexual confidence that stands behind other acts’ hits. It starts, absurdly, by covering the Rolling Stones: “Rocks Off,” a sexy song about sexual deprivation, a decadent, below-the-belt sort of song, introduces “Song About Rocks Off,” a Miller composition whose only certainty (amid rather tangled lyrics) is that he feels too self-conscious to write, though not too self-conscious to sing and play, any song that resembles “Rocks Off.”

Then things lighten up. The title track—co-written with Barbeau—sounds surprisingly optimistic, about its own major-key hooks and about the romance that it seems to describe. So does “Kind of In Love With You,” also co-written; that song relegates the characteristic GT stutter to the drummer and the sinuous over-long riff to the bridge. Childlike adverbs collide, and the words end up not awkward or over-articulate so much as cute: “it’s probably strange but it’s basically true, I’m kind of in love with you”). You can watch both songs on YouTube, in a fan-made video whose footage of gamboling children may depict Miller’s own daughters, Valerie and Julianne. When the gloom resumes, on the Miller-written penultimate track, “Don’t Bother Me While I’m Living Forever,” we hear a literally reverberant bitterness only justified by the facts of his long career: “Oh boy, what a classic show: Someone finally noticed, I know.”

7. History

I have no idea where T. is now; if she had a less common name I might be able to Google her. Two of the other girls I got to know at Explo wrote me letters, and I wrote back, for years. One is in touch with me now (our kids play together). The other one became, in succession, a skate punk who hung out in Harvard Square, a volunteer for radical left-wing causes, a professional photographer with a particular line in pictures of food, and a devotee of Ayn Rand.

A. kept on playing Champions after I stopped: she had much more trouble than I did, by then, in getting along with more conventional kids. I lost touch with her for ten years, then put her, just slightly disguised, into the last poem in my first book, *Popular Music*: “Marie is also known as Ariel, / girl-tamer of horses, unmercifully teased.” She sent an email from suburban Maryland, saying that she heard that I put her into a poem.

To make sense of “I’ve Tried Subtlety” now you need history, though not much of it: Google will do. Davis no longer shares area code 916 with Sacramento, having received its own code, 530, in 1997. Lafayette shared an area code with Berkeley and Oakland until 1998; the affluent town, just east of the Berkeley Hills, now uses the area code 925.

Miller still lives in northern California with his wife and daughters; presumably he still has the software industry job he held in the Loud Family years, when his employers admired his programming skills so much that they let him take months off at a time for tours. Miller wrote in 2008 that while he was still “utterly serious about music, I just respect the buying public’s judgment that it’s not what I should do for a living.” He seems to have stopped recording; his musical interests instead generated, first, a series of columns for the Loud Family website, and then, as he assembled the columns, a book.

Music: *What Happened?* gives Miller’s top twenty-odd songs, Nick Hornby–style, for every year from 1957 to 2007, with a para-

graph or so about each. It's partial (not much about hip-hop), sometimes self-mocking, and alarmingly educational, especially early on. Like any good record-collector list, it's got obscurities (Van Dusen! the Marmalade! "Leinst," by Daydream!) but it's also almost comically attentive to the mainstream, to post-Beatles songs that earned their uncool millions. "My Sharona" is a national monument" (100). So is a deep cut from *Les Miserables*. "Shop Around" (1960) by the Miracles is "really the first song that sounds like the sixties.... The verse comes in and pow, suddenly you're in the world of go-go boots and Ford Mustangs" (16). It's just as technical as it has to be: "Tell Me Something Good" (1974) sung by Rufus and written by Stevie Wonder, is "one of the hardest songs for me to count straight through and not get gutterballed onto the off-count by the verse vocal" (76). And it's funny: in "Thunder Road" (1975) by Bruce Springsteen, "the singer is feeding this poor girl such a banquet of self-mythologizing nonsense as to make one weep" (81).

In a way, the book is the culmination of the attitude in Miller's songs: the hypervocal production of a regretful bystander, telling us what he can't, won't, or can no longer do. It's got a surface of sparkling intellect, and a depth of nostalgia shot through with self-contempt. As it moves past Miller's own teen years, you can hear the tone change, the mood sour; he dislikes the 1980s, as such, and he seems less curious about the obscure music of that period (the music he wouldn't have come across without seeking it out) than he is about music before or since. The Ramones' "Bonzo Goes to Bitburg" (1986) "doesn't attempt an airtight indictment of Reagan ... but it's aces at putting across the feeling of being impotently rankled," a feeling you can find in Miller's own songs. Miller takes it personally that not only his own work, but the new work he admired when he was a touring, or full-time, musician, didn't (except for R.E.M.) make it big. In 1981, "nothing was sadder than watching the dB's Swiss-watch-precision sense of the progression of music history get lost on a generation that just wanted to dress like Adam and the Ants" (110). "Every Word Means No" (1983) by Let's Active "was my

idea of a million-selling hit, and its lack of impact on any but indie circles contributed to my realization that I was getting into the music business at a time when I didn't have the slightest idea what people wanted" (117). (Mitch Easter, who ran Let's Active, produced and played on Game Theory's LPs.)

Popularity, success, not just cult or indie success, must have mattered to Miller, in ways that fans younger than Miller (fans raised on indie 7" labels, or on DIY MP3s) might not expect. Miller hoped for big hits; he had dreams as big as you please. The kid who knows he's popular at nerd camp knows that he won't be popular when he gets home, but will he be popular—will people like him, will they want to date him, or have sex with him, or pay him to do what he loves—when he grows up? Or is nerd camp the summit of something, impermanent in itself, the best he can do?

"It was around 1983 that I felt ushered into the music business a bit, and around 2003 that I felt fairly completely ushered out" (201). So Miller writes à propos of "Milkshake" (2003), by Kelis. He sounds disappointed that his music could never become more popular, even though the feeling of belonging in a too-smart-for-your-own-good niche, the feeling that you're never going to be all that popular, informs almost every song Miller ever made. You can't be all that big if you overthink everything, those songs say, but neither will you end up on your own—you'll be very important to a smaller nest, or net, or Net, of people who take your songs to heart: the same people, maybe, who play silent football, who want nerd camp to last all year.

"He is the poet whose poems I would have written had I been the poet he was": so Helen Vendler has written about Wallace Stevens. Game Theory is the act whose songs I would have written had I been the songwriter Miller has been; their flaws, I fear, are the flaws in me. They might also be flaws in this essay, awkward, self-conscious, leaning on works of art by other people in order to talk about me. But the intellectual distance those leanings produce, the awkward and roundabout handling of our own emotions, is one of

the emotions I mean to depict. Another is gratitude: to A., to T., to Miller himself, and to the other, flawed, never-quite-famous, all-too-self-conscious makers of art who showed me what I could not help but become.

Migrations

Nick Antosca

Desmond tried to watch TV, but every program was preempted by baffling newsbreaks. Weather patterns shifting, whales *eating people?*

He began to drink.

Earlier in the afternoon, his dog had bitten him and the last of eight law school rejections had arrived, so he thought he was entitled to a little merriment. But once he was drunk, things got confusing. Apparently he left his apartment. Somehow he ended up in a neighbor's bathroom, huddled cackling in the shower stall while an elderly couple beat at him with a broom. Then he fled to the elevator and made it down to the lobby, where he collapsed on the marble floor, groaning like an injured moose, head bleeding. The doorman rushed over.

"Get away from me!" Desmond screamed. "I'm fine!"

He managed to get back into the elevator and up to his own apartment, where his dog—a boxer-bull he never, ever walked, since the building didn't allow pets—bit him again.

"Get away!" he screamed, delivering a kick. The dog retaliated. By the time Desmond, reeling and bloody, managed to get into his bedroom and lock the door, he was horribly mauled. He considered calling for help, but, it being his nature to ignore problems, however severe, he swaddled himself in a blanket and passed out. Shortly after daybreak, he woke thinking, *Is it true? Did I really not get into law school?* Then he sat up and saw the blood, the bulging violet bite marks on his arm. His left pinkie finger was gone. It was time to quit drinking.

He rose, light-headed. Twisting the doorknob provoked a fearsome volley of barks from outside. The dog, which had been his father's until his father got too sick to care for it, was waiting out there. Desmond called 911.

Because of the dog, he was told to vacate his apartment by month's end. The apartment, on New York's Upper West Side, had been paid for with his trust fund.

He had gotten twenty-nine stitches (forearm, hand, finger-stump, and scalp), a blood transfusion, and a ton of Vicodin that made him constipated. They hadn't been able to find his pinkie. The dog had been destroyed, but its stomach gave up nothing. Even now, packing up the place, combing the rooms, he found no sign of that finger. Where had it gone?

Another bewildering thing was sobriety. He seemed to have emerged from a soft, dark cave into eternal and cheerless light. The edges of tables were hard. Walls gave nothing when you pushed on them. Everything was so unyielding.

And was he only imagining it, or was there a strange, unpleasant electricity in the air, like before a lightning storm?

He called his uncle.

"August Falklander," said his uncle's research assistant. There was a strange yawning white noise behind her voice; it made him think of wind on the moon.

"This is his nephew, Desmond. Can you put him on?"

She did.

"Ah, hello, Desmond," said Uncle August, sounding uncomfortable. "I meant to call you yesterday, but with the weather and everything that's been ... happening, well, you know. You heard, then?"

"No," said Desmond, confused. "I don't know. The thing is, I decided to move out of my apartment, and I need a place to stay, so I was wondering if I could come to Glimpskill."

There was a pause. "Desmond," said his uncle gently, "I meant had you heard about your father."

"What about him?"

"He broke a collarbone and three ribs and punctured a lung trying to escape. Now he's under restraint. They say he's been seeing Oswald more than usual."

“Oh,” Desmond said.

“Yes,” said Uncle August carefully, “in fact, I was going to call you to suggest you go up. To see him. I’m in Louisiana right now, researching my book, but Brendan’s there.”

Glimpskill was Uncle August’s house and the surrounding seventy acres of dense Adirondack countryside just north of Amsterdam. The Bruening Institute, where Desmond’s father was a patient, lay farther north. Brendan Falklander was Desmond’s cousin.

“That works, then,” said Desmond, relieved. “I’ll go tomorrow.”

He called Brendan to make arrangements, but it turned out

Brendan was in Manhattan anyway and planning to drive back upstate after attending a wedding. Brendan was four years older but also adrift.

They planned to meet at 72nd and Central Park West. The benches were empty and it was a cool day, with the wind tossing wrappers and newspaper scraps around like leaves—New York weather had been strange and schizophrenic lately, full of brief uncertain rains and skies like wet tissue—but to Desmond things still seemed bright and hard, and he wished for a drink.

Brendan pulled up, and Desmond got in the car. His cousin was a dark-haired, charming, evasive man who liked to spend money on jackets. They’d been good friends since childhood.

“What happened to your face?” Brendan said.

“Daisy attacked me. I had him put down.”

“How the f—”

“Don’t ask. I’ve also stopped drinking. And been evicted.”

“Are you missing a finger?”

“Daisy did that.”

Brendan shook his head.

“Have you really stopped drinking, Des?” he said after a moment.

“Yes. I’m sticking to it this time.”

They didn’t speak for a while, until they were out of the city, driving upstate. The radio said that barometric pressure had risen

everywhere and that disappearances were increasing, especially in the cities. Brendan turned it off.

“How was the wedding?” Desmond asked.

“The ceremony was fine. But at the reception, Michael’s mother gave him and Gina a guinea pig. Gina’s niece was playing with some balloons and tying the strings together. Then she ties those strings around the guinea pig. Boom—it’s off. It drifts up in the sky, everybody screaming and pointing, until it’s only a little black speck in the sky, then gone.”

“I wonder,” said Desmond, “does the animal suffocate?”

“I don’t know.” Brendan shook his head, craning forward. “Storm coming.”

Drops of rain smacked the windshield. They drove in silence again, until just outside Garnet Falls, when a large black animal loped out of the gray, rainy woods in front of the car. They hit it, a glancing impact that nevertheless knocked the creature ten feet down the road, where it staggered to its feet.

They got out of the car. The beast stood in the road, hunched, gathering its wits or just glowering.

“What is that, a bear?” said Desmond.

“Is it?” said Brendan.

It watched them. Among the dark, thick fir trees, dusk was beginning to spread.

“Get back in the car,” said Brendan.

They did, hurriedly. When they looked back, the animal had fled; the road was empty. Brendan started driving again.

“What was that thing?” asked Desmond.

Brendan said, “What am I, Ranger Rick?”

Growing quiet, Desmond rubbed at the bandaged stump of his little finger, thinking that if he could only have a whiskey, the world would make sense again.

They arrived at Glimpskill after nightfall and got out of the car.

The moon hung over the black hills like an eye rolled back in its

socket.

Inside, Brendan locked the door and, as Desmond set his bags down in the kitchen, slipped furtively away. “What room am I in?” Desmond yelled. From another room, Brendan called back, “Whatever one you want.” Under his voice, Desmond detected the clink of glass; Brendan was pouring himself a quick drink, out of sight.

Later, upstairs in bed, Desmond lay awake. The pain in his missing finger was intense; his stitched-up scalp and arm hurt, too. He sighed. The bed was too small for his lanky frame; he curled in a fetal position for a while, then finally splayed his legs defiantly out. That was another thing about sobriety: It kept you awake.

After a night of fitful dreams in which he was menaced by a sort of goat-man, Desmond staggered downstairs. He had a desultory breakfast of milk and Wheaties, then stepped outside under a sky full of geese, which seemed to be fleeing something. A low, bulgy cloud carpet hid the sun.

Brendan appeared. “Nice day for a trip,” Desmond said, as they got into the car. Brendan started the engine and backed down the driveway.

The radio was on, more news—*reported sighting the beast more than once, saying it followed the ocean liner for almost—until* Desmond flipped to another station—*increasingly cloudy and there is a winter storm warning in...*

“Winter?” said Brendan.

He turned the radio off. Magnificent pines rumbled by.

The Bruening Institute was a chilly complex of buildings on a hill. The grounds sloped upward behind it and met the forest, and the mountain in the background towered gloomily over everything.

An old woman attended the front desk.

“I’m here to visit my father,” Desmond said. “Martin Falklander. I was told he had an accident.”

An orderly—a short man with stress creases like whiskers reaching

out from his mouth and eyes—led Desmond down a long hallway and up a flight of stairs. There seemed to be no other visitors.

On the second level, the orderly unlocked a door, waving away a young nurse who stood vigilantly beside it, and said, “I’ll wait here—someone always stays outside his door now. If you want Dr. Stergopoulos, let me know.”

“All right,” Desmond said. He went into his father’s room. He saw at once that his father’s death wasn’t far off. Loosely shriveled skin was molded to the old man’s skull, which looked about the size of a small coconut. He resembled a balding, underfed rhesus monkey.

“Hi, Dad,” Desmond said.

“Desmond,” his father said, pleased. His father was strapped to the bed. He was bandaged and a medical brace of some kind was visible under his pajamas.

Approaching and taking his father’s hand—so bony, and the loose skin, good Lord—Desmond was suddenly breathless: This was it, this was the end.

“I’m sorry it’s been so long, Dad.”

“*Has* it been a long time?”

“How you doing? They treat you well?”

“Oh, yes, yes. Desmond, sit. You make me nervous.”

Desmond looked unhappily around the room—which he saw had been recently cleaned, the bedpans emptied—for a place to sit, but saw no chairs.

“Move down, Oswald,” his father ordered, speaking to the edge of the bed. “Make room.”

Oswald, presumably, scooted down. This was the child, supposedly about nine or ten years old, who Desmond’s father claimed to have adopted and to be raising; it had been a deciding factor in his institutionalization. Oswald, as far as Desmond or anyone else could tell, had some sort of crippling deformity that required constant care, attention, and unconditional love. Desmond’s father’s dedication to providing these things had put Desmond in the unenviable position of having a sibling rivalry with a handicapped child who didn’t exist.

But all that was behind him; he resolved just to make the best of what time he had left with his father. “Wouldn’t want to sit on Oswald, would I?” he asked, sitting on the edge of the bed.

“You aren’t,” said his father, “but he’s afraid of you. Why do you have bandages all over your face and your arm?”

“The dog attacked me,” Desmond said. “Don’t worry. It’s nothing.”

“Desmond,” mumbled his father, “Desmond, that’s terrible. Where is Daisy?” He didn’t really seem to register the extent of Desmond’s injuries.

“I found a home for him. A nice big farm.”

“That’s good,” said his father with innocent relief. A moment later, he added, “Sorry about the odor.”

“Oh,” Desmond said, embarrassed. “I don’t actually—”

“They keep me tied like this. I can’t bathe Oswald. I can’t do anything but hold his hand.”

“Ah,” Desmond said. “Well, don’t worry. I don’t smell anything.”

There was an awkward silence. After a while, his father said, “Oswald, don’t pick at your scabs.”

The exact nature of Oswald’s disability was not known to anyone but Desmond’s father, but apparently it was pretty severe. The child had to be bathed, fed, constantly comforted, and sometimes carried from place to place.

“So, Dad,” Desmond said tenderly, “you broke some bones, you collapsed your lung—what happened?”

“I was trying to get out of here,” his father said.

“Uncle August said you were trying to climb something.”

“Yes. I fell.”

“I see.”

“Everyone is leaving.”

Desmond scratched his head, suddenly exhausted. “Who’s leaving?”

“My friends here.”

Not sure whether his father was referring to imaginary friends or fellow patients who had recently been released—or died—Desmond

decided not to press the issue. He stood up.

“Wait,” said his father. “Are you leaving? Please, before you go, if you could—”

“Yeah?”

“Would you bathe him?”

“Oswald?”

“He’ll get sick. He’s only a child.”

“Yeah,” Desmond said. “Yeah. I can do that.”

And so, using a nonexistent basin of warm water and soap and an imaginary sponge, he undressed the crippled boy, bathed him, dressed him again, and combed his sparse hair.

Brendan was waiting outside under a great force of blue-black thunderheads.

“Let’s go,” Desmond said. He could smell liquor on Brendan and knew that his cousin must have a flask on him. They got in the car. Desmond considered commandeering the keys, but he didn’t feel like driving.

“How was it,” grunted Brendan, backing down the drive.

“Fine.”

“I walked around the grounds,” Brendan said, belching sullenly. “Talked to some guy who was having a smoke break.”

“Really.”

“Eight patients escaped in the last two weeks.”

“Eight?”

Having, with some difficulty, reached the road, Brendan angled the car in the correct direction and started off. “He said something’s gotten into them.” He paused. “Oh. I feel a little sick.”

“Something’s certainly gotten into my father,” Desmond said. Suddenly he didn’t want to think about this at all. He turned on the radio.

—urged his followers to remain vigilant for the Dajjal’s arrival. Also today, civil authorities chided Franklin Graham for fueling public hysteria with his claim that the disappearance of Santo

Antão Island signaled the—

Brendan flipped the radio off.

“What is this?” he said. “Like every station is news now.

Where’s the music?”

“My dad’s going to die soon,” Desmond said. “I could tell. I feel guilty.”

“Why?”

But Desmond couldn’t even answer that to his own satisfaction, thinking only that he wished he had stayed longer.

Later, Brendan left the house, and when he returned at dusk,

he had plunged into a worried sulk. He moved from room to room, drinking relentlessly, pulling at his wavy dark hair and complaining.

“Why are all the liquor stores closed? What’s going on?”

Desmond pointed out that there was still a lot of liquor in the house, but Brendan shouted at him that it was running low. “And no one’s picking up,” he said, waving his cell phone like a shipwrecked man. “What’s happening out there? Where is everyone?” He pointed out the window. “I hate it here! We’re cut off.” Abruptly, he said, “I can’t take it. I’m driving to Saratoga Springs. *They’ll* have something to drink,” and strode out the front door, slamming it behind him. Saratoga Springs was over an hour away.

Desmond was surprised to hear the car actually start and go down the driveway. He was suddenly overcome by terrible, lonely claustrophobia. Heroically resisting the promises of the liquor cabinet, he went into the bathroom, locked himself in, and huddled in the tub.

Today, he suddenly remembered, was the day he was supposed to have had his stitches removed. Hauling himself up, he discovered nail scissors in the medicine cabinet and began snipping stitches out of his forearm and scalp, severing knobs and lumps of flesh that had healed over them. A door slammed somewhere. “Des! Des!”

Brendan was pacing the living room, flask in hand, gesticulating fearfully. “Keep the doors locked!” he slurred and sobbed. “Locked,

Des! I got a few miles down the road and I saw something in the woods. It was following the car. It moved like a human being but it kept up with the car....”

It took Desmond a long time to get his cousin calm enough to pass out.

In the morning, there was no mention of Brendan’s breakdown or whatever he had seen. Perhaps he had blacked out and forgotten. They drove in silence back to the Institute. Brendan turned on the radio—

—flocking to major urban areas like New York and Philadelphia. And in Campbell County, Virginia, pathologists have used dental records to positively identify the remains of Reverend Jer—

—and abruptly, savagely, flicked it off. Once at the Institute, Brendan parked outside and slumped behind the wheel with a harassed, hunted look. He said, “Maybe I’ll come in later. If not, I’ll be here.”

“All right,” Desmond said. He went in.

A different orderly led him up to his father’s room. No one was waiting outside the door this time.

“Isn’t he supposed to be under supervision?” Desmond said.

“Look,” said the orderly, “I don’t know where Dr. S. is, but somebody can try and find him if you want.”

“Never mind,” Desmond said.

The orderly unlocked the door and Desmond went inside. One of his father’s arms was newly bandaged, and the old man’s breathing sounded difficult. His restraints had been reinforced. He turned his leathery simian head to Desmond.

“What happened?” Desmond said. “Did you try to get away again?”

“They won’t let me go outside,” his father muttered. “I’ve *got* to get out to the woods.”

Desmond opened the door and leaned back into the hallway to ask the orderly what had happened, but the orderly was gone. The

wind blew a dry leaf against the glass, and it occurred to Desmond that the trees should not be losing their leaves for several more months.

“Sit down,” his father said, gasping a bit.

Desmond looked warily at the edge of the bed. “Is he there?” he asked.

His father looked at him like he must be blind. “Oswald *went*. I told him I’d be along soon.”

Desmond sat down, confused. He smelled urine. “How long have you been here like this?” he asked.

“Oh,” said his father, “a long time. Since last night. I call, but...”

“God *damn* it!” Desmond said, getting up again. “What kind of place are they running here?” He opened the door. The corridor was still empty and he had a sense of accumulated dust, of bad air.

“Hello? Orderly?”

Propping the door, he hurried down the hallway (echoes, echoes) and downstairs. The front desk was deserted. Desmond took a look outside and saw only Brendan’s car, his cousin dozing at the wheel. He turned back. Documents littered the front desk, as if the attendant had stepped away only for a moment. After waiting several minutes, Desmond turned over a paper and scrawled on the back: PLEASE SEND SOMEONE UP TO 214 RIGHT AWAY. MY FATHER IS BEING NEGLECTED AND I AM WORRIED ABOUT HIS RESPIRATION.

He went back upstairs.

“I’ll wait here with you, Dad,” he said, sitting on the bed.

“Somebody’ll be up soon to take the restraints off. These fucking people, man.”

His father released a labored sigh. “Who can blame them? I’d go, too. It’s time. I hope Oswald’s all right.” He lay back, his breathing troubled but his face peaceful.

“What’s that mean, Dad? Where is it you’re so anxious to get to?”

“I’ll find out when I get there,” said his father.

Desmond decided his father was talking about death.

“I’m glad to be here with you now, Dad,” he said.

His father, looking annoyed, said, "It would be helpful if you could cut off these restraints."

Desmond tentatively touched them. They were some kind of synthetic material, secured by little latches that appeared to require a small key.

"I'd need a knife or something. I don't know how to undo them," he said. "Somebody'll come soon." A moment passed. Desmond felt something unfamiliar, something like resolve. With great difficulty, he heard himself say, "Dad, for whatever it's worth, I'm glad I'm here with you now. I never knew what you thought of me, and I still don't, and I wish I knew you better. But I'm glad I'm here."

"Des," said his father, nodding at the restraints, "please. Oswald is waiting for me."

There was, in the tone of that statement, such wistfulness and vulnerability that Desmond turned away from his father, hurt.

"Don't worry, Dad," Desmond said. "He won't have to wait long."

"I hope not," said his father. "Something's coming and I need to be with him when it does."

"Someone will come soon," Desmond muttered. Some minutes passed. The sky outside the window was curdled, unlike any weather Desmond had ever seen. Grumbling to himself, wishing for a drink, he fell into a thin, strange doze.

At once he found himself in one of those precarious dreams that is less an imagined world than a cleverly marked transparency pressed onto one's actual surroundings, the differences so subtle that at first you don't know you're asleep. In fact there was only one difference, and it was so obvious and shocking that at first Desmond did not see it. It was this: Oswald was sitting on the dresser.

He was a hunchback with large black mouse eyes set into a sad, elderly face. His deformity was the kind that causes people to avert their eyes in the supermarket. In a pair of old, greyish Fruit of the Looms, the boy sat rocking on the dresser, clutching something in one nervous hand and looking at the wall with slightly parted lips.

Hey, Desmond said.

Oswald didn't respond, looking for all the world like a small and grotesquely dystrophic version of Desmond's father. His spine was curled like a question mark. Finally, he raised a skeletal arm and held out his closed fist.

Did you come back for him? Desmond asked gently, rising.

Oswald held out his clenched fist insistently.

Do you have something for him?

Sensing that the child didn't have the will or muscle control to open his own fist—the knuckles were white—Desmond gently began to peel back the fingers. They were clenched very tight.

What did you bring? he said. *And where did you bring it from?*
Hm?

He had pried two of Oswald's fingers up, revealing something wrinkled and milk-colored. Acid rose up his throat.

Where did you get this? he demanded. *Where have you been?*

He had Oswald's fist open now. There it lay, on the grimy palm: Desmond's bitten-off little finger, ivory and ruby. The dog's teeth had made glossy red indentations.

Desmond woke up, spitting bile. His father's chest was heaving with sludgy noises. A rope of white foam hung from the corner of his mouth. His father's eyes rolled down and looked at Desmond.

"Take me outside," he gasped.

"I'll get someone," Desmond said, leaping up. He ran down the empty hallway, downstairs. The desk was still deserted and his note untouched. He shouted for help, but only the echo of his voice came back.

Bursting out the main entrance, he found himself in an eerie dusk, though it was only mid-afternoon. He pounded the glass of Brendan's car; his cousin snapped awake and rolled down the window, looking peevish.

"What time is it?" he said. "What's going on?"

"Dad's having some kind of attack," Desmond panted. "I can't find anyone. I—"

Brendan's eyes flicked to something behind Desmond. "What's that?" he said.

The grassy slope that rose toward the woods was teeming with people. Patients, mostly barefoot, clad in pajamas or long white gowns. The old, the slow, the deformed, the deranged. Above, the sky had grown thicker, almost coagulated, and voluminous shadows weighed everything down. The white bodies slowly climbed the hill and disappeared among the forlorn dark trees.

When Desmond returned a minute later, carrying Brendan's pocketknife, his father was dead. An old man's pale corpse, like a huge naked shrimp on the bed.

Dazed, he cut off his father's restraints. His mind kept traveling, avoiding the corpse. He thought of the patients in their white gowns and pajamas moving inexorably into the woods. He dragged the body downstairs on a mattress. When he came outside, only a few stragglers remained on the hill. From the clotted dark clouds he heard a soft rumble, more like growling than thunder.

Brendan rolled down the window. "Is he dead?"

"Yeah. Help me."

"You're bringing the body back?"

"What do you want me to do?" Desmond yelled. "Leave him? There's nobody here! *Help* me."

Brendan got out and, with fearful glances at the sky and the woods, helped drag the body to the car.

At Glimpskill, they unloaded the body on the lawn.

"Why is it so dark?" said Brendan, looking up nervously. "It's two in the afternoon."

"Stop talking about the weather," Desmond said, throwing his arms up. He paused, touching his forehead. "I need to bury him."

"On our front lawn?"

"Do you have any better ideas?" he yelled at Brendan, who flinched.

“There are shovels in the basement,” Brendan said.

Desmond nodded, feeling that a storm was gathering to break on them any second, and they made for the house. Before they reached the door, a thick, glottal growling came out of the knotted clouds, a threat rolling across the treetops. A claw of violet lightning raked the horizon.

Inside, they locked the door. At once the noise ended, and Desmond became aware of total silence, inside and out, heavy, unbending. It seemed to spread across the world like thick cream.

“Do you still want to bury him?” Brendan said.

“Let’s just stay here a minute.”

They stood in the foyer, taking shallow, self-conscious breaths, and then Brendan went into the living room. Desmond followed a moment later and found his cousin drinking bourbon and water.

“Yeah,” Brendan agreed. “We don’t need to go outside.”

Desmond looked out the picture window that framed the front lawn. His father’s body lay on the grass. The air looked like everything was underwater.

“Yeah,” Desmond said. In the brambly darkness, he could hardly see the corpse now. No, he couldn’t see the corpse at all. A colossal growl rolled across the mountains, getting into the timber of the house, making it tremble like the heart of a bird.

“I’ve reconsidered,” he said slowly. “I will have a drink now.”

Three Poems

Joy Ladin

Birthday at the Book Mill, Montague, Massachusetts

August 16, 2010

The drizzly evening light's
just bright enough to see

summer's pages yellowing at the edges
of field and forest. We stop reading to eat

udon noodles, red cabbage shreds, scallion rings pale and green
as memory. Time today

is a kind of breath, filling our lungs
the way books fill

the low-ceilinged rooms
of the decades-dead mill. The old women

we will be
skir like crickets in the grass, afraid

to die, but singing
August's psalm. Rock can't reverse

the river's rush, but here and there,
its whitening hair

blackens in granite's palm.

Sickness and Health

You wish you could cure me. We float together
on the boat of your bed, on a postage-stamp sea
frozen into wood—your charming, warped floor—
that shakes and heaves while you sleep,
arm wrapped around my waist
as though you could anchor me, as though love, as children think,
were simply holding on, as though insomnia were simply wrong
when it whispers
that we're drifting apart, moving on.
Car horn. Hours till dawn.
Our bodies will be here when it comes,
our small white futures, glowing communion wafers,
touching symbols that aren't ours
of the crumbling body—this we share—
of God. I need to say this now
when your arm around my waist
is the only answer you can make
to the heaving sea of boards
which, you'd whisper, if you were awake,
neither shake, nor heave, nor carry me away
because beyond our love
there is no sea. I wish it were true.
That the sea were wood, the wood still tree. That your wish
could cure me.

You Can't Be Afraid of the Pain That Is Coming

The you you can't be
Afraid of is coming
The pain of the you

You can't be
The you that's afraid
The afraid that is you

The can't be that is the pain
Of the you
That is coming

The pain that is you
The can't be that is
The you you can't be

Afraid of is coming

The Tremendous Importance of Ordinary Events

*An interview with Alice
Munro about two versions
of “Wood”*

Lisa Dickler Awano

Alice Munro's story "Wood" originally appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1980. Nearly thirty years later, the author, nearing her eightieth birthday, rewrote it, and included the new version (reprinted in this issue of *New Haven Review*) in her 2009 collection of stories, *Too Much Happiness*.

In both renderings of "Wood," Munro investigates issues central to her canon, such as the process of writing fiction. In her second version, Munro also develops a love story, and probes themes raised in *Too Much Happiness*, which explores ways people do or don't go on with their lives when they have lost the person or situation they thought they couldn't live without. I interviewed Munro about this collection and reviewed it in *Virginia Quarterly Review*, in October 2010, then interviewed her specifically about "Wood."

Why did I single out "Wood" for further study? First, its lyricism, characterizations and subject matter particularly stirred me—more than I can explain. "Wood" also exemplifies Munro's use of the specific geography of Southwest Ontario to write about universal human experiences. Finally, readers can easily access the earlier *New Yorker* version of "Wood," and can, by placing the two incarnations of the story side by side, experience the sense of recrafting the piece alongside Alice Munro.

For instance, we can witness what expansive change Munro achieved with relative economy. We can also observe Munro—poet and perfectionist—in action as she alters small details of the first version when writing the second, making sure every word in the story works for her: whether she is tightening an already powerful sentence; or trading in one adjective for another more precise one; or altering the rhythm of a line by tweaking it almost imperceptibly.

Equally important, we can see what parts of the first version Munro retained when she rewrote. For example, in an extended passage in both renditions of "Wood," Munro catalogues the kinds of

trees that Roy, the protagonist, encounters in the bush. At first, this may seem a digression, but in fact it is essential to the story.

While being interviewed, Munro, as in her writing, is highly conscious of both the importance of staying on task and of the need for spontaneity, which can lead to epiphany. One learns to trust her instincts, which sometimes appear at first to lead to a discussion slightly off topic, but invariably go to the heart of the literary matter.

The first time I interviewed Alice Munro, our talk immediately veered where I hadn't expected it to, and I thought we had better take up a topic I hadn't planned to get to until much later. My prepared pages went flying as I searched through my notes for the idea.

"All of my questions have gone out of order!" I confessed.

"That's probably a good sign!" Alice Munro replied.

I laid my notes aside.

—Lisa Dickler Awano

LDA: "Wood" was published in 1980 in *The New Yorker*, and according to your biographer, Robert Thacker, you were planning to include it in your collection, *The Moons of Jupiter*, which was published by Knopf in 1983.

AM: I was. And I decided it had not enough weight as a story. I thought that it was ... not minor, but it just didn't have enough layers to be interesting to *me*. And that's what has to happen—I have to be interested. I never think at all about the audience, which I think is probably true of most writers. We think of ourselves, and what interests *us* first.

When I wrote the first version, it was something that I was taking from life. I knew the people in the story. And I didn't want to probe much deeper with them, because all I got from them, in fact, is what is in the story—which is more or less a trick story—you know, about how it's himself that Roy is chasing after. But I didn't see any.... Believe me, I never do things like that because I think they

have deep meanings. I just think, *Well, he's chasing after himself, or ha, ha*. I don't think, *Oh ... my!*

LDA: Is that self-protective? Do you avoid thinking about the complexity of what you are aiming to do, so that you won't become intimidated by the enormity of it?

AM: Not really. It's because my mind doesn't work that way. I'm not an abstract thinker. I think in terms of just what you see and hear and what you do. And that interests me often quite enough. Well, it did in the first version of that story. Then I realized, when I read it over, that it really wasn't very interesting. I had given the story over at one time; I thought, *It's a good but old-fashioned story in which the plot runs pretty much without any particular surprises*.

And when I read it over, I felt something more in it; I felt it was *about* something that I hadn't realized before. That's what accounts for the changes. I could see what happened to Roy in the second [version of the] story happening to him, and more than that, I could see Lea, the woman. The major change [in the second version] is that Lea, Roy's wife, is suffering a depression, which began to interest me a lot. How did I come by this? I didn't think, *I need something more interesting....* It's never that easy. It's just that I began to think about the characters and think about what it's like for both of them, and they both began to go a lot deeper. Then I came up with the second version.

I think it was because during that time I had gotten older, and I began to see what happens often: The female character is someone who's led a practical, successful, unassuming life. Then she goes into a deep depression and it looks like nobody can help her. I was beginning to see in my real life that that could happen to people. That it isn't always intellectuals or people who are fond of the arts who get very depressed! And that, often, it's just a mystery why they are depressed—and sometimes a mystery how they get out of it. With Lea,

it's only partly a mystery, because she gets out of it to some degree by being concerned about somebody else, and knowing how to help him. But I think it isn't completely that by any means. I think it's a mystery: how do we feel bad and feel good? Of course, I'm not talking much about the various chemicals we can take. I had her taking chemicals and they weren't doing all that much.

LDA: She was trying everything.

AM: Probably, the lift that comes as she begins to get better is [from] being essential, being useful. I think that will continue; she'll get back to her old nature somehow.

LDA: What brought you back to "Wood" thirty years after you had published the first version?

AM: Total accident. I was looking for something else, and I came to that story and I didn't mean to start reading it but I did, and I could hardly remember it. As I read it, I began to be drawn to doing a second story. What captured me ... obviously I wanted to know what this did for the woman. I wanted also to make it stronger about the man, about his plight. And that's all, really. And as I rewrote the second version, I didn't ever look back at the other version. One terrible thing that can happen to a writer is you can find that the first version is better. So I never trust looking back.

LDA: Your collection, *The Moons of Jupiter*, was published when you were in your early fifties, and as you are now, you were moving from one stage of life into another. Many of the stories in that volume are about a person becoming middle-aged, and relationships changing or ending. The title story takes place as the protagonist's father is dying, and in that story the protagonist contemplates her relationships with her children, remembering them at all different ages. The protagonist thinks about difficulties that the children, now

grown, face as young adults, and the difficulties she herself has in communicating with them.

AM: Yes.

LDA: We have talked about the strong relationship among all your volumes of stories. Isn't there a particularly strong relationship between *The Moons of Jupiter* and *Too Much Happiness*?

AM: I wonder ... I hadn't thought of that. *The Moons of Jupiter* was the one where I really first got started on complicated, imperfect relations of adults.

LDA: It was a huge turning point.

AM: It was, wasn't it? From then on, I suppose, this is what I was interested in for a long time.

LDA: In *Too Much Happiness*, you're writing about how people do or don't go on with their lives when they have lost the person or situation they thought they couldn't live without.

AM: That's very astute of you. I hadn't thought of that, but that's true. People have to. And I suspect I will find more and more truth of this in older age: the things you can't bear to lose, you have to lose.

LDA: Because this connection exists between *The Moons of Jupiter* and *Too Much Happiness*, I find it especially exciting that "Wood," which almost but did not quite find its home in *The Moons of Jupiter*, should have beckoned to you to revisit and reimagine it now that you are again at a transitional time of life. When Roy, the protagonist of "Wood," realizes at the end of the first version of the story that he hasn't lost the job that he thought had been taken away from him, he allows himself a comforting delusion. Your last word in the

story is Roy's thought, "Safe." But your readers know that neither anyone nor anything is ever really "safe" in an Alice Munro story.

AM: I do think that adult life—I don't know when it starts, but it does start being a series of problems of that sort. At first you can pretty well deal with them. Well, you can deal with them some of the time. But they'll come back.

LDA: What kinds of problems return? Problems of loss?

AM: Yes, or of what kind of person you are, what you can do, just not necessarily all things you do yourself, but what happens with other people and so on. This doesn't sound like a book that anyone would want to read, does it?

LDA: During the course of the story, Roy hears a rumor from a squatter named Percy that he interprets to mean that a job of wood-cutting promised to him has instead been given to a corporate firm. I wondered whether Roy so readily believes the rumor because he suffers from self-doubt: he has trouble believing that he would be chosen to be the wood-gatherer.

AM: I didn't think of that. A fact that I've found, living in areas like this, is that money, far from being unimportant, is *tremendously* important—it's mythical. People who have it; people who don't have it; people who might get it—I don't think this is as true now as when I [first] wrote that story. Although maybe it's getting truer again, because we [in Canada] are in a period when our economy has not sunk as badly as yours in the United States has, but it has sunk some. Maybe we're going back to this. It used to be there was a whole sub-class of people like Percy who lived in a kind of mythology; and the mythology was mostly around money. Which I think would surprise people who think this is a country character.

LDA: Is it because he would have been born around the time of the Depression?

AM: I don't know. I suspect that it's a mythology that's gone on for centuries, but usually wasn't noted or written about. People are really interested about other people and one of the things they're interested in is sex and another is money.

LDA: Why, do you think?

AM: I don't know, but sex is far more respectable. I mean no, the other way round ... was that a Freudian slip? The way around is ... money. People were always able to talk about money.

LDA: As I write about "Wood," it dawns on me that what drew me to your writing in the first place is that I identified strongly with many of your protagonists' feelings of self-doubt.

AM: It's there, and it's kind of out in the open, isn't it? I've never minded writing about it at all; I never found it a thing that I was embarrassed by. I found it more a thing that I was kind of surprised by, but interested in.

LDA: In many of your stories that are inspired by your father and his side of the family, the male protagonist sees himself as someone who can't do things that others can.

AM: The world I grew up in ... you could as soon fly to the moon as become a writer. I immediately thought that I would be a writer. But I didn't get that from anybody I knew or could think of knowing. I guess it's just egotism.

LDA: Your father earned his living through manual labor, whether

he was trapping or fishing in the bush, fur farming, working in a foundry, or raising turkeys. Then he published a book of historical fiction, late in his life, *The McGregors*. Do you think his confidence to do this came from observing your success?

AM: Yes, oh yes.... If Alice can do this....

LDA: In your new stories “Corrie” and “Axis,” recently published in *The New Yorker*, the male characters had that kind of self-doubt.

AM: Why do I think that men have self-doubt? I don’t know really. Because maybe my father had so much self-doubt? Certainly I’ve known people who haven’t self-doubt. I’m thinking of self-doubt in terms of everybody in the town that I grew up in. Mostly in the people that I know now too. I was thinking about this before we talked.... Most of the people around here think I’m nuts. They don’t think I’m nuts—they know I’m nice, they like me—but they can’t read the books and they can’t figure them out, and I think maybe the books *are* too difficult.... I was reading some of the old stuff a couple of days ago, and I thought, really this is very complicated. The language isn’t complicated, but the plots are. And they don’t give people the usual rewards. So that’s probably why in a way I can live so comfortably here, because nobody takes it seriously.

LDA: You have talked about the great value placed on “usefulness” in the Protestant culture of Sowesto. You say that the feeling of being needed by another human being is part of what brings Lea, Roy’s wife in the second version of “Wood,” out of her depression. There are other stories in *Too Much Happiness* in which the protagonists are helped by sensing that they can be useful; for example, “Dimensions” and “Deep Holes.” Do you ever feel that through writing about those who experience self-doubt, you’re able to help others?

AM: Oh, I don’t know. What I feel is simply that I bless the fact that

I was born in a time when you could get away from the society you were born into. Before, you had to have money, and for a woman, you had to have enormous confidence. I just happened to come at the time at the end of the war when they had scholarships that lasted two years at the university, but two years was enough for me to feel enormous self-confidence. I didn't act enormously self-confident—and [I felt confident] just about my writing, not about *anything* else....

LDA: Where did the confidence come from?

AM: From going to college and seeing there were people who really valued writing. There were people who really read and who knew that it was important. I have friends who found out the same thing about music—when they had been totally isolated at home, they suddenly found out that they weren't crazy.

LDA: There's a strong relationship between "Wood" and "Images," a coming-of-age story that you published in your first volume of short fiction, *Dance of the Happy Shades*, in 1968.

AM: Yeah ... yeah! I hadn't thought of that.... I really don't go back that far in my thinking.

LDA: In "Images," a young protagonist encounters terrifying experiences while in the bush with her father, including a surprise meeting with a disturbed, ax-wielding recluse. As she and her father walk home, he instructs her not to mention the hatchet to her adult family members. The protagonist tells us that:

Like the children in fairy stories...who have discovered that our fears are based on nothing but the truth, but who come back fresh from marvellous escapes and take up their knives and forks, with humility and good manners, prepared to live happily ever after—like them,

dazed and powerful with secrets, I never said a word.

In “Wood,” Roy is also confronted by dangerous, unexpected meetings with outsiders in the bush; both literally—when he happens upon the rumor-spreading squatter, Percy—and figuratively, when he is wounded by the ax-wielding recluse within himself. And when, in the second version, Lea surprises Roy by driving the truck and rescuing him (when Roy asks her how she got to him, she replies, “Well, I didn’t fly”), they drive away, similarly “dazed and powerful with secrets,” “like the children in fairy stories,” from the “ominous,” “indifferent,” “transform[ed]” “forest”—a formal word that Roy “would usually back away from.”

You sometimes write stories about the act of writing itself. Could “Wood” be read as a story about writing?

AM: That’s very interesting, and I don’t mind the idea at all. I don’t write that way, but ...

LDA: But you read that way.

AM: And I *do* write as if clearly ordinary events are tremendously important, because that’s the way they seem to me.

LDA: When you write, it seems to me that you include everything you’ve ever read.

AM: Yes, there’s a lot there.

LDA: Are you subconsciously drawing on literature that has stayed with you for many years, such as Bible stories?

AM: These are great stories. I got the traditional Protestant Sunday School upbringing, and those stories are among the earliest that you get in your head. It’s like the story that I always talk about as my

“errrr” story, “The Little Mermaid.” And the religious stories stay with me sort of like that, though not quite so importantly. I don’t think much about biblical stuff. But if I do go back to reading the Bible, I’m always just stunned by how good it is, in a totally different way from the way it’s been interpreted.

LDA: It seemed to me that in “Wood,” there were many stories within that story that I recognized, the Jacob story among them—where Jacob wrestles with an angel. And the angel, seeing that it is not winning, hurts Jacob and he develops a limp.

AM: Oh, no. I think it’s important to recognize that I never write in that way. I do find it really interesting sometimes ... people who do. But I am in no way ... I don’t consciously ever graft onto other stories or search through ... you know what I mean. The story is the story. The story is about a guy who injures himself in a totally unexpected way, has a helluva time doing what would have been a perfectly ordinary thing to save himself, then finds it has saved his wife. And that’s about what it is—with other things—but I would never have thought of—no, I did not think of any biblical terms, or any other terms than the stories’ terms, that seem to me about something very important in themselves, which is the sudden loss of strength ... the sudden change of your meaning in the world. Of your importance in the world. From becoming someone who’s tramping around the bush deciding to cut down the trees to somebody who’s wondering whether they’ll make it to the road or freeze there.

LDA: You are regarded as being among our most important writers of psychological fiction in the English language. Did you read a lot about psychology?

AM: No. I was always afraid of it. I’m so single-minded with my writing, but I really wanted it more than anything else. So when I married my first husband and we went out to live in Vancouver, we

met people our own age who were American draft-dodgers from the Korean War. I worked in the library and I made friends with another girl who worked there and she was married to one of them. I got to know people who knew all about ... they were very well educated, they were very sharp—they knew everything. And you know one of the things they believed? That women trying to achieve and accomplish were misfits—this is from Freud. And when I learned this, from people who were far better educated than I was, I thought—you know, I can't go too far into this—it's not going to be good for me! I think probably after the war, and in the fifties, there was a great feeling of women being ... it wasn't just that they were unnecessarily competitive, it was that they were looking for happiness in the wrong place; the happiness being home and children, and service to your husband. And boy, they believed this. And because I had grown up in the country, without any education to speak of, I had not run into such a notion before.

LDA: And yet the women's roles, as we see in "Corrie" and "Axis," were so prescribed.

AM: Oh, very. But it was not made sanctified by Freud, or any other important leader. In fact, you can count on the fingers of one hand anyone I've ever met here who had heard of Freud.

LDA: Is having a sense of one's own behavioral process similar to having a sense of one's own writing process?

AM: Yes, only it's much more. I think you actually can use the sense of having one's own behavioral stuff, but often I don't think you need that in your writing. I mean, you are following ... you have a nice reliable instinct in your writing I think, much more reliable than in your nature. I think you learn to write, you learn what is useful to you, you learn what is truthful and what's exciting, and maybe it's that, in

your writing, *you want the best*. You don't necessarily want to grind any ax; if you do want to grind an ax, the writing suffers. But you want to find out as much as you can, and know as much as you can, and all this involves putting the self aside. Whereas in our normal lives, the self runs all over the place. You can get to be a better and better writer but you don't necessarily get to be a better person because of it. That's my belief. I mean you *can*—you can certainly get to be a better person. But you have to work at that as a separate thing.

LDA: How could that be, particularly if you're writing psychological fiction?

AM: Well, you still fall into your old ruts, which are yours, not your fictional characters'. And I've found, as you probably have, too, that you do things almost without knowing that you're starting to do them, in your thinking about your life and people and so on. So that's a sort of separate job, which I think is worth doing.

LDA: You have told me in the past that when you were very young, your feelings for Romantic poetry, and Wordsworth's poetry in particular, really replaced religion for you.

AM: Yes.

LDA: Is writing a way to explore the kinds of things that people who don't write may connect with through religion?

AM: It is. And it's a very strong way to replace things and I think probably is always with you. There again, I think if you live to be, say in your eighties, that changes a bit. I mean, it finally dawns on you that the most successful book probably has a life of ... ten years? But that doesn't matter, really, you still want to do the same things. I'm so lucky, because I have been received by people and read. There

are other people who write, and maybe write very well, and that just doesn't happen. So, I can't recommend this as being a sure-fire thing.

LDA: Especially in our technological age—we don't hold on to things.

AM: I can hardly get my mind around that. And of course I feel ... not really frightened for myself, but it isn't something I would welcome at all.

LDA: What do you think will keep people writing? What keeps you writing in this era?

AM: Oh, just getting an idea and wanting to get it down. Wanting to tell a story. The story of course has a lot of properties that are not maybe story-like, but anyway I want to do it.

LDA: Not only in "Wood," but in many of your stories, you describe ordinary tasks in great detail. In "The Turkey Season" (1980), we see the characters gutting turkeys; and in a new story, "Axis," we observe the characters making strawberry jam. These practical activities take on more complex meanings in the course of the stories.

AM: This is my background—doing things all the time. So I wouldn't even think about that. I wouldn't think about why I put it into the story. It's just part of what I think about, I guess. Because mind you, I don't do much of [that kind of work] anymore.

LDA: There's a creativity to these chores.

AM: There is. And actually the female members of my family, some of them especially, my grandmother, went in for this. They didn't just do it well, they did it better than well. And there were women in my generation too who did that.

LDA: You have spoken to me before about the comfort of routine. Is there a relationship for you between that and the process of writing?

AM: I'm not quite sure what I have meant.... It may just mean that being a woman of my generation, part of my life has always been doing jobs. Looking after the house, making some kind of meal, doing the laundry, and so on. Though now it's much diminished, I still do all those things, and in a way I think it's very important to me. Not to do them excellently or anything, but just to have something I do every day. Because you know, you get dry spells, and if you're a male, a very successful male, sitting in your studio, supposed to be writing, and you're actually drawing squiggles on a piece of paper because you think you'll never get another idea, that's horrible, I should imagine. And I think that women have this great advantage that nobody ... maybe with some women there's a feeling that everyone's hanging on your next novel or something, but you have to be a huge success for that to happen. But men can get this quite easily and enjoy it—the parts of it that are agreeable—like lots of friends, lots of women, lots of drinks, and so on; but the bad part is worse for them. Mind you, I've never experienced this.

LDA: But you write from the perspective of a man—not that infrequently.

AM: I like doing that too. But I do think in some ways men have a harder role sometimes if they're successful in this particular thing. But also women have a much harder role in getting to be successful at all.

LDA: Where did you learn so much about woodcutting?

AM: My father, I suppose; it was part of my youth. But actually, I must say, my husband. When we moved here, we had a wood-burning stove, and he and a friend decided to go out and cut wood because

they weren't getting enough exercise, or to keep them very fit, and also because they enjoyed it as a switch from mental work. And so I learned a lot from him. It's great really to have another adult around the house; one who does not object to your work, because you can call on them if two brains are better than one for something *specific*.

LDA: When Roy leaves the forest, he doesn't have the wood in hand.

AM: No he doesn't. He couldn't carry it, no.

LDA: He couldn't even cut down a tree.

AM: He doesn't have his ax in hand, either. He had to let go of it. It's just himself. And you don't even know what he's going to do about that. He's going to go back and get his ax, but it's all ceased to matter, for the time being anyway.

LDA: Not without regret.

AM: Not without some regret. But I want him to.... After all, if he's getting his wife back—of course he doesn't know yet for how long, or whatever—but I think everything has changed for him a little bit. The way if you've ever been in hospital, really, really seriously ill, things change. Things that you thought were very important ... it's almost a happy state, in a vague way, for a while. I guess it's what the abandonment of ambition might be, but you can never count on that lasting.

LDA: And yet, in many of the stories in *Too Much Happiness*, one thing that the protagonists fear is the loss of their drive.

AM: People like me can't imagine how you deal with it. There again, I think this is something that comes with maybe serious, serious illness or age.

LDA: Roy and Lea seem to have a good marriage. The narrator points out that they accept one another as they are.

AM: I think that should be our goal, if we can manage it. That is always a good idea.

LDA: Lea develops a depression. This once “jok[ey],” “energetic” woman becomes “grave” and “listless,” and she “sometimes waves her hand in front of her face as if she is bothered by cobwebs or has got stuck in a nest of brambles.” Why does she leave Roy in this way? Is she seeking attention from him?

AM: I’m not sure, because there I’m very careful. It’s one story in which I’m using people and always thinking of what I know of people of their education and ideas. And that wouldn’t occur to her, I don’t think. They don’t think so much in abstractions, and that’s why sometimes, when a depression like this happens, it’s so hard to deal with. I mean it’s almost better if you can say, “I feel this way because of this, this, and this.” But I don’t think she thinks about it. It’s just something that has come down on her; it’s not anticipated, she’s not that kind of person. I think in that class there isn’t any feeling that your husband owes you attention. So there would never be any accusation of him for not producing it. Her social life would be expected to be what it is: she has family; she has a job, where she’s useful; and I don’t think that she would see herself as being deprived. One thing I liked about—or what I wanted to do in that story—is to think of what depression is like as a lid, rather than as something that you can think your way out of. Because I still think it is; no matter how you can think your way out of it, there’s something about it that’s very hard to deal with.

LDA: Something that comes out of nowhere?

AM: In a way, yes. You might go to a psychiatrist and he might say,

“Well this comes out of this—this happened to you twenty-five years ago”—and that might be a comfort, because you would think of something. But I’m not sure that’s always so.

LDA: Do you think she could have a chemical imbalance? But she takes pills and such, and nothing seems to help much.

AM: I haven’t had too much experience with it. I’ve known people.... You know, sometimes they do work, and sometimes, maybe not as well as you expected, or whatever. And anyway, aren’t they getting a lot less popular now? So that’s the gift that turns out to have another side. You get something that’s going to be wonderful, that’s going to solve the problem. And not just of each single person, but in general. And then it’s so discouraging when—this isn’t in any of my writing—when people hope there is something and it turns out that ... all this.

LDA: Tell me about the character in “Wood” who is named Karen in the first version of the story and Diane in the second. She is Lila/Lea’s niece. In the first version, this niece lived with Roy and Lila between the ages of eight and seventeen, had a talent for drawing, and helped Roy in his sign-painting business. Suddenly, at seventeen, she quit school to marry a truck driver, had five children, began to take low-paying service jobs, and let her health and looks go. You scaled back the character in the second version while you developed the character of Lea. In the second version, the niece—Diane—doesn’t seem to have lived with the couple when she was a child. But she did help Roy with jobs in his upholstery and furniture refinishing business until her husband put an end to it, because he thought, “it was[n’t] the right kind of work for a woman.” Now she works in the kitchen of an “old people’s home” to help support her family of four children.

In the first version of “Wood,” the narrator tells us that “Lila never seems to think that anything much has gone wrong with

this girl's life.... It is Roy who thinks Karen has wasted herself, and wishes there were something he could do for her.”

AM: Lila doesn't spend a lot of time [worrying], because in that world she lives in, her niece is not doing badly. Roy hoped for [his niece] to be different and help him. So [the niece] is married, the marriage isn't too great; in the society where she lives, which is the society where I live, it's not seen as a failure. And she seems pleased enough with herself. I think in the society I'm used to—and I don't know about this too much for the last maybe ten years—just fulfilling the role is a great comfort. Like, “Now I'm married.” “Now I have children.” “Now we....” You wouldn't even have to have a very fancy house.... It's not even money so much; it's just a kind of comfort and importance, terrific importance about being a mom, you know, what we call a hockey mom, and many people are quite satisfied with it. There are problems that will be financial, but their problems don't seem to be about “What are they doing with their life.” Because when they were about age fourteen, this is what they decided to do.

LDA: You've told me in an interview that “everyone gets sick of their mother's generation.” I suppose Karen/Diane's children will look at her life and say,

AM: *“Oh, for God's sake!”*

LDA: At the end of the second version of “Wood,” Lea appears on the track in the bush, driving the truck toward Roy to save him. She has emerged from her depression, and Roy seems to feel somewhat guilty, “[b]ecause he knows that he isn't feeling quite the way he thought he would if her vitality came back to her.” He thinks to himself that “even if it is for good, even if it's all good there's something more. Some loss fogging up this gain. Some loss he'd be ashamed to admit to, if he had the energy.” As he looks at the bush from the

outside now, “when the dark shuts down in early winter,” it seems “tangled up in itself ... dense and secret.”

AM: Yes. He’s not going to go back, probably, to the life he had before. I mean, she—and he too—are probably going to decide that he can’t be out in the bush by himself. And gradually I think he’s going to be leading a different life. I think he knows that. But he knows it in a vague way. This is a situation he’s never been in before; injured, and on the way to the hospital, and his wife driving him there. On the other hand, he’s pretty glad.

LDA: As you said earlier, when you have a serious illness it reprioritizes ...

AM: It simplifies things enormously.

LDA: Roy loses his ability to drive at the end of the story, and Lea not only regains hers but also drives the truck for the first time with “remarkable” skill. You and I have spoken before about our own issues with driving.

AM: I don’t drive.

LDA: Your daughter Sheila has said in her memoir that you don’t “like doing anything that require[s] manual dexterity or hand-eye coordination ... as if [you don’t] quite trust [yourself] in the physical world.”

AM: To me, the various things on a car don’t connect in any way and if I try to back up, and it really starts backing up, I’m astounded and I stop. I think I’ve told you about male writers I know who couldn’t drive—and this is really astonishing—I mean, who couldn’t drive at all. Whose wives, or partners, had to do all the driving. So there may

be something in writers' way of looking at things, or dealing with things....

LDA: When I read your stories, I immediately contemplate twelve different ways to think about them. I wonder if part of the problem is ...

AM: Maybe that's it.... "I could do this, or I could do that...." But with me it's just sort of an *amazement* that I have any relationship with this machine at all. And that makes me stop and think, *I mustn't push my luck*. But the men I know who didn't drive, I've never talked to them about it, but with both of them, it meant that they couldn't live where they wanted to live in the country and had to move to the city, just to manage things, so that [their partners] weren't on the road all the time.

LDA: So you think this could be occupational.

AM: Yes, I really have discovered this.

Wood

Alice Munro

Roy is an upholsterer and refinisher of furniture. He will also take on the job of rebuilding chairs and tables that have lost some rungs or a leg, or are otherwise in a dilapidated condition. There aren't many people doing that kind of work anymore, and he gets more business than he can handle. He doesn't know what to do about it. His excuse for not hiring somebody to help him is that the government will make him go through a lot of red tape, but the real reason may be that he's used to working alone—he's been doing this ever since he got out of the army—and it's hard for him to imagine having somebody else around all the time. If he and his wife, Lea, had had a boy, the boy might have grown up with an interest in the work and joined him in the shop when he was old enough. Or even if they'd had a daughter. Once he'd thought of training his wife's niece Diane. When she was a child she had hung around watching him and after she got married—suddenly, at the age of seventeen—she helped him with some jobs because she and her husband needed the money. But she was pregnant, and the smells of paint stripper, wood stain, linseed oil, polish, and wood smoke made her sick. Or that was what she told Roy. She told his wife the real reason—that her husband didn't think it was the right kind of work for a woman.

So now she has four children and works in the kitchen of an old people's home. Apparently her husband thinks that is all right.

Roy's workshop is in a shed behind the house. It is heated by a woodstove, and getting the fuel for the stove has led him to another interest, which is private but not secret. That is, everybody knows about it but nobody knows how much he thinks about it or how much it means to him.

Wood cutting.

He has a four-wheel-drive truck and a chain saw and an eight-pound splitting ax. He spends more and more time in the bush,

cutting firewood. More than he needs for himself, as it turns out—so he has taken to selling it. Modern houses often have a fireplace in the living room and another in the dining room and a stove in the family room. And they want to have fires all the time—not just when they’re having a party or at Christmas.

When he first started going to the bush Lea used to worry about him. She worried about whether he would have an accident out there by himself, but also about whether he was letting the business go slack. She didn’t mean that his workmanship might suffer, but his timetable. “You don’t want to let people down,” she said. “If somebody says they want something for a certain time there’s a reason.”

She had the idea of his business being an obligation—something he did to help people out. She was embarrassed when he raised his prices—so in fact was he—and went out of her way to tell people what the materials were costing him nowadays.

While she had her job, it was not difficult for him to take off for the bush after she had gone to work and try to be back before she got home. She worked as a receptionist and bookkeeper for one of the dentists in town. It was a good job for her, because she enjoyed talking to people, and good for the dentist because she came from a large and loyal family who would never think of having their teeth tended to by anybody but the man who was her boss.

These relatives of hers, the Boles and the Jetters and the Pooles, used to be around the house a lot, or else Lea wanted to be at one of their houses. It was a clan that didn’t always enjoy one another’s company but who made sure they got plenty of it. Twenty or thirty would be crammed into one place for Christmas or Thanksgiving, and they could manage a dozen on an ordinary Sunday—watching television, talking, cooking, and eating. Roy likes to watch television and he likes to talk and he likes to eat, but not any two at the same time and certainly not all three. So when they chose to gather in his house on a Sunday, he got into the habit of getting up and going out to the shed and building up a fire of ironwood or applewood—either of those but particularly the apple has a sweet comforting smell.

Right out in the open, on the shelf with the stains and oils, he always kept a bottle of rye. He had rye in the house as well, and he was not stingy about offering it to his company, but the drink he poured when he was alone in the shed tasted better, just as the smoke smelled better when there was nobody around to say, Oh, isn't that lovely? He never drank when he was working on the furniture, or going into the bush—just on these Sundays full of visitors.

His going off on his own like that didn't cause trouble. The relatives didn't feel slighted—they had a limited interest in people like Roy who had just married into the family, and not even contributed any children to it, and who were not like themselves. They were large, expansive, talkative. He was short, compact, quiet. His wife was an easygoing woman generally and she liked Roy the way he was, so she didn't reproach or apologize for him.

They both felt that they meant more to each other, somehow, than couples who were overrun with children.

Last winter Lea had been sick with almost steady flu and bronchitis. She thought that she was catching all the germs people brought into the dentist's office. So she quit her job—she said that she was getting a bit tired of it anyway and she wanted more time to do things she had always wanted to do.

But Roy never found out what those things were. Her strength had taken a slump that she could not recover from. And that seemed to bring about a profound change in her personality. Visitors made her nervous—her family more than anybody. She felt too tired for conversation. She didn't want to go out. She kept up the house adequately, but she rested between chores so that simple routines took her all day. She lost most of her interest in television, though she would watch it when Roy turned it on, and she lost also her rounded, jolly figure, becoming thin and shapeless. The warmth, the glow—whatever had made her nice looking—were drained out of her face and her brown eyes.

The doctor gave her some pills but she couldn't tell whether they did her any good or not. One of her sisters took her to a practitioner

of holistic medicine, and the consultation cost three hundred dollars. She could not tell if that did her any good either.

Roy misses the wife he was used to, with her jokes and energy. He wants her back, but there's nothing he can do, except be patient with this grave, listless woman who sometimes waves her hand in front of her face as if she is bothered by cobwebs or has got stuck in a nest of brambles. Questioned about her eyesight, however, she claims that it is fine.

She no longer drives her car.

She no longer says anything about Roy going to the bush.

She may snap out of it, Diane says. (Diane is about the only person who still comes to the house.) Or she may not.

That is pretty well what the doctor said, in a lot more careful words. He says that the pills he's got her on will keep her from sinking too low. How low is too low, Roy thinks, and when can you tell?

Sometimes he finds a bush that the sawmill people have logged out, leaving the tops on the ground. And sometimes he finds one the forest management people have gone in and girdled the trees they think should come out because they are diseased or crooked or no good for lumber. Ironwood, for instance is no good for lumber, and neither is hawthorn or blue beech. When he spots a bush like this he gets in touch with the farmer or whoever owns it, and they bargain, and if the payment is agreed on he goes in to get the wood. A lot of this activity happens in the late fall—now, in November, or early December—because that is the time for selling firewood and because it is the best time for getting his truck into the bush. Farmers nowadays don't always have a well-travelled lane going back there, as they did when they cut and hauled wood themselves. Often you have to drive in across the fields, and this is possible only at two times during the year—before the field is plowed and after the crop is off.

After the crop is off is the better time, when the ground is hardened by frost. And this fall the demand for wood is greater than ever, and Roy has been going out two or three times in one week.

Many people recognize trees by their leaves or by their general shape and size, but walking through the leafless deep bush Roy knows them by their bark. Ironwood, that heavy and reliable firewood, has a shaggy brown bark on its stocky trunk, but its limbs are smooth at their tips and decidedly reddish. Cherry is the blackest tree in the bush, and its bark lies in picturesque scales. Most people would be surprised at how high cherry trees grow here—they are nothing like the cherry trees in fruit orchards. Apple trees are more like their orchard representatives—not very tall, bark not so definitely scaled or dark as the cherry’s. Ash is a soldierly tree with a corduroy-ribbed trunk. The maple’s gray bark has an irregular surface, the shadows creating black streaks, which meet sometimes in rough rectangles, sometimes not. There is a comfortable carelessness about that bark, suitable to the maple tree, which is homely and familiar and what most people think of when they think of a tree.

Beech trees and oaks are another matter—there is something notable and dramatic about them, though neither has as lovely a shape as the big elm trees which are now nearly all gone. Beech has the smooth gray bark, the elephant skin, which is usually chosen for the carving of initials. These carvings widen with the years and decades, from the slim knife groove to the blotches that make the letters at last illegible, wider than they are long.

Beech will grow a hundred feet high in the bush. In the open they spread out and are as wide as high, but in the bush they shoot up, the limbs at the top will take radical turns and can look like stag horns. But this arrogant-looking tree may have a weakness of twisted grain, which can be detected by ripples in the bark. That’s a sign that it may break, or go down in a high wind. As for oak trees, they are not so common in this country, not so common as beech but always easy to spot. Just as maple trees always look like the common necessary tree in the backyard, so oak trees always look like trees in storybooks, as if, in all the stories that begin, “Once upon a time in the woods,” the woods were full of oak trees. Their dark, shiny, elaborately indented leaves contribute to this look, but they seem

just as legendary when the leaves are off and you can see so well the thick corky bark with its gray-black color and intricate surface, and the devilish curling and curving of the branches.

Roy thinks that there is very little danger in going tree cutting alone if you know what you are doing. When you are going to cut down a tree, the first thing is to assess its center of gravity, then cut a seventy-degree wedge, so that the center of gravity is just over it. The side the wedge is on, of course, determines the direction in which the tree will fall. You make a falling cut, from the opposite side, not to connect with the wedge cut but in line with its high point. The idea is to cut through the tree, leaving at the end a hinge of wood which is the very center of the tree's weight and from which it must fall. It is best to make it fall clear of all other branches, but sometimes there is no way this can happen. If a tree is leaning into the branches of other trees, and you can't get a truck into position to haul it out with a chain, you cut the trunk in sections from beneath, till the upper part drops free and falls. When you've dropped a tree and it's resting on its branches, you get the trunk to the ground by cutting through the limb wood until you come to the limbs that are holding it up. These limbs are under pressure—they may be bent like a bow—and the trick is to cut so that the tree will roll away from you and the limbs won't whack you. When it is safely down, you cut the trunk into stove lengths and split the stove lengths with the ax.

Sometimes there's a surprise. Some squirrely wood blocks can't be split with the ax; they have to be laid on their sides and ripped with a chain saw; the sawdust cut this way, with the grain, is taken away in long shreds. Also, some beech or maple has to be side split, the great round chunk cut along the growth rings on all sides until it is almost square and can be more easily attacked. Sometimes there's dozy wood, in which a fungus has grown between the rings. But in general the toughness of the blocks is as you'd expect—greater in the body wood than in the limb wood, and greater in the broad trunks that have grown up partly in the open than in the tall slim ones that have pushed up in the middle of the bush.

Surprises. But you can be prepared for those. And if you're prepared, there's not the danger. He used to think of explaining all this to his wife. The procedures, the surprises, the identification. But he couldn't think of the way to go about it, so that she'd be interested. Sometimes he wished he had got around to passing on his knowledge to Diane when she was younger. She would never have the time to listen now.

And in a way his thoughts about wood are too private—they are covetous and nearly obsessive. He has never been a greedy man in any other way. But he can lie awake nights thinking of a splendid beech he wants to get at, wondering if it will prove as satisfactory as it looks or has some tricks up its sleeve. He thinks of all the woodlots in the county that he has never even seen, because they lie at the backs of farms, behind private fields. If he is driving along a road that goes through a bush, he swings his head from side to side, afraid of missing something. Even what is worthless for his purposes will interest him. A stand of blue beech, for instance, too delicate, too weedy, to bother with. He sees the dark vertical ribs slanting down the paler trunks—he will remember where these are. He would like to get a map in his mind of every bush he sees, and though he might justify this by citing practical purposes, that wouldn't be the whole truth.

A day or so after the first snow, he is out in a bush looking at some girdled trees. He has a right to be there—he has already been talking to the farmer, whose name is Suter.

At the edge of this bush there is an illegal dump. People have been throwing their trash in this hidden spot rather than taking it to the township dump, whose open hours may not have suited them, or whose location may not have been so handy. Roy sees something moving there. A dog?

But then the figure straightens up and he sees that it is a man in a filthy coat. In fact it is Percy Marshall, poking around the dump to see what he can find. Sometimes in these places you used to be

able to find valuable old crocks or bottles or even a copper boiler, but that is not so likely anymore. And Percy is not a knowledgeable scavenger anyway. He will just be on the lookout for anything he can use—though it is hard to see what that could be in this heap of plastic containers and torn screens and mattresses with the stuffing popped out.

Percy lives alone in one room at the back of an otherwise empty and boarded-up house at a crossroads a few miles from here. He walks the roads, walks along the creeks and through the town, talking to himself, sometimes playing the part of a half-wit vagabond and sometimes presenting himself as a shrewd local character. His life of malnutrition, dirt, and discomfort is his own choice. He has tried the County Home, but he couldn't stand the routine and the company of so many other old people. Long ago he started out with a fairly good farm, but the life of a farmer was too monotonous—so he worked his way down through bootlegging, botched house-breaking, some spells in jail, and in the past decade or so he has worked his way up again, with the help of the old-age pension, to a certain protected status. He has even had his picture and a write-up in the local paper.

The Last of a Breed. Local Free Spirit Shares Stories and Insights.

He climbs out of the dump laboriously, as if he felt obliged to have a little conversation.

“You going to be taking them trees out?”

Roy says, “I might be.” He thinks Percy may be after a donation of firewood.

“Then you better hurry up,” Percy says.

“Why's that?”

“All of this here is going under contract.”

Roy cannot but help gratifying him by asking what contract this might be. Percy is a gossip but not a liar. At least not about the things he is truly interested in, which are deals, inheritances, insurance, house break-ins, money matters of all sorts. It is a mistake to

think that people who have never managed to get hold of money aren't busy thinking about it. A surprise, this would be, to people who expect him to be a philosophical tramp, all wrapped up in memories of olden times. Though he can shoot off a little of that too when required.

"Heard about this fellow," Percy says, drawing it out. "When I was in town. I don't know. Seems this fellow runs a sawmill and he's got a contract to the River Inn and he's going to supply them all the wood they want for the winter. Cord a day. That's what they burn. Cord a day."

Roy says, "Where did you hear that?"

"Beer parlor. All right, I go in there now and again. I never have no more than a pint. And these fellows I don't know who they were, but they weren't drunk neither. Talking about where the bush was and it was this one all right. Suter's bush."

Roy had talked to the farmer just last week, and he had thought he had the deal pretty well sewed up, just to do the usual clean out.

"That's a pile of wood," he says easily.

"It is so."

"If they mean to take it all they'd have to have a license."

"You bet. Unless there's something crooked," said Percy with intense pleasure.

"None of my business. I got all the work I can handle."

"I bet you do. All you can handle."

All the way home Roy can't keep himself from thinking about this story. He has sold some wood now and then to the River Inn. But now they must have decided to take on one steady supplier, and he is not the one.

He thinks about the problems of getting that much wood out now, when the snow has already started. The only thing you could do would be to pull the logs out into the open field, before the real winter got under way. You'd have to get them out as quickly as possible, make a big pile of them there, saw them, and chop them up

later. And to get them out you'd need a bulldozer or at least a big tractor. You'd have to make a road in and pull them out with chains. You'd need a crew—there was no way this could be a one- or two-man operation. It would have to be done on a big scale.

So it wasn't sounding like a part-time enterprise, the kind he carried on himself. It could be a big outfit, somebody from out of the county altogether.

Eliot Suter had not given any hint of this offer when Roy was talking to him. But it is quite possible that an approach was made to him later and he decided to forget the casual sort of arrangement that had been put forward by Roy. Decided to let the bulldozer go in.

During the evening Roy thinks of phoning up and asking what is going on. But then he thinks that if the farmer has indeed changed his mind there is nothing to be done. A spoken agreement is nothing to hold to. The man could just tell him to clear off.

The best thing for Roy to do might be just to act as if he has never heard Percy's story, never heard about any other fellow—just go in and take what trees he can as quickly as he can, before the bulldozer gets there.

Of course there is always a possibility that Percy may have been mistaken about the whole thing. He isn't likely to have made it up just to bother Roy, but he could have got it twisted.

Yet the more Roy thinks about it the more he comes to discount this possibility. He just keeps seeing in his mind the bulldozer and the chained logs, the great log piles out in the field, the men with chain saws. That is the way they do things nowadays. Wholesale.

Part of the reason the story has made such an impact is that he has a dislike for the River Inn, which is a resort hotel on the Peregrine River. It is built on the remains of an old mill not far from the crossroads where Percy Marshall lives. In fact the inn owns the land Percy lives on and the house he lives in. There was a plan to tear the house down, but it turned out that the inn's guests, having nothing much to do, like to walk down the road and take pictures of this derelict building and the old harrow and upturned wagon beside it,

and the useless pump, and Percy, when he allows himself to be photographed. Some guests do sketches. They come from as far away as Ottawa and Montreal and no doubt think of themselves as being in the backwoods.

Local people go to the inn for a special lunch or dinner. Lea went once, with the dentist and his wife and the hygienist and her husband. Roy would not go. He said that he didn't want to eat a meal that cost an arm and a leg, even when somebody else was paying. But he is not altogether sure what it is that he has against the inn. He is not exactly opposed to the idea of people spending money in the hope of enjoying themselves, or against the idea of other people making money out of the people who want to spend it. It is true that the antiques at the inn have been restored and reupholstered by craftsmen other than himself—people not from around here at all—but if he had been asked to do them he would probably have refused, saying he had more than enough work to do already. When Lea asked him what he thought was the matter with the inn, the only thing he could think of to say was that when Diane had applied for a job there, as a waitress, they had turned her down, saying that she was overweight.

“Well, she was,” said Lea. “She is. She says so herself.”

True. But Roy still thinks of those people as snobs. Grabbers and snobs. They are putting up new buildings supposed to be like an old-time store and an old-time opera house, just for show. They burn wood for show. A cord a day. So now some operator with a bulldozer will be levelling the bush as if it was a cornfield. This is just the sort of high-handed scheme you would expect, the kind of pillage you might know they would get up to.

He tells Lea the story he has heard. He still tells her things—it's a habit—but he is so used to her now not paying any real attention that he hardly notices whether there is an answer or not. This time she echoes what he himself has said.

“Never mind. You've got enough to do anyway.”

That's what he would have expected, whether she was well or not. Missing the point. But isn't that what wives do—and husbands probably the same—around fifty percent of the time?

The next morning he works on a drop-leaf table for a while. He means to stay in the shed all day and get a couple of past-due jobs finished. Near noon he hears Diane's noisy muffler and looks out the window. She'll be here to take Lea to the reflexologist—she thinks it does Lea good and Lea doesn't object.

But she is heading for the shed, not the house.

"Howdy," she says.

"Howdy."

"Hard at work?"

"Hard as ever," Roy says. "Offer you a job?"

This is their routine.

"I got one. Listen, what I came in here for, I want to ask you a favor. What I want is to borrow the truck. Tomorrow, to take Tiger to the vet. I can't handle him in the car. He's got too big for the car. I hate to have to ask you."

Roy says not to worry about it.

Tiger to the vet, he thinks, that's going to cost them.

"You weren't going to need the truck?" she says. "I mean, you can use the car?"

He has of course been meaning to go out to the bush tomorrow, providing he got his jobs done today. What he'll have to do, he decides now, is get out there this afternoon.

"I'll fill it up with gas for you," Diane says.

So another thing he'll have to do is remember to fill it up himself, to prevent her. He is just about to say, "You know the reason I want to get out there is something's come up that I can't help thinking about—" But she's out the door and going to get Lea.

As soon as they are out of sight and he has things cleaned up, he gets into the truck and drives out to where he was the day before. He

thinks about stopping by and questioning Percy further but concludes that it would not be any use. Such a show of interest might just get Percy inventing things. He thinks again about talking to the farmer but decides against it for the same reasons as last night.

He parks the truck on the trail that leads into the bush. This trail soon peters out, and even before it does he has left it. He is walking around looking at the trees, which appear the same as they did yesterday and don't give a sign of being party to any hostile scheme. He has the chain saw and the ax with him, and he feels as if he has to hurry. If anybody else shows up here, if anybody challenges him, he will say that he has permission from the farmer and he knows nothing about any other deal. He will say that furthermore he intends to go on cutting unless the farmer comes and personally tells him to get out. If that really happens, of course he will have to go. But it's not likely it will happen because Suter is a hefty man with a bad hip, so he is not much taken to wandering around his property.

"... no authority ...," Roy says, talking to himself like Percy Marshall, "I want to see it on paper."

He's talking to the stranger he's never even seen.

The floor of any bush is usually rougher than the surface of the surrounding land. Roy has always thought that this was caused by trees falling, pulling up the earth with their roots, then just lying there, rotting. Where they had lain and rotted there would be a mound—where their roots had torn out the earth there would be hollows. But he read somewhere—fairly recently, and he wishes he could remember where it was—that the cause was what happened long ago, just after the Ice Age, when ice formed between layers of earth and pushed it up into odd humps, just as it does today in the arctic regions. Where the land has not been cleared and worked the humps remain.

What happens to Roy now is the most ordinary and yet the most unbelievable thing. It is what might happen to any stupid

daydreamer walking in the bush, to any holidayer gawking around at nature, to somebody who thought the bush was a kind of park to stroll in. Somebody who wore light shoes instead of boots and didn't bother to keep an eye on the ground. It has never happened to Roy before in hundreds of times of walking in the bush, it has never once come near to happening.

A light snow has been falling for some time, making the earth and dead leaves slippery. One of his feet skids and twists, and then the other foot plunges through a cover of snowy brush to the ground, which is farther down than he expected. That is, he steps carelessly—is thrown, almost—into the sort of spot where you should always step testingly, carefully, and not at all if you can see a nearby place that is better. Even so, what happens? He doesn't go down hard, it's not as if he has stumbled into a groundhog hole. He is thrown off balance, but he sways reluctantly, almost disbelievingly, then goes down with the skidding foot caught somehow under the other leg. He holds the saw out from himself as he falls, and flings the ax clear. But not clear enough—the ax handle hits him hard, against the knee of his twisted leg. The saw has pulled him over in its direction but at least he hasn't fallen against it.

He has felt himself go down almost in slow motion, thoughtfully and inevitably. He could have broken a rib, but he didn't. And the ax handle could have flown up and hit him in the face, but it didn't. He could have gashed his leg. He thinks of all these possibilities not with immediate relief, but as if he can't be sure yet that they have not happened. Because the way this started—the way he skidded and stepped onto the brush and fell—was so stupid and awkward, so hard to believe, that any preposterous outcome could follow.

He starts to pull himself up. Both knees hurt—one from being hit by the handle and one from coming down hard on the ground. He gets hold of the trunk of a young cherry tree—where he could have bashed his head—and pulls himself up gradually. Tentatively he puts weight on one foot and just touches the ground with the other—the

one that skidded and twisted underneath him. In a minute he'll try it. He bends to pick up the saw and nearly buckles again. A pain shoots up from the ground and doesn't stop till it reaches his skull. He forgets the saw, straightens up, not sure where the pain started. That foot—did he put weight on it as he bent over? The pain has drawn back into that ankle. He straightens the leg as much as he can, considering it, then very cautiously tries the foot on the ground, tries his weight. He can't believe the pain. He can't believe that it would continue so, could continue to defeat him. The ankle must be more than twisted—it must be sprained. Could it be broken? In his boot it doesn't look any different from his other, faithful, ankle.

He knows that he will have to bear it. He will have to get used to it to get out of here. And he keeps trying, but he does not make any progress. He can't set his weight on it. It must be broken. A broken ankle—even that is surely a minor injury, the sort of thing old ladies get when they slip on the ice. He has been lucky. A broken ankle, a minor injury. Nevertheless he can't take a step. He can't walk.

What he understands, finally, is that in order to get back to the truck he's going to have to abandon his ax and his chain saw and get down on his hands and knees and crawl. He lets himself down as easily as he can and hauls himself around into the track of his bootprints, which are now filling with snow. He thinks to check the pocket where his keys are, making sure it's zipped. He shakes off his cap and lets it lie—the peak interferes with his vision. Now the snow is falling on his bare head. But it's not so cold. Once he accepts crawling as a method of locomotion it's not bad—that is, it's not impossible, though it's hard on his hands and his good knee. He's careful enough now, dragging himself over the brush and through the saplings, over the hummocky ground. Even if he gets a little bit of a slope to roll himself down, he doesn't dare—he has to guard the bad leg. He's glad he didn't track through any boggy places and he's glad he didn't wait any longer before starting back; the snow is getting heavier and his prints

are almost blotted out. Without that track to follow it would be hard to know, at ground level, whether he was going the right way.

The situation, which seemed at first so unreal to him, is getting to seem more natural. Going along on hands and elbows and the one knee, close to the ground, testing a log for rot, then pulling himself over it on his stomach, getting his hands full of rotten leaves and dirt and snow—he can't keep his gloves on, can't get the proper hold and feel of things on the bush floor except with his cold bare scratched hands—he is no longer surprised at himself. He doesn't think anymore about his ax and his saw back there, though at first he could hardly pull himself away from them. He scarcely thinks back as far as the accident itself. It happened, no matter how. The whole thing no longer seems in the least unbelievable or unnatural.

There is a fairly steep bank to get up, and when he reaches it he takes a breather, relieved to have come this far. He warms his hands inside his jacket, one at a time. For some reason he thinks of Diane in her unbecoming red ski jacket and decides that her life is her life, there is not much use worrying about it. And he thinks of his wife, pretending to laugh at the television. Her quietness. At least she's fed and warm, she isn't some refugee shuffling along the roads. Worse things happen, he thinks. Worse things.

He starts up the bank, digging in his elbows and his sore but serviceable knee where he can. He keeps going; he grits his teeth as if that will keep him from sliding back; he grabs at any exposed root or halfway-sturdy stem that he can see. Sometimes he slides, his hold breaks, but he gets himself stopped and inches upwards again. He never raises his head to judge how far he still has to go. If he pretends the incline goes on forever, it'll be a kind of bonus, a surprise, to get to the top.

It takes a long time. But he pulls himself onto level ground at last, and through the trees ahead and the falling snow he can see the truck. The truck, the old red Mazda, a faithful old friend, miraculously waiting. Being on the level raises his expectations of himself again and he gets onto his knees, going easy, easy on the bad leg, rises shakily

onto his good leg, dragging the other, swaying like a drunk. He tries a sort of hop. No good—he'd lose his balance that way. He tries a little weight on the bad leg, just gently, and realizes that the pain could make him black out. He sinks back to the old position and crawls. But instead of crawling through the trees towards the truck he turns at right angles and makes for where he knows the track to be. When he gets there he begins to make better time, crawling over the hard ruts, the mud that has thawed in the daylight but is now starting to freeze again. It's cruel on the knee and his palms but otherwise so much easier than the route he had to take before that he feels almost light-headed. He can see the truck ahead. Looking at him, waiting for him.

He'll be able to drive. So lucky the damage is to the left leg. Now that the worst is over a lot of vexing questions come at him, along with his relief. Who will go and get the saw and the ax for him, how can he explain to anybody just where to find them? How soon will the snow cover them up? When will he be able to walk?

No use. He pushes all that away, raises his head to get another encouraging look at the truck. He stops again to rest and warm his hands. He could put his gloves on now, but why ruin them?

A large bird rises out of the bush to one side of him and he cranes his neck to see what it is. He thinks it's a hawk, but it could be a buzzard. If it's a buzzard will it have its eye on him, thinking it's in luck now, seeing he's hurt?

He waits to see it circle back, so he can tell what it is by the manner of its flight, and its wings.

And while he's doing that, while he's waiting, and taking note of the bird's wings—it is a buzzard—he is also getting a drastically new idea about the story that has preoccupied him for the last twenty-four hours.

The truck is moving. When did it start? When he was watching the bird? At first just a little movement, a wobble in the ruts—it could almost be a hallucination. But he can hear the engine. It's going. Did somebody just get into it while he was distracted, or was somebody

waiting in it all the time? Surely he locked it, and he has the keys with him. He feels his zipped pocket again. Someone stealing the truck in front of his eyes and without the keys. He hollers and waves, from his crouched position—as if that would do any good. But the truck isn't backing into the turnaround to drive out; it's bumping along the track straight at him, and now the person driving it is honking the horn, not in a warning but a greeting way, and slowing down.

He sees who it is.

The only person who has the other set of keys. The only person it could be. Lea.

He struggles to get his weight onto the one leg. She jumps out of the truck and runs to him and supports him.

"I just went down," he tells her, panting. "It was the dumbest damn thing I ever did in my life." Then he thinks to ask how she got here.

"Well, I didn't fly," she says.

She came in the car, she says—she speaks just as if she'd never given up driving at all—she came in the car but she left it back at the road.

"It's way too light for this track," she says. "And I thought I might get stuck. But I wouldn't've, the mud's froze hard.

"I could see the truck," she says. "So I just walked in and when I got to it I unlocked it and got in and sat there. I figured you'd be coming back soon, seeing it's snowing. But I never figured you'd be doing it on your hands and knees."

The walk, or maybe the cold, has brightened her face and sharpened her voice. She gets down and looks at his ankle, says she thinks it's swollen.

"Could have been worse," he says.

She says this was the one time she hadn't been worried. The one time she wasn't and she should have been. (He doesn't bother telling her that she hasn't shown worry about anything for a matter of months.) She didn't have a single premonition.

“I just came to meet you to tell you,” she says, “because I couldn’t wait to tell you. This idea I got when the woman was working on me. Then I saw you crawling. And I thought, *Oh my God*.

What idea?

“Oh that,” she says. “Oh—well, I don’t know what you’ll think. I could tell you later. We gotta get your ankle fixed.”

What idea?

Her idea is that the outfit Percy heard about doesn’t exist. Percy heard some talk but not about some strangers getting a license to log the bush. What he heard was all about Roy himself.

“Because that old Eliot Suter is all big talk. I know that family, his wife was Annie Poole’s sister. He’s going round blowing about the deal he got and added on to it quite a bit and first thing what have you? Ends up the River Inn for good measure and a hundred cords a day. Somebody drinking beer and listening in on somebody else drinking beer and there you are. And you have got a kind of a contract—I mean you’ve got an agreement—”

“It may be stupid all right—” Roy says.

“I knew you’d say that but you think about it—”

“It may be stupid but it’s the same idea I had myself about five minutes ago.”

And this is so. This is what came to him when he was looking up at the buzzard.

“So there you are,” Lea says, with a satisfied laugh. “Everything remotely connected with the inn, it just turns into some big story. Some big-money kind of a story.”

That was it, he thinks. He was hearing about himself. All the ruction comes back to himself.

The bulldozer isn’t coming. The men with the chain saws are not converging. The ash, the maple, the beech, the ironwood, the cherry, are all safe for him. For the time being, all safe.

Lea is out of breath with the effort of supporting him, but able to say, “Great minds think alike.”

This is not the moment to mention the change in her. No more than you'd call your congratulations to somebody up on a ladder.

He has knocked his foot hoisting himself—and partly being hoisted—into the passenger seat of the truck. He groans, and it's a different kind of groan than would come out of him if he was alone. It's not that he means to dramatize the pain, just that he takes this way of describing it to his wife.

Or even offering it to his wife. Because he knows that he isn't feeling quite the way he thought he would if her vitality came back to her. And the noise he makes could be to cover that lack, or excuse it. Of course it's natural that he'd feel a bit cautious, not knowing if this is for good, or just a flash in the pan.

But even if it is for good, even if it's all good there's something more. Some loss fogging up this gain. Some loss he'd be ashamed to admit to, if he had the energy.

The dark and the snow are too thick for him to see beyond the first trees. He's been in there before at this time, when the dark shuts down in early winter. But now he pays attention, he notices something about the bush that he thinks he has missed those other times. How tangled up in itself it is, how dense and secret. It's not a matter of one tree after another, it's all the trees together, aiding and abetting one another and weaving into one thing. A transformation, behind your back.

There's another name for the bush, and this name is stalking around in his mind, in and out of where he can almost grasp it. But not quite. It's a tall word that seems ominous but indifferent.

"I left the ax," he says mechanically. "I left the saw."

"So what if you did. We'll find somebody to go and get them."

"And there's the car too. Are you going to get out and drive that and let me take the truck?"

"Are you insane?"

Her voice is absentminded, because she is in the process of backing the truck into the turnaround. Slowly but not too slowly,

bouncing in the ruts but keeping on the track. He is not used to the rearview mirrors from this angle, so he lowers the window and cranes around, getting the snow in his face. This is not just to see how she's doing but to clear to a certain extent the warm wooziness coming on him.

"Easy," he says. "That's it. Easy. Okay now. You're okay. You're okay."

While he is saying this she is saying something about the hospital. "... get them to take a look at you. First things first."

To his knowledge, she has never driven the truck before.

It's remarkable the way she manages it.

Forest. That's the word. Not a strange word at all but one he has possibly never used. A formality about it that he would usually back away from.

"The Deserted Forest," he says, as if that put the cap on something.

Irony at the Opera

The case of The Secret Agent

James Berger

We know that music can be ironic. Think of old Bugs Bunny

cartoons, or the Marx Brothers, the way that pompous music is juxtaposed with silly actions, or silly music with pompous characters, to create a sense of anarchy and joyous transgression of social boundaries. There can also be music that invokes irony, but isn't ironic at all, as in the Alanis Morissette song of a few years back: Not only are almost none of her examples of irony ironic, but the music also creates no ironic effect. It's just a tune that carries the words along jauntily and with perfect neutrality. Ironic music is not neutral. It comments, it's got a point to make, generally in opposition to an established order or set of assumptions—and, more immediately, in some contrary relation to the text or lyrics it's supposed to be supporting. Musical irony is about inflation and deflation: Something or someone is puffed up and then a phrase of music bursts the bubble. But how does that work? And especially, how does musical irony work when you're telling a story? Or, more specifically, in the case I'll be presenting, in trying to set a highly ironic novel to music as an opera?

I have yet to read a novel more fundamentally ironic than Joseph Conrad's *The Secret Agent* (1907), and in March 2011, I got to see the world premiere of composer Michael Dellaira's operatic adaptation of it, using a libretto by poet J.D. McClatchy. This novel is one of Conrad's very best, but not one of the most widely read, so I'll give a quick review of the plot. Adolph Verloc, the secret agent of the title, is a paid informer for a foreign government living in England. He is summoned to appear at the embassy to meet with his master. There he is castigated as lazy and corpulent. The anarchist faction that he has infiltrated has been entirely inactive and so Verloc's reports are useless. If Verloc wishes to be paid in the future, an anarchist outrage must be perpetrated. The foreign government desires that England crack down on the anarchists and, it is hoped, curtail the country's precious civil liberties in doing so, which would weaken England's prestige and influence. Thus, if the anarchists are

too timid or incompetent to perform an act of terror, Verloc must concoct one himself that can be blamed on them. Verloc leaves this meeting deeply disquieted.

We then see the motley band of anarchists gathered in Verloc's shop, where he sells stationary and pornography. It is clear that this radical crew is, in fact, all talk and constitutionally incapable of any radical action. But we are also introduced to the one character in the novel who takes seriously the radical rhetoric regarding the injustices of capitalism: Stevie, the younger brother of Verloc's wife, Winnie. Stevie has some congenital cognitive impairment. He has been to school and can read, but cannot hold a job or care for himself. In the terminology of the day, Stevie is feeble-minded—though also passionately, even violently, opposed to all injustice and cruelty (especially because he was frequently beaten by his father when he was young), and he seethes when he hears the anarchists speak of the treatment of prisoners and of the poor. Winnie has devoted her life to protecting Stevie; she married Verloc because she trusted that he would provide for them both. Stevie regards Verloc as the perfect and virtuous father he never had, though Verloc is quite oblivious to Stevie's existence.

The novel jumps forward in time, not obviously and without warning. There has been a failed terrorist attack on the Greenwich Observatory. A bomb went off prematurely, and the utterly detonated remains of the bomber have been recovered. The police investigate. Gradually, we learn, in retrospect, that Verloc took advantage of Stevie's idealism and of his devotion to him and made Stevie his accomplice in the attack on the observatory. Stevie, unfortunately, tripped over a tree root and the bomb went off. When Winnie learns of her brother's death, she becomes unhinged and murders her husband with a kitchen knife.

The story then ends in one of two ways. The novel ends one way. A dramatization of the novel that Conrad wrote in 1922 ends another way. We'll get to the consequences of choosing one or the other later in this essay. But even this small plot summary should

make clear, first, that all the novel's characters are loathsome, with the exceptions of Stevie and Winnie, who are ineffectual and out of control; and second, that the narrative is dismally depressing. But what the plot summary does not show is that *The Secret Agent* is also a very funny book. How *that* is possible requires a discussion of how the novel's irony works.

The crucial tool of irony in *The Secret Agent* is the narrative voice that Conrad created for it—the voice of a consciousness that always seems to know a bit more than it lets on, and that describes each character and action in a way that corrodes their surfaces and reveals the corruptions underneath. This narrative voice tells the story as a continual counterargument to the empty pretensions, hypocrisies, and semi-conscious self-aggrandizements of the characters. The book is already operatic in this sense, always advancing two distinct and opposing melodies. The plot of the novel is dark enough; the experience of reading it is made even darker through this acidic continuo that precludes any moral alternative to the social-political status quo. Police, anarchists, and government ministers are equally corrupt, lazy, and ineffectual. Language itself is a set of clichés and circumlocutions—the “current words,” as one character puts it.

The novel offers a way out, though it's not an entirely comforting one. There is Stevie, the “feeble-minded” or “mentally defective” boy (to use the “current words” of Conrad's time), who grows up listening to the rantings of the anarchists who meet in his home and, as his sister Winnie laments, takes those empty rantings seriously. Stevie is genuinely opposed to selfishness and cruelty. In one of the most crucial scenes of the novel, Stevie observes a coachman whipping his horse and tells the man to stop. The man then tells Stevie of his own financial and personal woes, and Stevie struggles mightily to articulate some ethically essential axiom through which he might understand the unjust society he lives in. “Bad world for poor people,” he finally blurts out. And to top it off, an image appears to

Stevie of taking both horse and coachman into bed with him, for in his experience “a bed of compassion” is the supreme remedy for all ills. The ever-deflating narrator adds that such a remedy has, as its only drawback, its being “difficult of application on a large scale.” So much for private solutions to systemic injustices. But Stevie, in the end, blows himself up; as a police detective in the novel observes, he uniquely is “unaccountable” in an age in which everything can be defined and quantified. This suggests that the potential escape from the novel’s—and society’s—moral and symbolic impasses lies only through mental incompetence, self-detonation, and removal from all means of accounting, which then leaves, again, only the vicious irony of the narrative voice as what passes for the novel’s moral center.

The composer and librettist seeking to capture the tone of *The Secret Agent* must then, first and foremost, find a musical equivalent to the novel’s irony. There should, for example, be a distinct musical style for Stevie, whose cognitive and moral apprehensions are so different from all the other characters—yet even this style can’t lose the novel’s undermining narrative irony. How can a composer write music that will carry the countering voice to all the story’s character and action? In the case of Dellaira, the answer is, unfortunately, that he simply doesn’t. The music he writes is good music. It’s dramatic and moves the story along; it’s modern, though not modernist, in its musical vocabulary, and well orchestrated, with vocal lines that nicely convey the feelings the characters are expressing. It adds up to a kind of updated Puccini in its emotional effect on the audience, which is no small compliment. If one comes to the opera with no knowledge of the novel, one experiences a pretty good night at the opera. And I understand that probably that was exactly Dellaira and McClatchy’s goal. The story is topical in that it involves terrorism, and its cynicism is apparent even without the ironic counter-voice. And the sister Winnie is given several very moving scenes, which were performed exceptionally well by Amy Burton. But Conrad’s *Secret Agent* is working at a far higher level of art and of moral, political, and semiotic understanding. What if a composer aimed

somewhat closer to that level? How would he do it? How have composers and librettists tried for similar effects in the past? A few historical examples suggest a few ways that the opera of *The Secret Agent* could approach the irony of the novel.

In one of the earliest operas, Monteverdi's *Coronation of Poppea* (1642), two brutal, conscienceless protagonists lie and murder their way to power. Yet, in the final scene, when the triumphant Nero and Poppea sing of their passion and love for each other, the music portrays none of the evil that marked these characters through the entire story. The music is sublime, unspeakably beautiful, a music of the purest, highest, most sensual and spiritual love. What could this mean? Can such villainy and such love—and such beauty—really exist together? For Monteverdi, the answer is yes, and emphatically so. The beauty and truth of the music in no way mitigates Nero's and Poppea's evil actions. And yet their final duet proclaims just as surely that their love for each other is real. The incongruity of music to character presents us with a moral paradox about the nature of love and the nature of art, that there is no necessary connection between moral action and either beauty or erotic love.

A similar irony regarding the incongruity of beauty is revealed in Richard Strauss's opera *Intermezzo* (1924), in which a composer and his wife have a dull marriage. He travels a great deal. She enters into a flirtation with a younger man, but it develops no further. The husband returns and there are some mutual recriminations. Finally, domestic accord is restored. The opera's story is intentionally banal; perhaps *banal* is even too vivid a term. The story is dull and the characters markedly deficient in passion or wit. The music, however, is astonishingly rich, inventive, swirling, and profound, as if composed for some other story, other characters. Again one asks why—why freight the tedious narrative with brilliant music? I'm not entirely sure, and it's difficult to consider *Intermezzo* a success in purely dramatic terms. The story drags down the music as much as the music lifts the story, and they struggle more or less to a draw. My sense, though, is that Strauss

intended this loosely autobiographical work—to which his wife, Pauline, responded with anger—as an ironic commentary on the creative process. An artist's life, the opera seems to say, may be completely ordinary, his personality dull, his muse superficial, yet somehow, out of this unlikely soil, comes great art. There's no explanation. The fact of the music must suffice.

Irony happens in nonoperatic music as well. Shostakovich mimicked the heroic style Soviet authorities favored to create ironic pastiches of nationalist gestures and subversive excavations. In Mahler, the juxtaposition of folk and popular genres—including music that sounds like klezmer at times—with high German orchestral seriousness has been argued indicate the composer's sense of alienation from both his Jewishness and his German musical classicism. There seems to be no place for the music to find a home, culturally and tonally speaking; in that sense, perhaps, it's a harbinger of the atonality in Schoenberg's twelve-tone compositions. In all these examples, irony emerges out of a tension between a thematic or narrative element and the music. We can add here the way bebop musicians used old standards and tin-pan alley songs—which were no strangers to irony themselves—as the bases for their improvisations, reinterpreting them by making them cooler or hotter, with detachment and immersion, adding rhythmic and harmonic complexity. Writing sad lyrics to happy melodies is a staple of good pop and country songwriting. Hip hop is full of examples of ironic sampling. And then, of course, there is music for cartoons. Ironic music does not simply or unambiguously express character, motive, theme, or action, but comments on them, often working against them.

So what could Dellaira and McClatchy have done musically that might convey the irony that is inseparable from Conrad's narrative in *The Secret Agent*? Their challenge is different from the sorts that Monteverdi and Strauss took on: It is not beauty that would create the ironic commentary on unlovely action and character, but something not beautiful at all. First, our composer and librettist must

attend to Stevie, the character whom the novel renders as uniquely “unaccountable.” His music must be somehow qualitatively, incomparably different from any other in the opera. There are precedents for approaching this problem as well. In Mozart’s *Abduction from the Seraglio*, the character of the Pasha is unique: Amid all the vectors of desire that construct the plot of this opera, the Pasha’s love for Constanza is rational and ethical—notwithstanding, of course, that he had her captured and confined in the first place. That aside, when he realizes that she truly loves Bellmonte, he releases her and blesses their union. How did Mozart compose music for this rational-ethical anomaly and paragon? He didn’t: The Pasha does not sing. In this comic opera of lovers reunited, there is no music for him. Music is the vehicle and fuel of passion, from which he has been removed. Reason and ethics are expressed in spoken language. It may be that Mozart, in this early opera, did not yet know how to write music of reason and ethics. That skill he mastered when he wrote the music for the Pasha’s mighty successor: Sarastro in *The Magic Flute*, whose music, George Bernard Shaw declared, is the “only music which might be put into the mouth of God without blasphemy.” Benjamin Britten, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, deals with a similar problem when composing music for the fairies. Oberon sings as an unearthly countertenor, and Puck doesn’t sing, but shouts his lines. In *Death in Venice*, Britten cast Tadzio, the object of Aschenbach’s fatal desire, as a dancer, always on stage and always silent. Perhaps most relevant to Stevie is Modest Musorgsky’s introduction of the Holy Fool at the end of *Boris Godunov*. The Fool is an outcast, tormented by a small horde of boys who steal his single kopek; he calls to Boris for protection but then refuses him forgiveness, and he ends the opera with a prophecy of Russia’s future troubles. Musically, the Fool is an outcast as well. In an opera dominated by low male voices, the Fool is a high tenor, and amid music that most often is inflected by folk melodies or else placed in enormous architectural harmonies, the Fool’s high melodic lines are

like wails, almost unaccompanied and almost nonverbal. Mussorgsky understood that the Fool had to be distinct and set apart, and musically made him so.

In a more ironic version of *The Secret Agent*, the scene with the horse and the coachman could be a scene in itself, not just presented early in the opera as a recollection, as Dellaira and McClatchy portray it. Stevie must act, and there must be strange, stammering, difficult music in which his thoughts partially cohere: *Bad world for poor people*. The scene could be a nightmare, unsettling and strange, with a distinct contrast between Stevie's vocal lines and whatever the orchestra is playing; for the orchestra is, at that point, the world as it is, the world proceeding normally with its normal senselessness and brutality. And then there could be—perhaps the opera is lost without it—an aria for Stevie's "bed of compassion" idea, to which the orchestra would respond with the same restrained ridicule as the narrator, that such a solution to social ills has only the one drawback of being "difficult of application on a large scale." In this juxtaposition, the story's politics would be most brutally exposed.

The real politics in *The Secret Agent* is not terrorism, as the opera's creators seem to believe. The explosion itself is not an act of terrorism, but a paid provocation and an act of manslaughter. *The Secret Agent* centers around the systemic impossibility of justice, the fact that there is no valid vocabulary for it, or in the case of opera, no music for it. The music for Stevie—the voice of justice, incommensurable, unaccountable, mentally damaged and ultimately destroyed—must find a way to convey this. In contrast, the orchestral music must be the poisonous, ironic echo chamber of the status quo, the "current words," the way of thinking that precludes all others, the universal currency of self-interest and self-regard. How is this to be done? One possibility is to use and distort popular forms, to employ almost cartoonish music, or to formalize ballad and dance forms along the lines explored by Kurt Weill—any way that the orchestra can establish itself as not organic to the vocal lines, or to the characters' thoughts and motives. None of the characters, of course, think

of themselves as morally or physically grotesque. All believe they act with the best of intentions. In their words and voices, they tell us what they want to tell us, the anarchists, the diplomats, the police, Verloc. The music tells us otherwise. And in that gap would reside the opera's irony and meaning—a gap that Dellaira and McClatchy never open.

Or not quite never. At one point in the opera, Dellaira composes in a direction close to the one I am indicating. At a party at the house of the rich patroness with political pretensions, the assistant commissioner of police comes to pay his respects and mingle with the assorted artists, anarchists, government ministers, and diplomats. This is after the mysterious, potentially destabilizing explosion, after the police discover the remains of the bomber and the piece of his jacket, to which an address label had been sewn. (“How do you account for this?” he had demanded of the chagrined police inspector. ‘I don’t account for it at all sir,’ the inspector had stammered. ‘It’s unaccountable.’”). As the party and its minglings proceed, there is musical entertainment: A newly arrived singer performs Schubert’s “Der Erlkönig” for the guests, allowing a brilliant touch by Dellaira and McClatchy. This song, set to Goethe’s poem—one of the most famous and emotionally powerful in the classical canon—tells the story of a boy and his father riding home through the forest. The boy feels the presence of the erlking, a magical being who abducts children, and tells his father, but the father dismisses his fears. Again and again, the boy cries out at the erlking’s presence. At last, the erlking takes the boy’s spirit, and the father reaches home carrying his corpse. The song recapitulates the opera’s story. Stevie is walking with his sister’s husband, Verloc, the secret agent, whom he idolizes and regards as a father, though Verloc, in fact, has no paternal feelings for Stevie and uses his devotion to persuade him to venture the bombing of the observatory. Stevie then carries the bomb toward the observatory, slips and falls, and dies. The father figure returns home with not even a corpse. Dellaira and McClatchy’s cleverness lies in

recontextualizing the action, giving it a new reference against which to create meaning. Stevie's horrible death is juxtaposed with an elite culture that cares nothing for him and will soon regard him as a danger to decent society who, fortunately, destroyed himself before he could harm others. Schubert's song, set at a social gathering where the currency is trivia and deception, becomes part of the "current words," the dominant ideology from which Stevie is excluded.

But unfortunately, this is the only instance of an ironizing, recontextualizing use of music. The rest simply propels the opera's story without comment—ably, dramatically, but finally, for me, without meaning. This lack shows itself with renewed force in the revision of the novel's ending. In the 1907 novel, Conrad's 1922 dramatization, and McClatchy's libretto, when Winnie discovers that Verloc was responsible for her brother's detonation, her horror and rage overwhelm her sanity and she stabs Verloc to death. She is then overcome with fear of the law and execution, and at that moment, Ossipon, the most dashing and despicable of the anarchists, drops in. Winnie throws herself at his mercy, pleading for him to save her. When she shows him the money that Verloc withdrew from the bank, Ossipon proclaims himself her champion. Here the novel and the opera diverge. In the opera, Ossipon takes the money and tells Winnie to wait there at home while he goes to purchase train and boat tickets. After he leaves, the police inspector enters, finds Verloc's body, and tries unsuccessfully to question a now utterly traumatized Winnie. Then, another police officer enters with Ossipon in custody. Ossipon is assumed to be the murderer and is taken away. There is a brief interchange with another anarchist, the Professor, who has just wandered in, in which the inspector informs him forcefully that he and all terrorists are nothing but "blood and dirt. The whole lot of you." And the opera ends with Winnie, as the official synopsis puts it, "curled in a corner, ruined and alone."

It's quite a sad ending, but also the wrong one—even though McClatchy took it from Conrad's own dramatization of the novel of 1922. Fifteen years after he wrote the novel, Conrad apparently felt

that Winnie's deranged presence was required at the end, to create the right dramatic, tragic effect. But he shouldn't have second-guessed himself, because the novel had it right. Winnie's absence in the original ending allows the novel's narrative irony to reach a more crushing conclusion than a scene of madness does. Here is how the novel ends. Winnie and Ossipon leave the shop where Verloc's body lies. They go to the train station where Ossipon purchases, with Winnie's money, tickets for the train and a boat across the channel. At a stop just before the harbor, Ossipon takes the money and, leaping from the train, abandons Winnie. The next scene is some weeks later, in a café, where a noticeably disheveled and dispirited Ossipon obsessively reads a newspaper clipping reporting the news of the "lady suicide" who jumped from the channel boat: "an impenetrable mystery seems destined to hang forever over this act of madness or despair." In this journalistic exclamation, the "unaccountable" merges with the "current words," and Ossipon—a faux anarchist thoroughly associated with the current words in every sense—descends into unaccountability as Winnie has now, like Stevie, sunk into oblivion. This is not a tragic ending; it is thoroughly hideous and horrifying, without any of the redemptive promise that tragedy can offer. In a preface Conrad published for a later edition of the novel, he protested that he had not "intended to commit a gratuitous outrage on the feelings of mankind." We can well understand how he thought the novel might have this effect. In fact it does; and it should. Stevie's and Winnie's fates, and the social structures that facilitated them, are nothing if not gratuitous outrages.

But how could the original ending work musically? In our more ironic opera of *The Secret Agent*, we would hear the transformation of Ossipon's music from a lighter, popular, perhaps dancehall sort of music to something resembling Stevie's stammering tones, the movement from "current words" toward the "unaccountable," with the orchestra—like the newspaper, like the culture at large—maintaining its insouciance through every violation of human life and

dignity. Who would have the final word? The orchestra, I think, the agent of irony.

I think this could be done. If I had the compositional ability, I'd try to do it myself. There is melody and countermelody, and melody at cross purpose; there is music that knows what the operatic character does not know. There may or may not be any music of the spheres, but there is certainly a music—there is a lot of music—of the realm of social understanding, the “current words.” And there must be then the possibility of a music for what the current words cannot account for.

Two Poems

James May

Late Coleridge

In their drawing room, they had at one side a mirror that filled an entire wall. When he rose to leave, Coleridge would inevitably start to walk into the mirror.

—Walter Jackson Bate

If it gets to that point and, leaving,
you walk toward what seems the greatest,
most open space, but find instead yourself,
a jowly mess, pale as the settee

where friends flinch on the peripheral
(one stands halfway up, out of pity,

not sympathy), admit that this stumble
was no mistake but rather a symptom

of that uncertainty you've felt
unfurling in you like a slow sore throat.

The clock, the brass girandole, the thumb-
width flames drilling through wax, all obscured

because you see too much of what you didn't.
Stand there. Breathe. Watch it all cloud over.

The Problem with Poems that Describe Love

A long-planned-for day of no plans. We woke
gradually, warm skin warming the other's,

while last night's rain
continued darkening all the new green
we'd failed to comment on during the week.

And after letting Heika out into the backyard
where she scattered the suddenly

legible rabbits to safer places
in the thickening English ivy below the azaleas,

we went back inside to finish our coffee
and the board game from the night before—

All our words making other words.
The strange way the name for a letter

needs more than itself to spell itself.

The Axiom of Choice

David W. Goldman

The incident in the story's penultimate scene comes from something I stumbled upon several years ago—a message from a defunct e-mail discussion list that had been copied to a website (by now, also defunct).

In his 1996 message, Mike Beauchamp described a concert he'd just attended at the Brantford (Ontario) Folk Club. During one song introduction, musician Michael Doyle related an anecdote about reassuring an earlier listener that travelers always come back. Someone a few rows behind Beauchamp commented, "Sometimes they don't come back." Sitting in that section was Ariel Rogers, widow of legendary Canadian singer-songwriter Stan Rogers—victim of a 1983 airplane disaster.

"I think," Beauchamp wrote, "there is a song in there somewhere to be written."

301

The guy mentions a town that means nothing to you, but the remark topples Paul into laughter. Into his big, rumbling belly laugh, the one so deep and generous that during a gig it never fails to convince the audience that they're all in on the joke with you and him.

The three of you have lingered outside the darkened club an hour beyond the show's end. Your palms rest atop your guitar case, which stands vertical before you on the cracked sidewalk. Standing not quite as vertical, Paul steadies himself by pressing a hand against the club's brick wall, just below a photocopied poster bearing an image of his face looking very serious. (DYNAMIC SINGER-SONGWRITER PAUL MURONI! says the poster. Your name appears lower down, in smaller type.) One corner of the poster has come loose. It flips back and forth in the unseasonably warm gusts that blow down the narrow street.

“But really,” says the guy, some old friend of Paul’s whose name you’ve already forgotten, “why should you two spend tomorrow driving way up the coast for one damn gig, and then all the way back the next day? I’ll fly you there tonight in my Cessna—tomorrow you can sleep in as long as you like.” His arms sweep broad arcs when he speaks, the streetlamp across the road glinting off the near-empty bottle in his grip.

Paul rubs the back of his hand against his forehead, the way he always does when he’s tired. You’re both tired, three weeks into a tour of what seem like the smallest clubs in the most out-of-the-way towns along the twistiest roads in New England.

Paul looks at you, his eyes a bit blurry. “What do you think?” There’s a blur to his voice, too. “I’m in no condition for decisions.”

You’re not sure that your qualifications for decision making are any better than his, given not only your sleep deprivation, but also the beers during the gig and the fifth of Scotch that the three of you have been passing around since.

If you ask Paul’s friend to let you both spend the night here in town on the floor of his apartment, go to section 304.

If the thought of sleeping in until noon is too tempting to pass up, go to section 307.

304

This would be a different story.

Go to section 307.

307

The third time the little plane plummets and steadies, its propeller’s buzz nearly lost beyond the pounding of rain on the cold aluminum hull, you turn to Paul.

“You know, maybe this wasn’t the best decision.”

But Paul's snores continue uninterrupted.

Usually you're the one who can sleep anywhere, anytime. Tonight, though, Paul has achieved a blend of exhaustion and inebriation that's vaulted him into a league beyond even your abilities.

"Hey," shouts Paul's friend, twisting around from the pilot seat, his head a silhouette in the dim glow of the control panel. "You ever used a parachute?"

For an instant you're aware of nothing but your own heartbeat.

Then the friend cackles. "Just kidding! Flown through worse than this, dozens of times. You two just sit back and enjoy the scenery."

You peer out the dark porthole. The only scenery is the shivering wing above, illuminated ghost-like in the fan of the plane's lights.

The plane bounces again. You picture aerial potholes.

If you unstrap yourself to check on your guitar in the back of the cabin, go to section 310.

If you pound on the pilot's seat and demand that he turn the plane around, go to section 312.

310

Go to section 324.

312

Go to section 324.

324

Ice-cold water splashes your face.

If you keep your eyes shut tight and try to ignore the water, go to section 325.

If you're confused about where you are and how you got here, go to section 326.

325

Ice-cold water splashes your face. You're terribly cold, except for your arms. You can't feel your arms.

If you wonder why you're so cold, go to section 327.

If you wonder what's wrong with your arms, go to section 328.

326

This is not the choice you make.

So this section doesn't really need to be here. If it were omitted, its absence wouldn't affect your story.

Go to section 325.

328

Ice-cold water splashes your face. You open your eyes to blackness.

You're floating in freezing, heaving water. You spit out a mouthful of brine as you realize that your numb arms are wrapped around something. Whatever it is, it's the only thing keeping you afloat.

You remember the plane, and the storm. It's still raining now, the drops plinking against your scalp even as ocean sloshes into your mouth.

The last thing you can remember is aerial potholes.

You realize that something is tangled really tightly around your arms.

If you try to work your arms free, go to section 335.

If your consciousness fades, go

338

"Now *that* is a guitar case!"

You open your eyes. A few inches away, blue medical scrubs

wrap somebody's legs.

"The lining's not even damp." It's a woman's voice. The scrubs turn and she says, "Well, good morning, Sunshine! Joining us at last, are you?"

You blink and roll your head to look up toward her face. On the way you see the metal bed railing. Hospital, you think. The woman—in her early thirties probably, tall but pudgy, her brunette hair pulled into a ponytail, a stethoscope slung around her neck—is grinning at you. Nurse, you think.

She points to a bedside table on which your guitar case lies open. Your head is too low to see inside.

"Coast Guard brought it over this morning," she says. "Figured you'd like to keep it close, the way it saved your life and all."

You see the case's shoulder strap—tooled leather, custom-made, presented to you by a lover three, no, four years ago to replace the case's broken handle—dangling in two jaggedly truncated scraps from each of their rivets.

Maybe the nurse notices the direction of your gaze. "They had to cut you free when they got you out of the water. That strap was so tight that your hands—"

She stops, as if she's caught herself saying more than she intended.

You look at your hands, resting atop the bed covers. They're wrapped in so much gauze that they look like two cantaloupe mummies. Both arms are also thickly wrapped, nearly to the shoulder. You try to bend one, and then the other. They don't move. Your arms don't move. What the hell—

"Calm down!" says the nurse. "Just relax. Those splints have to stay on for a week. They spent a whole night working on you in the OR. You don't want to put all that effort to waste now, do you?"

You let your head settle back into the pillow.

Your tongue sticks to the roof of your mouth for a second when you try to talk. "Working on me?"

"Well." She reaches down to adjust the covers over your chest.

“Your hands got really banged up in the crash, and you were hypothermic, of course. And then that strap got tangled around your arms, choking off the circulation.”

“So they had to, what, restore the circulation?”

For a second she doesn't answer. She reaches up and pulls her ponytail over her shoulder, and then slowly runs her fingers through its end.

“Yes,” she says. “That's right.” A brunette curl wraps around her finger. “Also—”

She straightens and takes a step away. “I should tell the doctors that you're awake. They'll give you a full report.”

If you insist that she stop and tell you everything right now, go to section 341.

If you wait to hear what the doctors have to say, go to section 344.

341

“Well,” she says, “your right hand is going to be fine. Except that they had to amputate the end of your pinkie finger. Just the last joint.”

It takes you a moment to understand that word. Amputate.

But okay. Just the pinkie. You don't need that one to hold a pick. Not even finger picks. So that's okay. You'll still be able to play, no problem.

If that makes you think of Paul, and you ask how he's doing, go to section 350.

If you realize that the nurse hasn't said anything about Paul, nor the other guy, and you guess what her omissions must imply, and you recall that it was you who decided that flying would be the right choice, go to section 356.

“Okay,” you say. Your voice is louder than it needs to be, and you speak quickly, as if you’re drowning out some other voice. “And my left hand?”

Her finger tightens in her ponytail. “You’re right-handed, aren’t you?”

You nod. You’re busy trying to not think, so you don’t wonder why she asks that.

“There was more damage to your left hand. I’m afraid that they couldn’t save all the fingers.”

She has freckles across both cheeks. You hadn’t noticed that before. Her eyes are green, like the eyes of the cat you had as a kid.

“You still have your thumb, though. And your middle finger should be fine. So you’ll—”

If you think about Django Reinhardt, the Gypsy guitarist renowned for his prowess despite half his left hand being crippled by a fire, go to section 362.

If the only thing you can think about is how, just the other night, your biggest priority had been sleeping in until noon, go to section 373.

373

You stay in the hospital for three weeks. There’s a lot of pain, and two more surgeries. You don’t have insurance, of course, but the hospital’s social worker says that they’ll work out a payment plan for you. You meet her eyes when she says that; after a second she looks away.

This afternoon a therapist is making you squeeze a rubber ball with your left hand, but you keep dropping it. Each time he picks up the ball, without speaking, and puts it back into your hand. The two of you repeat this cycle for five minutes, glaring at each other.

Somebody punches you in the shoulder.

“Ow!” you say.

It’s your nurse, the one with the freckles. You didn’t notice her entrance.

“Get out,” she says to the therapist. Her eyes, though, are locked on your face.

“Look at your hand,” she tells you.

“What?”

“It’s why you can’t hold the ball. You never look at what you’re doing.”

“Fuck you,” you say. And you turn away.

So you aren’t watching when she reaches out and grabs your left wrist.

“Hey!”

She’s stronger than you, despite your panic. She yanks up the hand and holds it before your face. “Look at it.” Her other hand clamps onto your head so you can’t twist away.

So you do it. You look at the hand. At the intact but twisted middle finger. At the half forefinger, wriggling like a decapitated worm. At the puckered stumps at the hand’s outer edge.

“All right!” you shout at her. “I’m looking! Now let go!”

“No,” she replies. “You’re looking at this messed-up thing I’m holding. Now—” and suddenly you realize that her voice, this whole time, has been surprisingly gentle, almost a whisper, “—look at *your* hand.”

It’s not some immediate, magical thing. But after a few seconds you notice the thumb. And, yes, it’s your thumb, exactly the same as it’s always been. And that’s your palm, with all its familiar lines and creases, including the scar from when you fell onto a rock as a kid. And the fingers—the parts that are still there—those are yours, too.

You lift your other hand, and she releases her hold as you press your two palms together. You turn them back and forth, back and forth, studying what’s there. What’s not.

If, for the first time since the crash, you start crying, go to section 378.

If she's brought back a memory from your college philosophy class, go to section 125.

125

The professor is roaming the aisles between desks, as he always does, speaking about determinism and free will. You try to pay attention, but you were up all night at a party, jamming some blues with a hot piano player and a lukewarm fiddler while everybody else drifted home or fell asleep in the corners. Now the only things keeping you awake are the cup of dorm coffee you swallowed on the way to class, and the good-looking redhead two rows down, across the aisle.

Somebody punches you in the shoulder.

"Ow!" you say.

The professor stands beside you, massaging his fist. "What's wrong?" he asks.

"You punched me! Why did you do that?"

He looks confused. "What do you mean? Oh—my fist?" He studies it. "Well, my fist has free will. It hit you for no reason."

"What?" You know that you've fallen into one of his Philosophical Dialogues, but you're pissed. "Your fist doesn't have its own will. It does what *you* decide."

"Yes, I suppose that's true." He draws out the moment, as if you've just given him something novel to consider. "Well, *I* have free will. *I* punched you for no reason."

You notice the redhead watching you.

You say, "People don't do things for no reason."

"You endorse determinism, then? The claim that everything that happens is predetermined by what's happened before? So I punched you because, say, I wanted to get your attention. And I

wanted to get your attention because you were nodding off. And you were nodding off because—well, I suppose that’s none of my business, is it?”

Your classmates snicker. Except the redhead, who smiles and raises an eyebrow.

“But,” continues the professor, “don’t I have free will? Can’t I make unpredictable decisions, regardless of what’s come before?”

You’re about to speak when you have a sudden insight.

If you think you see how free will and determinism can coexist, how their apparent conflict is merely superficial, go to section 132.

If it strikes you that philosophy is bullshit, and after lunch you drop this course, and then pretty soon you decide to drop the whole university and become a professional musician, go to section 390.

390

You spend two more weeks in the hospital. The nurses explain about changing the bandages. The therapist gives you exercises to do, and a rubber ball.

When you’re discharged you try to leave your guitar behind. But the nurse with the freckles makes you take it.

You drive—of course you can drive, you’re right-handed—to Paul’s memorial service. Lisa, Paul’s wife, widow, hugs you tightly, careful to avoid your bandaged hands. You hug her back, but when you step apart there’s a piece of the way she looks at you that you can’t manage to interpret as sympathetic. Or friendly.

You sit in the rearmost row of folding chairs. The room fills with people all sitting still, watching and listening. Like a concert audience. Your forearms always tighten up right before a gig, and they do that now. But this time your legs tighten, too, and then they start shaking.

Somebody picks up a guitar to sing one of Paul’s songs. Your heart hammers at twice the song’s tempo as you push back your chair and sneak away.

You reach your apartment as the sun is setting. You lean the guitar case against its usual bookshelf. You're relieved to finally collapse into your own couch, surrounded by your comfortably familiar clutter. Then, after a few minutes, you take a closer look at your familiar clutter. CDs, sheet music, *Guitar Player* and *Dirty Linen* magazines, scattered picks, broken strings. The apartment doesn't feel so comfortable now.

You stare awhile at the telephone. But all your friends are musicians. You don't want to watch them as they try to say the right thing. As they try to not look at your hands.

If, despite all that, you do phone one of them, one of your oldest friends, go to section 402.

If you go out for a drive and after an hour come back with three fifths of Scotch, go to section 429.

429

Your savings—at least, the dollars you don't spend on the increasingly cheap whiskey that keeps you from hearing your own thoughts—let you hold onto the apartment for three months. The guitars and the mandolin buy you two more. It's nearly another two before the police show up for the eviction.

It's late spring by now, so your timing could have been worse. Your hand hurts a lot, though, and the prescriptions keep running out early—and your new pharmacy, who meets you each Wednesday in the alley behind the porn shop, isn't interested in your Medicaid card.

The guitar case—you've still got that. The way it saved your life and all. Also, with a rope tied to the strap-stumps you can sling it over your shoulder with all your stuff inside. The case whacks against your hip when you walk, but that's not so bad, and when the bottles in there clink against each other—on the happy occasions when there's more than one—you tell people that you're making music.

If you meet a guy at the shelter who convinces you to get into treatment, go to section 440.

If you tell that guy to go fuck himself, go to section 472.

472

You should, somehow, have gotten yourself down South someplace before winter arrived. Last night some asshole stole your shopping cart while you slept, so now your only possession that you're not wearing is the crappy cardboard sign asking people to help a vet. (It's pretty obvious that not everybody buys that when they first glance at you. But you always hold the sign with your left hand showing good and plain, and then nobody asks anything.)

This afternoon you kind of lost track of the time, and when you finally got to the shelter it was full. So now you're heading toward the bridge by the river, where at least you'll be out of the wind.

You must have turned the wrong way, though, because you're walking along right next to the frozen river. You look up, and then around, and finally you find the bridge, way the hell behind you.

As you turn, your foot slides onto the ice. Which isn't as thick as it looked. You yank it out quick, though, and it doesn't feel wet. Of course, both of your feet were already kind of numb.

If you think you can still make it to the bridge, go to section 476.

If the idea of just lying down right here and sleeping in until noon is too tempting to pass up, go to section 491.

491

You wake to noise and light. Your chest hurts. You squint against the glare and lift your head just enough to see that some asshole has stolen both your goddamn coats and all your shirts and left you lying here, covered in just a sheet like a corpse. You try to grab the railings and sit up, but your wrists are tangled in some straps and your arms

don't move.

"Hey!" you yell. "Hey! Hey!"

Somebody grabs your shoulder. Red hospital scrubs. Nurse, you think.

Both of your shoulders get shoved down against the mattress.

Your nurse says, "Take it easy."

"My case," you demand. "Where's my case?"

You twist around to see her freckles, but she's up behind your head too far.

"We've got your case, don't worry."

Of course you're not worried. "The Coast Guard," you explain to her.

"Sure," she says. "Take it easy."

Damn, she's not even listening to you! "The Coast Guard!" you repeat. "They're supposed to bring my case!"

If you keep trying to get through to her, until a warmth slides up inside your arm and then you feel sleepy, go to section 501.

If you shut up for a minute and look around and realize that you're not where you thought you were, and then you quietly ask the nurse if maybe you can stay here a few days and get some help, go to section 525.

501

You're sitting in a plastic chair, in a circle of people sitting in plastic chairs, in a bright hospital room with pale blue walls. There's a TV mounted high on one of the walls, but it's off right now.

"All right," says the guy in one of the chairs. He's the only one who's wearing shoes. Not these little socks with rough patches on their soles, at least if you put them on right.

The guy says, "The past couple days here in group we've been talking about what? Choices, right? Choices. Now I've got something I want you to try. I'm going to shut up for the next ten minutes, and for that ten minutes I invite each of you to think about the thing I'm

about to explain. And each of you, you need to shut up, too, or else it's not fair to the others. Okay?"

He waits until everybody, including you, says okay, or at least nods.

"All right, so here's the thing. We've all had moments in our lives where we were faced with a choice. And we made our decision, and that choice sent our life down a certain path. And one thing led to another, and finally, well, here we all are." He looks around the circle, his gaze pausing on each person. When he looks at you, you stare right back at him and he gives you this little smile he does sometimes. Then he finishes looking around the circle, and then he shakes his head and says, "Here we all fucking are."

Everybody chuckles. This guy is all right. He's told you that his drug of choice, back when he wasn't the one wearing shoes to group, was meth. Normally you can't stand tweakers. But he's all right.

"So," he says, "here's what we're going to do for the next ten minutes. Each of us is going to think back to some choice we once made, some decision that at the time made sense, but that ever since, we've wished we could do over. All right? Now, I invite you to sit here and take yourself, in your head, back to that moment. But this time, this time you get to do it over. This time you make a different choice. And for the next ten minutes—maybe close your eyes, if you like—for the next ten minutes you get to watch how your life goes, step by step by step, after this different choice. Just follow it out slow and easy, okay? All right? Give it its fair chance. All right, here we go. I'm shutting up now for ten minutes."

You look around the circle. Most of the others are doing the same. A few have closed their eyes.

What the hell. You close your eyes.

If you ask Paul's friend to let you both spend the night on the floor of his apartment, go to section 304.

If that strikes you as too obvious—too predictable—and instead you're curious about how free will and determinism can coexist, go to section 132.

You pick an empty table and set down your tray, still thinking about your dialogue with the professor. As you're taking the second bite from your burger, the redhead from class sits down opposite you.

"Hi," says the redhead. "I'm Kerry."

You never finish the burger.

The two of you talk about how free will differs from unpredictability. How predetermination doesn't equate to constraint. How fists can't have free will because they don't have brains, but how brains are overrated.

Kerry is a year ahead of you—a junior—and a math major. (Kerry's the one who introduced the term *equate* into your conversation.)

You try not to be obvious about letting your gaze wander over what you can see of Kerry's body. You'd like to see more.

Then Kerry makes a stupid claim about the contrast Boethius drew between fatalism and divine omniscience.

If you steer the conversation back to the part about how brains are overrated, go to section 138.

If you get frustrated as you keep trying to explain why Kerry's claim is stupid, go to section 155.

You and Kerry have been spending all your evenings together at the library, and afterward at the Rathskeller or just wandering campus talking. But so far things haven't gotten past holding hands and kissing. Pretty intense kissing, true, but come on.

Apparently math majors are shy.

Tonight, though, the two of you are rolling around on your bed, and many items of clothing have been removed. A few minutes ago you almost blurted out something about hoping that Boethius's God was looking someplace else, but you suppressed the impulse.

As you yank off a sock, Kerry suddenly pulls away and says, “Do you have any ... I mean, because I don’t, not with me....”

You don’t either, but right at this instant you’re not really up for a Philosophical Dialogue. “I’ll get some tomorrow,” you say, and you reach for Kerry’s shoulder.

“Wait.” Kerry eyes you reappraisingly.

If you say, “Just this one time,” go to section 160.

If you offer an apologetic smile and sigh, and then, deliberately but gently, you put the sock back onto its foot, go to section 144.

144

You listen to the morning’s birdsongs. Kerry’s dorm is on the edge of campus, by the arboretum, so mornings are louder here than in your room. There’s one bird who keeps hitting this little arpeggio with a syncopation on the last note that you’re trying to memorize, so you can try it out later on guitar.

You’re also trying to memorize how Kerry looks asleep. Just because you think that will make a good memory.

Eventually the alarm buzzes, and you two have to get out of bed.

A little later, you face each other over breakfast trays. (The first time you shared breakfast, you discovered that you both like oatmeal—with raisins, and definitely no brown sugar—and that neither of you can stand breakfast sausage.)

Kerry asks, “Figure it out yet?”

You’ve been teaching Kerry some basic music theory, and in return you’re learning about set theory. Last night Kerry gave you a challenge: Suppose you’re given some arbitrary sets. It doesn’t matter how many or what’s in them. Maybe one contains all the even numbers, while another contains red fire trucks, and a third includes the contents of your pants pockets on the morning of your fourteenth birthday. Whatever. Now prove that, without having to know exactly what’s in each set, there is some other set that has at least

one element in common with each of the given sets—but which isn't simply the union of all of them, as if you'd dumped all of the original sets into one big bag.

You did, in fact, figure this out, last night while you were brushing your teeth. But then the two of you got distracted by other, more entertaining challenges.

"All right," you say. "I pick one element from each of the sets you give me. My new set is defined as the set containing precisely those elements. Ta-dah."

Orange juice in hand, Kerry nods. "Very good."

You grin, but Kerry's not finished.

"So who gave you permission to *pick* an element from each of those sets? There's nothing in the basic rules of set theory—the axioms—that says you can do that."

You frown. "Of course you can. It's obvious."

Kerry raises an eyebrow.

"Fine," you say. "I choose the smallest element in each set—that's well-defined, right?"

"What if one of the sets consists of all fractions bigger than zero? What's the smallest fraction?" Kerry reaches for your toast, which you've been neglecting.

Annoyed, you start to offer a counterproposal. But you catch yourself as you see its flaw. Which suggests a different solution—but no, that doesn't work, either....

Finally Kerry says, "It does seem natural that you should be able to pick elements out of sets. But it turns out that there's no way to prove that you can do that, in general, based on the axioms of set theory. Most mathematicians agree with you that it should be allowed, though, so they add a new rule that specifically says you can do it. The Axiom of Choice."

Now you're annoyed again. "Then why didn't you tell me that up front? If this Axiom of Choice is simply one of the rules, why are we even discussing it?"

Kerry leans forward, one elbow skidding almost into a puddle

of spilled coffee. “It’s *not* one of the rules. Not one of the most basic, defining ones, anyway. You can build up a complete, self-consistent system of mathematics that doesn’t include the Axiom of Choice. If you add it in, you end up with a slightly different system. One that includes a lot of new, interesting results, most of which *feel* right. So most mathematicians are fine with proofs that depend on the Axiom of Choice.”

You glance at your watch. You’ll both be late for class if you don’t pick up your trays and get going. But a corner of Kerry’s argument looks loose to you.

“So,” you say, “you can do math either with this axiom or without it?”

“Right.” Kerry stands up.

You remain in your seat. “Then, each mathematician has to *choose* whether or not to use the Axiom of Choice.”

Kerry pauses and stares at you.

And then, slowly, Kerry nods, and slides the two trays in your direction. As if presenting you an award.

“I guess,” says Kerry, “that says something about the rules of the *higher* system. The one in which we live.”

If you stack both trays and carry them away, go to section 147.

If you push back Kerry’s tray and grumble about hypocritical mathematicians, go to section 170.

147

That night, after you get under the covers, Kerry approaches the bed, naked.

“Tonight,” says Kerry, “I want you to lie completely still. Got it? Now pay attention. Here’s my hand. And here’s my mouth. And here—” Kerry takes a step back, so you can get a really good look, “—is the rest of me.”

Kerry draws out the moment.

“Choose.”

If

502

“Okay, that’s ten minutes.”

You open your eyes to a circle of people sitting in plastic chairs, in a bright room with pale blue walls.

“So,” says the guy with shoes. “Who wants to share something from their experience?”

If after a few seconds you raise your hand, go to section 511.

If it strikes you that group is bullshit, go to section 550.

550

One of the counselors is standing in your room, looking Very Serious.

“We can’t do this without you,” she says. She’s in her forties, you guess, her dark hair braided and wrapped up on top of her head. You’ve decided that the lilt in her voice comes from Jamaica.

You lie completely still.

She sighs. “You only get to keep your bed if you’re an active participant in ward activities. Do you understand me? If you’re going to stay here, then you have to get yourself up and out of this room, and interact with the others.”

She waits for you to respond. As if it matters what you might say.

Again she sighs. “At least come to the common room for lunch.”

If the idea of lunch finally gives you a reason to get out of bed, go to section 557.

If you’re finally recognizing that you’re not the one making the decisions in your life, go to section 601.

601

Somebody has started a fire with some old campaign signs from a dumpster, and you join the others huddling around it. The bridge's supports block most of the wind, and after a while, for the first time today, you stop shivering.

"Nice hat," says a big guy, meaningfully.

Somebody at the hospital gave it to you when they kicked you out. It's the warmest thing you're wearing, stuffed with fleece, and with furry earflaps.

If you kick the guy in the nuts and run, go to section 615.

If you stand there waiting to see what the higher system is going to make you do next, go to section 620.

620

You're standing in line at the mission, leaning against the counter to take some weight off your feet. A lady asks whether you'd like brown sugar on your oatmeal.

If you shake your head and keep shuffling down the line, go to section 634.

If you stand there, waiting, until finally somebody drops a clump of brown sugar onto your oatmeal and shoves you ahead, go to section 652.

652

Your sign isn't working at all today. You glance down to your lap and notice that you're holding the sign with your good hand. Dumb.

A brown leather wallet drops onto the cracked sidewalk, right in front of you. The guy who must have dropped it is sauntering away, oblivious, eating one of those big pretzels.

Even without leaning closer, you can see a lot of bills in there. Probably cards, too—you could maybe sell those cards.

If you pick up the wallet and stick it inside your coat, go to section 664.

If you just sit there, and eventually somebody else notices the wallet and grabs it, go to section 701.

701

The sky is full of fluffy clouds today. You've got a good view, except for some tree branches. You must have slept on a park bench last night, since that's where you find yourself now. You can't recall the details, though.

If you're just going to lie there all day, go to section 701.

If eventually you get so bored that you sit up, go to section 702.

702

At first it's really early in the morning and you've got this part of the park to yourself. But soon a thickening parade of office workers marches past your bench. Some of them glance your way for a second, and then lift their coffee or their phone to block the view.

If you ask one of them what they think they're staring at, go to section 708.

If all you do is wait to see what's going to happen next, go to section 721.

721

There aren't as many office workers now, but between the kids and the joggers and the drunks there's still a sort of parade.

If you lie back down on the bench, go to section 724.

If your fist punches somebody in the shoulder for no reason, go to section 801.

“Ow!” says the woman who had just sat herself beside you on the bench. “What was that for?”

You’re staring at your fist.

“No reason,” you say.

“Yeah?” She squints at you for a few seconds.

Then she punches your arm. Pretty hard, actually.

“Hey!”

“So,” she says, “if we’re done with that, I have a proposition for you.”

You give her a closer look. Mid-thirties. Dressed like a lot of women you used to know, in a long crinkly black skirt and a brightly striped top from Peru or Mexico or someplace like that. Hair falling in waves to the base of her neck.

Redhead.

She continues, “Community House—maybe you’ve heard of us? One of our residents got himself kicked out last night, so this is your lucky day. You get a bedroom to yourself, and three meals. Only two rules: You don’t do anything illegal in the house, and you don’t piss off everybody else.”

You narrow your eyes. “So why are you choosing me?”

She nods toward your still-clenched fist.

“No reason,” she says. “Now come on.” She stands and begins walking away.

If you’re fine with her making the decisions, go to section 808.

If you lie back down on the bench, go to section 815.

Your third afternoon at Community House, Irene—the redhead—invites you to come along with everybody to a movie.

In your mind you see a dark room full of people all sitting still, watching and listening. Your arms tighten up, and then you start

shaking all over.

After a minute Irene says that maybe you should just stay here today.

If you insist on joining the outing, go to section 815.

If you're fine with Irene making the decisions, go to section 822.

822

A couple evenings later you and a few others are in the living room watching TV. When the show ends, Irene gets up and turns off the set. Nobody objects.

"I'm going to read awhile," she says. She crosses the room toward an armchair, pausing at the stereo to start up a CD.

The drums kick things off, and then comes the bass. A bottleneck guitar eases into some Delta blues.

You get shaky, and stand to leave.

"Wait a minute," she tells you, looking concerned. She turns off the CD. She glances around the room at the others. "I think I need some tea. Come on."

You follow her to the unoccupied kitchen. She runs water into the kettle. Not looking at you, she says, "Music. It's a problem?"

You don't feel entirely steady, so you slide into one of the wooden chairs at the kitchen table.

She lights a burner and sets down the kettle. "Especially guitar."

You let out the breath you've apparently been holding. "I used to play."

She pulls out the adjacent chair and sits. "And then your hands got messed up."

You nod. Though you don't know whether she's watching, because you're staring at your lap, where your hands are holding each other. As well as they can.

You've had this conversation enough times, back when you

were in the hospital, to know that next she'll ask how that makes you feel. And then you'll be having a Therapeutic Dialogue.

You wait, but for several seconds she doesn't speak.

"That," she finally says, "truly sucks."

A minute later the kettle starts whistling, and she stands. You hear her open a cabinet.

"Damn. We're out of green. Chamomile okay?"

If you wait silently for your tea and then carefully pick it up with your right hand, go to section 831.

If you look up and say, "Sure. Thanks," go to section 845.

845

A week later there's a trip to an art gallery.

You go along.

If, when you're standing in a crowded room where everybody is attentively staring at the same big painting, your heart starts hammering and you have to leave, go to section 859.

If you don't leave, go to section 870.

870

You've been at Community House for three months now. Sometimes you help Irene or the other staff with grocery shopping. Often with cooking. Lately you've been able to sit still while CDs play, and a few nights ago you realized that your right hand was fingerpicking along with an old Ry Cooder track. (Though at that realization you did have to leave the room, and for a couple of hours it felt like all the fingers you don't have anymore were spasming in boiling water.)

But what surprises you the most, what truly astounds you, is that some of the other residents lately have been asking if they can talk with you. Have been asking your opinions about their stuff. As if it matters what you say.

This afternoon you're sitting at the kitchen table with Irene, stuffing fundraising envelopes. The sun is warm on the back of your neck. Through a screen, birds arpeggiate.

"I'm going to a concert next week," she says. "Some Canadian folksinger." She positions a stamp at an envelope's corner, presses it down with her thumb. "Come with me?"

"Sure," you say. "Thanks."

If you lift a fundraising letter from the pile and fold it precisely into thirds, giving the task absolutely all your attention and thinking hard about nothing else at all, go to section 884.

If there's no way you're going to let her drag you to that concert, go to section 896.

896

Could be worse, you think, sitting in the darkened room. The guy's guitar playing is rudimentary, but his lyrics actually make sense. And he's got an interesting, gravelly voice that he keeps sending out on surprising trajectories. It twists and soars until, sooner or later, it always ends up crashing back home.

Irene is working her usual nonchalance. But you've noticed her glancing your way every minute or two. You consider telling her that she can relax, that you're doing fine. Then you feel the singer's diminished chord echoed on your left hand's own phantom fretboard, and you think maybe you'd better wait a bit and see what develops.

Now he's introducing his next song, explaining that it's about a man sailing away on a long expedition, leaving the woman he loves to await his return. "Couple months ago," he says, "a guy came backstage after a show, looking really sad. And he told me how his girlfriend was about to leave for Europe for a year, and so he had to ask me about the traveler in my song: 'Did he come back?' And I told him, 'Of course he came back! This isn't a blues song!' He seemed reassured."

Everybody chuckles. Then, just as he leans forward and is about to start playing, you hear a soft voice.

“Sometimes they don’t come back.”

Two rows behind you sits a woman whose face you can’t quite make out in the darkness. You can’t be sure the comment came from her. But you think it’s Lisa Muroi. Paul’s wife, widow.

If you sink down into your seat and hope that Lisa doesn’t recognize you, go to section 898.

If you sit up and try to pay attention to the singer, figuring that somehow you owe that to Paul, go to section 901.

901

You’re sitting on the curb outside the club, watching cars and pedestrians. Two songs after the break you told Irene that you needed some air, but that she should stay for the final few tunes. After considering you for a few seconds, she nodded.

You’re thinking about people who go away. About the ones who never come back.

And about the ones who do. Even if it takes them a long, long time.

The show lets out. Irene lowers herself to the curb by your side, and helps you watch traffic. She passes you her open can of ginger ale. You take a sip and pass it back.

After a while there are no more pedestrians and not many cars. Irene stands.

“Let’s go back to the House,” she says.

You look up at her.

And ask, “What if I don’t?”

For a few seconds she squints at you.

And then, slowly, she nods. She hands you the empty soda can, as if presenting you an award.

“I guess that would be for you to find out.”

You reach out your left hand and take the can between your thumb and middle finger. The can wobbles in your uncertain grip, catching a glint from a nearby streetlamp. And in that glint, for just a second, your life takes a step back so you can get a really good look.

If you return with her to the House, and over the following days realize that helping other people is something you could learn to be good at—

If tonight's show has left you wondering whether you could learn to play guitar left-handed or maybe pick up some different instrument, or take voice lessons, because you're realizing that during these past couple years a lot of new songs have been growing in you—

If you think that maybe you should get back together with some of your oldest friends, maybe even look up that lover of four, no, six years ago—

If you think that it's time, finally, to forget your old life and hitchhike out to Minneapolis, say, or Seattle, and find a job, maybe take some classes (starting, you think, with philosophy)—

You lower the soda can to the ground.

And you choose.

Two Poems

Megan Cowen

Early Bloom

This morning when you draped your ankle over
the bed sheet, I spotted the transfusion scar;
remembered that when I was six days

old, you followed me and I almost lost you.
You were meant for September, really,
but you broke through the soil,

fingers uncurling like centipedes
through the last placid drops of summer.
The sun lowered its bittersweet yolk

into a cloud of dusk as you freed
your blue, iris body, came out of your mother
still breathing behind your ears.

Postcard from a Palm Reader on Horseback

Yesterday I held a Palo Verde beetle in my hand.
We shared a moment of being
on the back of my burro.

It rested on my heartline, antennae
brushing the pillows of Saturn and Jupiter,
respectively.

I knew it started life in sodden blackness,
nursed by mildew
and the roots of wild conifers

as did its ancestors—who divided Pangea
with the steady hum
of their stained-glass wings;

who gave their bodies to the Anasazi
to be ground into mineral
and traced from memory

over white clay. Before taking off
it crawled to the sun
beneath my third finger,

trying to remember
which shadowed portal
was its own.

I imagined a layer of Arizona
dusted its brittle onyx head when it landed
beside broken pottery shards and rested,

contemplating its own fate
as evening's shadow cast and angled
thumb of compassion on the canyon floor.

The Use of *Ulysses*

*How Joyce's novel made me
what I am today*

Donald Brown

The year 2011 marks the seventieth anniversary of the death, at the age of fifty-nine, of James Joyce. And 2012 will mark the ninetieth anniversary of his most influential work, *Ulysses*. How is Joyce's lifework holding up in the new century?

Recently, Joyce's legacy has begun to be undermined. James Wood, an influential literary critic, started the assault at the beginning of the twenty-first century, with a review of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* that implied that the big, messy, unfocused novels appearing since the middle of the previous century took their unfortunate impetus from modernist works, like *Ulysses*, that attempted to be exhaustive in what Wood sees as a culturally busy but shallow way. Wood's complaints about Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, and Toni Morrison may be seen as shots at writers who learned from Joyce. More recently, in *Slate*, Ron Rosenbaum opined fatuously that *Ulysses* does have *one* chapter worth reading. After decades as one of the undeniable masterpieces of the twentieth century, *Ulysses* may in our era return to the more dubious status it enjoyed in Joyce's lifetime, as the cause célèbre of a coterie; and perhaps, in the decades ahead, it will join *Finnegans Wake*, long deemed unreadable, as a failed departure from the norms of narrative in favor of hubristic experiment.

I would argue that this new trend, or micro-trend, is simply the flipside of the automatic veneration of *Ulysses* that has existed since the 1960s. For too long *Ulysses* has been proclaimed the centerpiece of modernism, a movement in literature whose effects have mostly died out but for academic study of its many notable writers and unique works, and such highbrow praise made reading *Ulysses* a task that would-be literati had to undergo at the risk of excommunication. This state of affairs is the sort of thing that inspires enterprising writers to rebel, if only to put their own mark on literary matters. Modernism and its successor/antagonist postmodernism dominated

academic talk about fiction from the 1960s through the 1990s; those coming of age in the twenty-first century, schooled after the glut of theory, seem to wish for a return to more straightforward fiction, or even non-fiction. *Ulysses* is the most obvious whipping boy for marking the changed aesthetic climate.

All of which is purely academic, in a sense. Modernist studies, in the academic world, continue apace, and *Ulysses* will continue to be taught because it's a book that repays the attention, a book worth knowing, as a literary accomplishment, the way the *Divine Comedy*, *Canterbury Tales*, *Paradise Lost*, and *Moby-Dick* are worth knowing. But my own attachment to *Ulysses* derives not simply from its challenge and pleasure—qualities it possesses beyond most other “twentieth-century masterpieces” one could name—but because of what I believe its use value to be, for readers and for writers.

Use value, simply put, has to do with what one “gets out” of an experience. We may speak of the use value of seeing a film, taking a class, engaging in correspondence, reading a book, and so on. If a thing's value in the market, the great arbiter of our sensibilities these days, is its exchange value, then use value is more problematic, hence all those modern works of art making use of found objects, of detritus, of supposedly useless things, if only to point out that art is always putting to use what is valueless, giving it value through what is done with it. If you don't read *Ulysses*, you can have no experience of it and thus can derive no use from it. And if you do read it, despite the claims of its “unreadableness,” of what use to you is such an experience?

Because you might be anyone, of any age or gender or ethnicity, any nationality, faith or income, I would not presume to say what the experience might be for you, so I will make a few assumptions about you and address you accordingly: you care about the art of the novel; you care about the craft of writing; you care about what has been accomplished, artistically, with the English language. But caring about the art of the novel implies a number of considerations. Part of what

such concern means, at least, is that you like to learn about fictional persons through a narrator's sleight-of-hand, that you trust novelists to reveal aspects of human life not graspable by other means. But what aspects of life do you want to understand or experience through fiction? That's really up to you, but there has been a long-standing tradition—it is sometimes called a bourgeois tradition—that takes as its subject matter the ordinary life of ordinary people, to see that, as Virginia Woolf said, "it's dangerous to live even one day."

And what about craft? In the novel, that generally refers to the correspondence between the voice or manner of the prose and the actors and events described. In the mimetic view of literature, the style should suit the subject matter. We could say that's the end of it, if we are admirers of the novel as a fictional prose narrative that tells of make-believe events. But we might also want the novel, as writing, to create or promote a relation to events that is unexpected—sometimes this is achieved simply by a first-person narrator who is rather odd or estranged, but it can also be achieved by an aesthetic choice, a way of commanding the writing to be something other than mimetic.

We might even hold prose fiction to another desideratum: that the work impress us as a verbal construct, that its language sing and dance and dazzle and mystify, cause laughter and perhaps deep reflection, as well as convince us that, while reading it, we inhabit a true and coherent world. *Ulysses* does all those things without peer. It gives us ordinary people on an ordinary day, and it estranges us from the mimetic while also maintaining a cinematic fidelity to verisimilitude. And—its main distinction—it makes of language an instrument capable of virtuoso turns, of completely unexpected and original effects. The usefulness of *Ulysses*, the uniqueness of its experience, is that it is one of the few works in which all three of these conditions is met. And it does all that while also maintaining an at least clever, at best profound, relation to literature itself, to *the literary* as the art of

verbal representation. To no longer care about that is no longer to care about an art form, about the claims that reading makes on consciousness, about the very possibility of enacting consciousness in prose.

My first attempt to read *Ulysses* was in high school, eleventh grade. Up to that point, modern prose was whatever I met with in the paperbacks of the day—Ray Bradbury, tales of sci-fi and the fantastic, a bit of Vonnegut—with a more “literary” version provided by Orwell, Huxley, translations of Hesse, but with little sense of the tradition out of which Joyce’s prose came: I had read no Flaubert, but knew translated glimpses of Baudelaire and the symbolists, and Wallace Fowlie’s Rimbaud. Thankfully, a handful of Ibsen plays, the main tragedies of Shakespeare.

That first time I got as far as the opening of Chapter 14: “Oxen of the Sun.” I couldn’t have made that statement at the time. I didn’t know the Homeric titles, and the chapters were unnumbered in that old Random House edition. I only knew I’d reached the paragraph beginning, “Universally that person’s acumen . . .” and could in no wise parse it. Skipping ahead a few pages, nothing cleared up. Was I still in the same book? When comprehension flags, so does attention. Put it aside.

Still, that first foray was instructive. The first three chapters—Stephen Dedalus’s—were like nothing I’d ever read. Later, I learned to call this style “modernist,” but at the time all I was aware of was a command of modern language more astonishing than I’d found in anything but a few poems of our century, a prose in which rhythmic units were not guided by line breaks, but by as faultless and unmatched an ear for the aural dynamics of language—for the ability to construct sentences—as could be imagined. As new as anything, I thought, but dated too. Stephen Dedalus was not my contemporary—he was young when my grandparents were toddlers—but he had my interests at heart. He was bored by everything anyone told him using the mundane diction of everyday speech, of gossip, of newsprint. He had to find his space in an alienated relation to his mother tongue—

he needed Church Latin, Scholasticism, Elizabethan English, the wit of Swift and Wilde, the lyricism of Shelley and Swinburne.

Raised Catholic, educated in a parochial school for eight years, I was familiar with those churchy rhythms, with the intonation of King James Gospels read aloud, and had already gained a love of Shakespeare through memorization of speeches in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. Which is to say that the spell of Dedalus was immediate enough, was—even with that dire and debilitating sense of Dublin’s paralysis that weighed on him—oddly relevant to a teenaged dissatisfaction with the middlebrow tastes of a middling suburb in the mid-Atlantic states in the middle of the 1970s. For every *Blood on the Tracks* or *Born to Run* or *Horses*, there was insipid drivel aplenty.

Reading *Ulysses*, I had a glimpse of what my unknown Irish ancestor must have left behind in coming to America, and gained a sense, noticed in more ethnic parishes than the one I belonged to, of the part Catholicism played or could play in identity. Joyce showed me a city, a nation, a time, where priests set the tone. And as an experience of a place and time, of an immediate locale and milieu, nothing I’d encountered in fiction quite compared. Joyce had done away with the typical mannerisms by which setting and character are introduced, the whole boring armature of narratorial explanation. The reader is eavesdropping, not only on conversations but on unspoken thoughts. And there’s nothing the Joycean method won’t note—even when Dedalus picks his nose, or when Bloom farts.

In that first reading, I was buoyed by so many glimpses of a different way of doing things with words, of presenting experience in a direct and inimitable style: the performative nature of Malachi Mulligan in his relentless jests, so theatrical, trying always to get a rise out of Stephen, opening the book as if aware a camera is on him; the touchingly private moment of Bloom’s visit to the outhouse, so simple and endearingly comic in its touches; Father Conmee, so reassuringly banal as he makes his way crosstown; Bloom following women with his roving eye (at last! surreptitious peeking at girls

captured, noted), even the many passages causing blank confusion—who is who in the newspaper chapter, in the cemetery chapter, in the many bar scenes—could be offset by striking moments: Bloom’s discomfort with the other men in the funeral cortege; the men spying on the barmaids who flirt with certain men, like the bouncer Boylan; Bloom’s reflections on the Mass and on the ghoulish nature of burial; the hilarious leaps into descriptive absurdity in “Cyclops,” with flourishes worthy of Monty Python (an enthusiasm of mine that will never pass away); the rapid-fire witticisms and over-lapping chatter in the newspaper office—the sort of thing for which Robert Altman’s films, *MASH* and *Nashville*, recent at the time of my reading, were praised as groundbreaking.

But nothing did more to impress upon me the idea that I was in the hands of a rare master than the “dancing coins” of sunlight on Mr. Deasy’s “wise shoulders” at the end of chapter two, and nothing captured my mind and heart like the love of language, the sheer verve of the discourse of reverie, as in Dedalus alone on the strand in chapter three. For a would-be poet, every walk along the beach is a walk into eternity through a space of creative ferment, and Joyce’s rendering of poetic stream-of-consciousness as a constant making and unmaking of thought, a search for constructions to place on reality, is an odyssey in itself, a depiction in miniature of the liberties language can take in its flow over objects, through time and space, arrested only by the odd intuition that words might be as palpable as shells and as scattered as one’s attention. It was as language, as a bravura use of poetic effects, as a salad of unique techniques that I valued Joyce’s prose. The story, the plot, the point of it all were not elements I was too concerned about. While I might not have been able to explain what, as Polonius asks Hamlet, “the matter was that I read,” I was often thrilled and delighted by the “words, words, words.”

On my next attempt I got through the whole thing. By then I was almost twenty-one, living in Philadelphia, in a ramshackle apartment usually rented by students at the Pennsylvania Academy

of the Fine Arts. At that time, in my bohemian surroundings, taking part in poetry readings in art galleries, bars, and parks, I read *Ulysses* because I wanted something that would require full mental immersion. It was 1980, and living in a big city for the first time in my life made me want to revisit Joyce's handling of an urban environment because I had plans to write a fiction set in "a city." (Many years later, I would finally visit Dublin and find that it reminded me, very much indeed, of Philadelphia as it was in those days when no building could stand higher than the hat on the statue of Billy Penn on the top of City Hall.) Returning to *Ulysses* that summer brought me—besides renewed admiration of how Joyce handled street scenes, his sensory registers so minute and telling (simply following the Wisdom Helys sandwich men through the prose of the streets was a delight)—greater appreciation for how Joyce handled dialogue. I'd been a year among scribblers and poets and art students and would-be geniuses, had drunk in bars, and now knew first-hand the verbal culture of wags and wits, of flirtatious and boozy loquaciousness. I had followed with my eyes striking and random female strangers on city streets, and was more than ever convinced that Joyce was *the man* when it came to rendering thoughts spurred by the flux of surface phenomena. Entering into the book with our mind's eye, it is possible to see unfold a detailed and deliberate panorama of life.

But the other effect that initial complete reading of the book had on me was more personal. I wasn't in school. I was reading on my own time. I was living with my lover, younger than her by more than a decade, and she was pregnant with our child. Before we'd moved to Philadelphia together, she had been married to an English teacher at the high school I graduated from. In fact, I'd lived for most of a year in a spare room in their house during a tense period that brought about their separation and divorce, after ten years of marriage. In a sense, she and I were helping each other get out of Delaware: me, for whatever creative inspirations I might find in a city; she, out of a way of life she no longer wanted to live.

Reading *Ulysses* that last summer of pre-fatherhood, I encountered a kind of saving fantasy of what my romantic education might mean. When I watched, late in the book, Leopold Bloom, sixteen years the senior of twenty-two year-old Stephen Dedalus, invite the young man to move into a spare room in his home, implying that he might also avail himself, in time, of the charms of his wife Marion, I was given a profound dig in the ribs. Here was a story I had to some extent just lived through, and it made me think that my teacher friend, who had been impressed by my efforts to read *Ulysses* back in high school, was something of a Bloom to my Stephen. My friend was more Jewish than Bloom (who was only Jewish on his father's side), and more intellectual, and I was a Nietzsche-reading Catholic apostate and would-be poet in something of Stephen's manner, though without Jesuit schooling, a B.A., or a sojourn in Paris under my belt. And I couldn't help recognizing, amused, that my lover had a penchant for lengthy excursions with many digressions not unlike the torrent of Molly's words—if I had to render her speech in writing I too might despair of punctuating it. The “Nostos,” or last three chapters, of *Ulysses* showed me that Joyce could “hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature.” The “sentimental education” that Flaubert and many others had depicted—often involving a young man falling for an older married woman—was unknown to me as a literary trope, but here it was, shifted by Joyce into a frame very close to home indeed. Dissolute, egotistical, and overly dreamy literary type is befriended by a well-meaning Samaritan, and might find life-changing erotic experience with the man's wife. The fact that *Ulysses* flirted with that story seemed a personally relevant message.

But there was more to Joyce's vision: I hadn't read a word of Freud at that point, but I knew my *Hamlet* well. For me, the kind of triangle Joyce was depicting wasn't Oedipal, it was Hamletian—as Stephen makes clear in his library discussion. And I was stunned to see a Hamlet fixation take on the shape Joyce gave it. Of course, Stephen, as Joyce's surrogate, doesn't stay with the Blooms. He

walks away from both husband and wife, both Poldy and Molly. And though I was enthralled by the character of Hamlet, Stephen argues that the emphasis should be on the man behind the character: Shakespeare himself. If I was truly looking for advice in great literature, then, psychologically, I had to learn to become not Stephen, not Bloom, but Joyce. His perspective contained both of them as well as Molly. He understood how to make the novel of adultery (with Flaubert and Tolstoy his main predecessors) become a comedy; how to make the coming-of-age novel (for Stephen is desperately in search of some kind of meaningful erotic relation as well as creative outlet) include the novel of married life; how to make the novel of private and public life contain the novel of comically invoked archetypes.

In other words, Stephen became for me, by the end of that reading, too immature as a model, as Joyce intended. He was not the hero of Joyce's universe, even if I still felt myself thoroughly seduced by his prickly and insecure and arrogant and mercurial performance in the library chapter, explaining Shakespeare's relation to Hamlet in terms that also explain Joyce's relation to Bloom and Stephen. *Ulysses* was not only a novel of great effects; it was a novel that seemed to me a profound—because comic—rendition of pride, lust, sloth, and the other sins. Up to that point, the novels that had most stirred me as stories of great characters striving to assert their grand passions and to overcome their tangled weaknesses were by Dostoevsky. But in that transitional period of late teens to early twenties, there was no novel I could have read more apropos than *Ulysses*.

What I did next was read *Ulysses* again, start to finish, but this time in about two or three weeks (as opposed to two or three months), and then I read some essays on *Ulysses* in books from the public library, and Stuart Gilbert's book, the first study of *Ulysses*, published with Joyce's participation; and then I read *Ulysses* again, this time pen in hand, making all kinds of marginal notes, subjecting the book to *my* reading. I felt I'd mastered it, you see. And in March my daughter was born.

But Joyce, once mastered, doesn't stay mastered. Skip ahead a few years, and I was back in Delaware, and the urban, mythic, coming-of-age novel I was writing, “forging in the smithy of my libido the unconsummated goddesses of my youth,” bogged down. So, if you can't become Joyce, study him! I enrolled in my home state university, with an idea to major in art history, but access to several library shelves on Joyce and his work proved too much, and I ended with a double major in that field and comparative literature, writing my senior thesis on book three—the Shaun the Post chapters—of *Finnegans Wake*.

Why the *Wake*? In those intervening years, I and a couple friends had spent many hours reading aloud Joyce's last work, *Ulysses*, and Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (a daunting and bizarre book I began reading my senior year of high school and finally finished sometime before getting through *Ulysses* the third time). I'd found that those three books were exceptional in the quality of their prose: reading them aloud went beyond comprehension to something closer to music, to a blend of image, sound, rhythm, and meaning that stretched the mind in all kinds of interesting and ticklish ways, producing an inner cinematic experience. These days, the hero of that kind of mind-stretching fiction, for those younger than my friends and I, is David Foster Wallace, but, while there are passages in *Infinite Jest* I could read aloud for fun, I can't bear the thought of reading the whole thing aloud, as Wallace specializes in tedium and frustration rather than lyricism and expansion. With Joyce, the lyricism was an accepted aspect of the best writing of his time—found in Eliot, Yeats, and whomever you'd care to set beside them. And for Pynchon, the experience of jazz and the Beats and rock'n'roll and movie musicals inspired flights of cartoon prose that simply spoke the lingo of the late sixties/early seventies, the birthplace of my tastes. And the *Wake*, more than any work of prose, demanded an aural component. It had to be heard to be seen, seen to be heard, said as well as read.

Earlier, I mentioned the correspondence between the voice, or manner, of prose and the actors and events described as a key aspect of novel craft. But how far could that correspondence go? In the *Wake*, actors and events are fluid, altering according to the mannerisms of a polyglot prose that involves jokes, puns, allusions, all in various languages and across numerous fields of reference. The practice of converting characters into signs, into correspondences rather than traits, began in *Ulysses*, but, to my mind, in my late twenties, the latter book—simply because it was, after all, still a novel—was too familiar. In those days I was utterly bored by the notion that the best thing prose could do was “tell stories.” Literary explication, I’d learned when I attended a conference on Joyce in Philly before I began studies at the U of DE, was now a matter of deconstruction, of undermining firm distinctions, of close attention to the slippages in any statement.

I will spare the reader the very interesting difference between reading on the paradigmatic as opposed to syntagmatic axis, because this is not that kind of essay, but let it suffice to say that Joyce criticism had taken on, by the mid-eighties, a decidedly philosophical slant, no longer quaintly concerned with the author’s relation to his work, or with the work’s place in literary history, but wholly consumed by the relations of signifier to signified. And no text bedevils that relation to the extent the *Wake* does. Let’s leave me there for the next nine years, earning a B.A. at the U of DE, and a Ph.D. in comparative literature at Princeton, producing a dissertation on my old nemeses Joyce and Pynchon, with Proust (that’s another story) added to complete the triumvirate, and skip ahead again.

For a few years now, I’ve been teaching *Ulysses* as a five-week course in Yale’s summer session. The class occurred to me, after I’d taught composition a few summers, because five weeks seemed ideal for a concentrated study of *the Book*. By now, Joyce’s novel has gained for me the fondness of a place one goes away to, an “elsewhere”

always familiar but never quite the same. That, if nothing else, would be enough justification, in my view, to claim a very special status for *Ulysses*. I simply don't know of any other work I would agree to commit five weeks to reading and discussing year after year. But what is the purpose of such study? What is its use value?

At one time, I might have said: it's for the sake of understanding the Great Works of Literature. I could be heard to say things like, "Every English department should have a Joycean" (better still, every comp lit department, but there aren't enough of those); or, "No student of literature should graduate from college without reading *Ulysses*." These were dicta inspired by a certain perceived need to champion a twentieth-century Great in light of the favoritism to Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Milton (in English) and to Homer, Dante, Cervantes (in European lit). Yale's course on the epic, which I taught once, sets *Ulysses* in such company, and that's all to the good, yet ...

The "yet" is what made me think about an introductory course on *Ulysses*, as opposed to squeezing the unworkable text into a survey of "The Modern British Novel" (as though *Ulysses* is "British"), or giving it several weeks of a Joyce seminar (for upper-classmen). The point, I thought, though I didn't really articulate it as such to myself, was the uniqueness of *Ulysses*, and so it was necessary to detach the book from the contexts of comparison and contrast so dear to the teacherly mind, and try to take it—as I did in my earliest, personal reading—on its own merits.

Was I seeking a key to that bygone banquet, as Rimbaud might say? Perhaps. But I was also seeking a key to my "take" on the book.

The other teaching experience relevant to that effort has been tutoring for a course at Yale called Daily Themes. The course consists of writing exercises that require students to write about three hundred words a day, five days a week, for twelve weeks. The skills promoted in that course are many, but the main value is inventiveness. Taking a chance. Risking something. Such risk is not so much a question of subject matter, but rather of shedding the comfortable

clichés and mannerisms of writing, both as a form of expression and as a means of encountering the world. To say something about some thing, one must really see, taste, hear, smell, feel that thing and then find the means to convey that to the reader, with as little mediation as possible. As such, we offer what seems a realist dictum: show the thing, get out of the way. No fancy stylistic razzle-dazzle. The passages handed out to students as models tend to favor Hemingway and Joan Didion much more than Joyce and Thomas Pynchon. Excess verbiage is a problem for most students, and it's best to argue for the Poundian virtues of "non-slithery language," telling them to pare down to the essential, telling details.

Ezra Pound, of course, was a great proponent of the Joyce of *Dubliners* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, but he started to balk at things he found in *Ulysses*, particularly in the later going, after the interior monologue of both Stephen and Bloom had been abandoned, and he had no patience for the *Wake*. And Pound's viewpoint, largely, is still that of the English teacher's approach to *Ulysses*. Appreciate *Dubliners*, *Portrait* and "the initial style" of *Ulysses*, then stick with Woolf and Faulkner; Joyce just goes too far.

And indeed it's true, for the most part. The passages from *Ulysses* that strike one as exemplars for writers tend to come from the first ten chapters; thereafter things get a bit dicey. Consider a passage like this, from chapter 3:

Found drowned. High water at Dublin bar. Driving before it a loose drift of rubble, fanshoals of fishes, silly shells. A corpse rising saltwhite from the undertow, bobbing a pace a pace a porpoise landward. There he is. Hook it quick. Pull. Sunk though he be beneath the watery floor. We have him. Easy now.

Bag of corpsegas sopping in foul brine. A quiver of minnows, fat of spongy titbit, flash through the slits of his buttoned trouserfly. [...] Hauled stark over the gunwale he breathes upward the stench of his green grave, his leprous nosehole snoring to the sun.

The “scrupulous meanness” that controlled Joyce’s aesthetic choices in *Dubliners* has been developed, through *Portrait’s* attention to how Stephen experiences the world verbally, into a prose equal to any task. We get the visceral thrill of the drowned man’s corpse being found and brought into a boat. But none of this is happening except in Stephen’s mind, and it is that controlling mind, fond of its show-offy post-graduate effects, that quotes Milton (“sunk though he be...”) and plays with words—having found a nice alliteration in “fanshoals of fishes,” he adds “silly shells.” Such touches become more pronounced, even aggressive, as the novel develops. More remarkable are lines like “Bag of corpsegas sopping foul brine” which is, by its recurring sounds, poetry: bag / gas, corpse / sop, and, especially fine, the slide from “ing” to “ine” by way of “oul.” Likewise, “leprous nosehold snoring to the sun.” Both lines demonstrate the progress in Joyce’s prose: from command over detail for its own sake, he has moved to the ability to make delicate poetic effects out of indecorous images, not only to illustrate Stephen’s morbidity but also to give us a pleasantly icky sensation. We see minnows dining on offal and a nasty transformation of the male member into a “spongy titbit”—but we might also say, from the fish’s point of view, a tasty transformation.

In any case, such effects might be said to get in the reader’s way, drawing us into a circle of admiration for the author, but to take it that way is to miss the true scope of Joyce’s achievement. If such things were isolated instances, we might say “cut them and get on with it.” Outside of a context like this, would a scrupulous editor allow “green grave”—isn’t that simply overkill? But that, we *Ulysses* fans say, is the point: if you think that’s overkill, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet! “Overkill,” “excess,” “superfluous padding”—such ideas will themselves seem quaint by the end of this book. Joyce is a writer’s hero because of all he risks, but also because of all he gets away with, all he makes us suffer/admire; but, unlike the mind-numbing explicit doldrums of *Infinite Jest’s* horse latitudes, Joyce has a heart. He’s not a machine and he knows we aren’t either. Consider a passage from chapter 14:

You move a motion? Steve boy, you're going it some. More bluggy drunkables? Will immensely splendiferous stander permit one stooder of most extreme poverty and one largesize grandacious thirst to terminate one expensive inaugurated libation? Give's a breather. Landlord, landlord, have you good wine, staboo? Hoots, mon, a wee drap to pree. Cut and come again. Right. Boniface! Absinthe the lot. *Nos omnes biberimus viridum toxicum, diabolus capiat posterioria nostria*. Closingtime, gents.

Here we have Stephen ("Steve boy" to his friend Lynch) standing drinks to his impecunious friend ("one stooder of most extreme poverty" where "stooder" stands in relation to "stander" or provider)—the play with "splendiferous" and "grandacious" typical of former students trained in Latin, as is the use of Latin coined on the spot to accompany, as benediction, Stephen's demand of absinthe for all: we will all drink the green poison and the devil take the hindmost. What's clear immediately is that we're on a drinking binge, everyone's drunk, and the language has the texture of voices gesticulating wildly in a bar and waxing—as play with language inevitably does in Joyce—toward idiolects, often with a Shakespearean cast when Stephen's on stage (which is why *Ulysses* is so much fun to read aloud): "bluggy drunkables" for "bloody drinks," "breather" for "pause," "staboo," a reference to a bawdy song sung earlier in the chapter, while "hoots" has the sound of "zounds" in Shakespeare, much as "cut and come again" gives us the feel of fencing. "Right Boniface" mimics "right about-face," a military command, but also a call to the bartender—"Boniface" a slang term for his beneficent countenance.

All this is packed so tight it can make the reader's head spin. And it should, because Joyce wants us to feel the confusion and collide of a range of effects, but, if we've read all the previous chapters, we know the entire passage is marked with the coloration of Stephen's verbal jousting. This is how it feels to be on a bender with our young, word-drunk, and actually drunken hero.

In terms of writerly use value, these passages—one might say virtually any passage in *Ulysses*—are packed with food for thought, to surfeit perhaps, on such important prose techniques as: sound effects; variations in diction for purposes of characterization and surface interest; reference to specific things to create the “reality effect” of a world characters inhabit; shifts in point of view—lightning fast in some chapters of *Ulysses*, but almost always marked by nodal points that help us navigate; enlivening depiction through humor, and by characteristic expressions, and by the kind of textual material that people keep in their heads and reference at will. There’s no dumbing down in Joyce, but, at least until the *Wake*, there’s an earnest attempt to keep the reader on the page, and that’s done by providing pleasures you can’t get elsewhere. Joyce staked a big claim, one that can be mined for ages without seeming in the least depleted.

If this were only about the pleasures of the text, then we could say the use of *Ulysses* is the entertainment it provides. Would that be enough? It would, for my money, offset the claims to accomplishment made for any number of novels much less fun to read.

Still, the need for literary significance, or for the power of art, would not be satisfied by such a claim. We want to be convinced, when putting in our time to get what we can out of the book, that it adds something to our minds, maybe even to our souls (if you permit the term), that is worth having. I’m in sympathy with such a view because it’s what I felt the first time I got all the way through. I was changed. There was a “before” and an “after” in reading *Ulysses*. That first attempt in high school, I was simply acting precocious, trying to hold my own, as a reader, with the best the century had to offer. But the next time, maybe because I wanted to be a better writer, maybe because I wanted to understand what it meant to be committed to literary art, maybe because I wanted something to be worth more than entertainment or sanctimonious “messages,” the

D. BROWN

stakes felt very high to me indeed. And Joyce delivered.

What I found in *Ulysses* was an artfully contrived verbal relation to the modern world, to literature, to psycho-sexual make-up, to domestic relations, to political and commercial status, to the very notion of what it means to be free or not inside one's own mind. Joyce, more than any writer whose career began since the dawn of radio and television, even since the start of newsprint, grasps, in the movement of his prose, in his ear for how words, phrases, tunes, brief glimpses, acts of attention and inattention work upon us, the rich potential and the potential poverty of our responses to our environments, our milieux, our gangs and hoods and schools, our folk, our nation, our faith and family—everything that shapes the individual and makes a person one of the crowd.

And that's not all. That pretty much covers only the "initial style." What Joyce does in the more problematic, and wilder, second half of the book is destroy the technique he added to literature. In chapter 14 he leads the reader on a walking tour of English prose styles—rather say "voices," since almost every passage is recognizable as a take-off, what stand-up comedians call "an impression," of a specific era or writer, from before writers had names up to the big guns of the generation previous to Joyce's. He does this after chapters in which he deliberately distorts and extends his own technique of interior monologue and narration (chapter 11), mocks any number of prose styles, from newspaper reporting, in its more flowery form, to scientific debate and religious tract (chapter 12), to a re-enactment of what today is called "chick lit" and was, in his time, much more sentimental than snarky, but with an up-to-date sense of the young female reader as consumer—sort of like a romance novel crossed with *Cosmopolitan*. And then he pulls the book apart, in chapter 15, with the zaniest send-ups imaginable of his own material. The book we've been reading explodes and, in the process, all the darkest fears and deepest shames of our heroes Bloom and Stephen—the kinds of things people used to confess only to priests,

then to psychoanalysts, and lately to anyone with a TV camera and microphone—are dressed in grotesque carnival colors, making them into laughingstocks.

Granted, what is revealed about Joyce's characters may seem quaint in our day. But if men can still lose positions of power and obligation due to the sorts of things "the old Adam" makes them do—often involving a search for sexual thrills beyond whatever line they normally toe, whether involving interns, solicitations in men's rooms, or self-exposure via phones or the internet—then the kinds of things we learn about Bloom, and the whirlwind rise-and-fall fantasy he lives through, still have remarkable relevance. Joyce sussed early on, as we find in his unfinished first attempt at a novel, the hypocrisies of his day where sexual freedom was concerned, and his response was a bit like Lenny Bruce's: he found the means to mock the world of bourgeois mores. But unlike Bruce, he wasn't goaded by the need to be hip or to score with or off some particular social group.

Joyce's art, though entertaining, isn't simply that of an entertainer. As an artist Joyce, like many others of his time, believed the biggest revolution would take place in individual lives in private homes throughout the world, but, for that to happen, the necessary thing was—to paraphrase John Lennon—to free our minds. Stephen, tapping his own brow, says: "It is here I must kill the priest and king." We might add a whole host of others Joyce sought to kill: the censor, the editor, the sponsor, the confessor, the soldier; and those he didn't kill outright—the scholar, the poet, the lover, the novelist—he transformed. The point was to make those who presume to know what we should and shouldn't read, how we should and shouldn't write, or act or dress, or when we should or shouldn't love or fight, or how we should or shouldn't live face up to their own inadequacies before the true richness, randomness, and strangeness of life. In the process, he helped create the notion of The Writer as the answer to everything. The Writer as artist became, for a time, a very self-conscious and at times quite contentious position, founded on the belief that writing enhances and completes life. Arguably, there is

no longer that kind of demand for *The Writer*, and soon, perhaps, there will no longer even be the wherewithal to appreciate what *The Writer of Joyce's* era achieved.

These days, with our blogosphere and twitterdom, every fleeting thought, every mundane act, can be transcribed and transmitted. *Ulysses* was there first, and Joyce, I believe, would have loved the verbal oddities and inanities of internet communications—the random quotations, the misspellings and bad grammar, the revealing slippages and usages, what he calls in the *Wake* the “skysign of soft advertisement,” or the skein of self-advertisement we find in social networks. But even if you took the postings and tweets of your immediate circle, or of everyone linked-in by certain characteristics, and created an algorithm to assign attributes to characters generated by the data, and had them speak a pidgin derived from the posts and links they post and access, you would still not attain anything very interesting without the controlling vision—the artistic accountability—derived from that Old World discovery, the unique and individual human imagination. Joyce did the mapping and the cross-referencing without benefit of computers, and that in itself is remarkable. What his aesthetic makes graspable is the idiosyncrasy of true originality, and of the shaping power of the imagination when faced with the endless discourse of modern times, with the sheer, mind-numbing stuffiness of our thoughts that David Foster Wallace renders so well, and with the altering-as-we-go wikipe-dias of our personal mythologies and histories.

The use of *Ulysses*, for Joyce, is that it saves everything he knew from being useless knowledge—it all serves its purpose in the work. And if the use for us is laughing at life as we live it, we moderns, or getting even with it, or getting it right, or giving it, to borrow T. S. Eliot's oft-cited phrase, “a shape and a significance,” then that use is only achieved—in the most direct “use it or lose it” way—by putting the book to work, by working the text and letting it work your mind. Ron Rosenbaum finds *Ulysses* “overwritten” and “overwrought,” its humor “leaden,” its symbolism “overstuffed”—a

list of adjectives not exactly exacting—and its erudition “gratingly obvious” (as if he already knows everything the book knows). He further blames *Ulysses* for Pynchon going awry after his first two novels, when it’s rather obvious—maybe even gratingly so—that *V.* is the Pynchon novel most directly influenced by *Ulysses* and Joyce’s effort to do “take-offs” on other literary styles. But such distinctions don’t matter to Rosenbaum, who is more interested in scoring a toss-off than making any statement that might prove him equal to a work that makes demands beyond what he’s willing, perhaps able, to concede.

Are such works beyond us, or are we beyond them? It’s a question that sends me back to the classroom ultimately: to see the book work upon other minds about the age I was when I first made it through, minds not yet frozen into reaction or convinced they know “how fiction works.” Readers willing to jump in and see where it goes, willing to be surprised and delighted and confused by what Joyce’s prose does to their expectations of prose, willing to face the pleasures of virtuosity, the challenge in linguistic possibilities that simply beggar anyone you’d care to name. As a reader, you have nothing to lose but your illusions. Humbling enough, perhaps, but a useful loss, if what is gained is a sense of the use value of writing as art.

How to Cope

Chelsea Rathburn

Develop watchfulness early.

Sort the detritus of the pockets to count bottle caps,
check the opened bottles for water.

Listen for the key missing and finding the lock, for the call
from the authorities. Sleep with one ear open.

Look for their tell—the slight slur, the narrowing eyes,

a benign gratitude—and take them away
the minute they begin calling everyone
in the Mexican restaurant Pedro.
They are now less than one drink

from rolling on the neighbor's lawn
or curling into the fetal position
to tell you they hate their life and everyone in it.
The truth is, you like them more when they have been drinking.
The truth is, they like you more when they have been drinking.

Deliver threats they won't remember in the morning.
Accept explanations and subterfuge, as in "I don't have a drinking problem,
I have a drinking and driving problem." Or, "It looks like someone's caught
the Vino Virus again."

Construct elaborate proofs and theories:
if there are 16 bottle caps, he must have offered to open someone else's beer.
Perhaps she is allergic to wine. And though

you walk through the world expecting it to break, believing
that those you love will always lie to you, tell yourself they never mean to.

Do not wash the vomit off the steering wheel. You have to draw the line somewhere.

A Government Office in Al Ain

Andrew Madigan

And it was like knocking four quick times on the door of unhappiness.

–Albert Camus

Oct. 11

A bad day.

When I came home from work, K. was standing in the kitchen, staring out the window. Grocery bags were scattered around the floor, but she hadn't put the food away. A yogurt had exploded. Ants were lining up. The milk had already started turning. There was broken glass in the sink.

K. lost the baby. I'm not sure what I said to her. It probably doesn't matter. I held her in the kitchen for a long time until I had to get the kids from school. When I kissed her on the head and pulled away, she didn't seem to notice. I remembered a story someone told me about falling in love and getting married. The guy went off to work one morning and his wife was on her hands and knees scrubbing the inside of the oven. When he got back home nine hours later, she was still scrubbing.

She'll be alright, won't she? I backed away from her carefully, so as not to squash any food. From the doorway, it looked like the ruins of a classical city. A Carthage of bananas and plums. A Persepolis of crinkly bags.

Oct. 12

We learned things today. K. cried a lot, but she was more responsive.

She was twenty weeks along, which means they can't just scrape it out, or whatever it is they normally do. No, K. will have to deliver it, as if it were still alive. The procedure's in three days. *Deliver* seems

like the wrong word. I couldn't stop looking at her stomach. It looks hollow now. I feel as if the baby's already been removed, but it's still there, waiting.

Him, not it. We found out he was a boy. We're going to call him Charlie.

Oct. 13

K. cried all day. Her doctor said the hospital would take care of the burial procedures. We hadn't even thought about that. I guess I just assumed they would ... I don't know what I thought.

Here in Al Ain, in the Emirates, abortion is illegal and every baby, alive or not, every fetus and embryo, must have a proper burial. That's nice, I guess. They're also going to perform an autopsy to make sure we didn't abort the baby. A murder investigation. That's what it really comes down to. I didn't tell K. about this. Her doctor didn't think it would be a good idea.

At dinner we had a small service for Charlie. Everyone said a few words. K. cried, the kids cried, I cried. K. started wailing and the kids were scared. I tried to calm her down. I don't want to worry the kids. Denise, who's eleven, had a strange look in her eyes. It was like she'd lost her mom, not a baby brother.

Oct. 14

We had a fight today.

"What is it?" I asked, for the third time, or maybe the fourth. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"No, really. What is it? Come on."

"I'm fine. Nothing." Her jaw weighed a thousand pounds, but she managed to pry it open. Something in the neighborhood of a smile.

Later, while I was getting ready to go out—my department had

a working dinner—K. was sitting on the corner of the bed.

I was trying to get my watch on. “Can I do anything for you while I’m out?”

“You didn’t want the baby in the first place, did you?”

“Of course I did.”

“Then how come you’re not crying all the time? You know how hard it’s been not to cry in front of the kids? It takes all I’ve got. I—”

“—Hold on, hold on. You can cry in front of them. Of course you can. That’s not what I said. Not what I meant, anyway. It’s just, you were really freaking out the other night, and that was freaking *them* out.” I sat next to her. “I just thought you should be careful. I’m worried about the girls, you know? They were so excited about the baby.”

“We *all* were.”

“Yeah.” I found it hard to keep up with her thoughts, especially while I was trying to knot my tie. It was like running after a train that was pulling away from the station.

“Why aren’t you crying? I’m sick of you, you know that?”

This is when I started to get worried. “No ... what’s going on?” I’d gotten up, but I sat down again and put my hand on her leg.

“You know.” She squirmed out from under my hand. “You don’t even care, do you? No, I know you don’t. You’re just going on as if nothing happened.”

“What? No, not at all. I’m sad. I cried a little. You know me. That’s just not how I react to ... to these things. There’s no law about how you’re supposed to act. Everyone’s different. Come on, you’re being silly.”

I’d spoken to the doctor. I knew about hormones, chemicals quietly surging within. K.’s body had been preparing itself to care for a baby. Her job, at the biochemical level at least, was to protect the baby. But now the baby was dead. Her body was telling her that she’d failed. The doctor spoke of confusion, depression, erratic behavior.

“You should just leave me, okay? I think we’re through. We’re

over.”

I didn't say anything. It's all chemicals, I remember telling myself, nothing else. It's normal. The doctor said to expect this. There's nothing to worry about.

She got up and walked across the room. She stood by the dresser and knotted a scarf. She unknotted it a few seconds later, then started knotting it all over again. I was mesmerized.

“What do you have to say about that, huh? Nothing, that's right.” She was screaming now. “So go ahead and leave me if that's what you want. Selfish, as always. You never think about anyone but yourself.”

K. threw the scarf as hard as she could against the wall, but it wasn't a rock or a baseball or a porcelain mug. There was no velocity or crash, no spray of broken pieces tapping against the floor, washing across our feet. Only a confetti of fear falling over the room.

“Quiet, K. Please. The kids.”

She yelled incomprehensibly, then fell on the bed in a hard lump of tears and muted groans. I could see her muscles grow taut, the veins in her arms and shoulders straining against the skin.

At some point I finished getting dressed and went to the dinner. I don't remember anything else.

Oct. 15

We took care of it today. I left her at the hospital an hour ago. She needs to stay overnight, maybe longer.

When we got there, K. was supposed to get a pill, something to induce labor, but all the doctors were busy. We had to wait for an hour. She was supposed to have a private room, but they were all full, so they put her in a crowded ward with dozens of Indian and Emirati women. Some were in labor, or getting close, and some had already delivered. The sound of crying babies was too much for K. She looked at me the way our kids do when they're trying to fight

back the tears. The quivering mouth, the milky eyes, the fear without end.

I spoke to the head nurse, but she could do nothing.

K. got the pill, eventually, but it didn't seem to do anything. After a few hours we rang for the nurse, but no one came. They seemed to have forgotten about us.

The doctor wouldn't be coming, we were told. The nurses—*sisters*, they're called—would handle everything. I spoke to the head nurse again, to voice my complaints. She nodded her head and murmured and looked at me with dark eyes. She smiled halfway, a look of tolerance and understanding for difficult patients. Some of the nurses were midwives, she told me. Very skilled. This was supposed to make me feel better, but of course it didn't. A midwife was fine, if you were having a baby.

K. got another pill. She asked for pain medication as well. "Soon," we were told. "Soon. Doctor too much busy now."

We waited. I was glad we'd dropped the children off with friends. They didn't need to see this. I read all the signs and posters on the wall. It was a Catholic hospital. Christ, I had no idea. I didn't even know they had them here.

At the end, it came quickly. Her water broke, a nurse wheeled her bed into a spare room, and things were arranged. There was no need for K. to push. The contractions were enough to nudge him out.

The nurse, from South Africa, was nice and efficient and somewhat abrupt. She said the cord had become tangled, which is why he died. She asked if we wanted to spend a few minutes alone with the baby. K. said yes. The nurse arranged Charlie's body so that he wasn't all curled up. She stretched out his arms and legs and turned his head to the side. She worked quickly, but with care and skill. I was afraid his body would break apart when she touched it, but it didn't. It looked like it was made of gelatin. It looked weak and fragile, but it wasn't. She cut the cord and went somewhere else, leaving the three of us alone.

He was blue, gray, translucent. I was surprised how real he looked, how fully formed. I had expected a bigger head. I thought he'd look more fetal, more alien. But Charlie wasn't like that at all. I couldn't stop looking at him. He was beautiful.

I was frozen. I would stare with utter objectivity and detachment, amazed at how perfect and miniature everything was, and then I would remember he was my dead son.

K. cried and screamed and dug her nails deep into my arms. I knew there was blood dripping down and falling from my elbows to the bed, but I didn't feel anything. I held her and said nothing. I kissed the top of her head, matted with sweat. K. looked like someone else's wife. Her eyes were different. Her mouth. She was a stranger.

It was hard to cry. K. sucked all the tears from the room. She didn't leave any for me. I felt desiccated and barren, like those pictures of dried-up lake beds in Africa where the earth is another planet, cracked and dead.

We couldn't take our eyes off him. I had no idea there would be fingernails and a rib cage and a nose that looked just like mine. He didn't look dead. He looked perfect. He had K.'s chin, my cheekbones. You could tell he was ours. He looked like he was sleeping. Charlie was my son, and now he was dead. I knew this, of course, but at the same time I didn't. The idea had been knocking at the door, insistently, but I refused to answer.

The nurse came back. She wrapped Charlie in a blanket and placed him on a silver tray.

A doctor came to see how K. was. She put on a rubber glove and stuck her fingers inside. K. was screaming again, worse than before. The doctor removed things, sticky and red. I stood in the hallway for a few minutes.

K. was moved to a private room, sort of. It was a large room that had been divided into three, with makeshift walls that didn't go all the way up to the ceiling. The doors didn't lock. The bathroom was down the hall. K. had trouble walking and there was no buzzer

to call for a nurse. I took her to the bathroom. What if she had to go in the middle of the night? I asked if she wanted me to stay, but she didn't. She wanted to be alone.

Oct. 16

I got to the hospital early. I had to bring a marriage license. If we weren't really married, then we had committed a crime by fornicating. The police would be notified. They would have to investigate the abortion angle with greater care.

K. was dressed when I got there. Her eyes were red and angry. The woman in the next room, the next cubicle really, had kept her up all night. She'd had a baby girl and it had cried incessantly. Her family had squeezed into the tiny room and stayed all night. Talking, singing, laughing, cooking on a portable stove. The noises, the smells. There must've been more than a dozen people in there.

Before we could leave, a Sri Lankan nurse came in with the director of patient relations. He had a gray beard, an approachable sweater, a jittery smile. He was American. We spoke for a few minutes in soft voices. He said the same things that were printed on trifold brochures. I barely heard what he was saying.

"Do you mind if we pray for you?" he asked.

I was shocked, but then I remembered this was a Catholic hospital. Prayer was the last thing I wanted, and I knew K. felt the same way. I smiled, to soften the words. "As long as you do it somewhere else." I thought this was a pretty good answer.

"Okay." He left the room, but the nurse stayed behind. She'd been holding K's hand all this time, comforting her, which I thought was strange. That was my job. I was standing right there.

The nurse stared at the floor, eyes closed. She was praying. I had just said not to do it here, and she was doing it anyway.

She opened her eyes and smiled. I noticed that she was covered in gold. Gold-framed glasses, small golden earrings, slim gold watch. Gold bracelet, rings, necklace. She held K.'s hand even tighter. "It is

all for best. God's will. It is his plan. You will see. It is all okay now." She left the room.

K. took my arm and we walked downstairs to reception. I had to settle the bill. There was no line at the desk. We sat down and the man brought up our information.

"You're here for deliver baby?" he asked, smiling widely, eager to share our joy.

I nodded. I didn't look at his face but soon, I imagined, it would register.

A couple came up to the desk a few moments later. The woman had a newborn wrapped in a yellow blanket. K. left the room. I remembered what the nurse had said, that everything would be okay now.

Oct. 17

The director of patient relations called me at home. Did I remember him? Sure, sort of. He spoke in circles, faint splintered circles. I didn't get what the point of his call was, but then I figured it out. He didn't want to get to the point. He was afraid.

The hospital couldn't take care of the burial, not alone. Someone from the family had to accompany the body to the morgue. I was confused, stuttering, lost. He said I needed another copy of the marriage license. He said he would go with me. We agreed to meet tomorrow at 3:00 PM.

Oct. 18

He was late. Rick, the director of patient relations. When he showed up, he let us into his office and we sat down. The small talk was very small indeed. A few minutes later, a nurse came in with Charlie. He was still wrapped in the blanket. She handed him to me. He was so light.

“I, I, I ...” I looked at Rick. I looked at the nurse. I stared at a dark green filing cabinet. “Shouldn’t ... don’t you have something? Will he be alright?”

“It should be okay,” he said.

“It ... doesn’t feel right. I expected something more official, more secure. Shouldn’t he be. Preserved? Is that right? A coffin, a cooler. Something more ... sanitary? It’s almost 120 degrees outside. It gets so hot in the car.... he’ll ...”

Rick looked at the nurse, another Sri Lankan wrapped in bright gold. She shook her head discreetly, with a tight mouth. “We don’t have anything like that. I’m sorry.”

It was as if this had never happened before, but of course it had. In fact, the nurse, the midwife, had talked about it quite a bit the night of the delivery. Much more common than we realized. So why didn’t they know how to handle it?

“I ... a bag or a box at the very least.... I mean ...” I don’t know what I said, exactly. I probably wasn’t making much sense. But I couldn’t walk out of there carrying my son in a blanket.

Rick nodded to the nurse, who left and came back a few minutes later with a plastic grocery bag. She held the bag open while I placed Charlie inside. There are moments, I discovered, when you have no feelings at all, good or bad, because no part of you is prepared to feel.

I followed Rick in my car to the city morgue, which was at another hospital across town. I kept stealing glances at the bag. I was afraid of what would happen to the body. I didn’t want it to get jostled. I turned the AC on full-blast. I hoped Rick would drive slowly.

The UAE is a place of gold and glass and steel towers, but the government offices are ramshackle affairs. The Catholic hospital had been quite ... basic. Peeling paint, broken light bulbs, chipped furniture, a jaundiced tint in the air. But the morgue, or rather its administrative office, was another step down. Dirt strewn across the

floor like carpeting. Doors flung wide open. A large hole in the wall. Birds flew in and out. There was no air conditioning so the building was painted in mold and mildew, uneven brushstrokes of brown, black, and green.

An old man covered with scabs slept on a crumbling wooden bench in a narrow hallway. I didn't know who would collapse first, the man or the bench. He sat up. "Salaam."

"Salaam," I answered. The man rubbed his head. One or two teeth remained standing, the last survivors of a failing colonial outpost.

We entered a large empty room. Everything was quiet except for a ceiling fan with a missing blade. As it spun on a lopsided axis, the absent blade hummed and whirred.

Rick spoke to a Sudanese man sitting behind an old metal desk. A nameplate read *Abdulrahman*. I stood back, silent, holding Charlie in his grocery bag. Every minute or so, I would look down at him. Rick was more assertive now, trading his threadbare cardigan for a black leather motorcycle jacket. He spoke in a thick, loud, rapid Arabic, pointing and nodding with great force. Do you become a different person when you speak another language?

I watched Abdulrahman. He sat with his legs tucked under his body, a posture I'd never seen before, not in a government office. He wore a robe that had probably been white at the beginning of the week. He was tall and thin with a rubbery body and corrugated face. He had a small mustache speckled with gray. His broken sandals sprawled on the floor, one on top of the other. His toenails were long and crooked. He stared at a dark-green metal trashcan while Rick spoke.

Abdulrahman motioned for us to sit. He took my paperwork. After some introductory nodding and blank staring and nonverbal muttering, he borrowed some of Rick's circumlocutions from the day before. I floated on waves of incomprehension, hoping to someday reach the shore. I may have closed my eyes. Charlie was still sleeping

in his blanket, in the plastic bag, sitting carefully on my lap.

“No,” Abdulrahman finally said, with clarity, “the morgue does not do this. You go Fahqa with body and make bury. City cemetery there.”

“But we just spoke on the phone,” Rick said. “Yesterday, remember? We just went over this. You will take care of it for the father. You said that you would.”

“No, no, you misunderstand. We do not do this.” He raised both hands and leaned backward, smiling cautiously. The universal gesture of self-absolution. “You go there and they will make bury. No problem. This is best.”

“It’s not best for me,” I said, on the perimeter of shouting. “It’s not best for *me*. I was told that the hospital would take care of it. I don’t even know where Fahqa is. Look—”

Rick stopped me with his right arm. He was sitting to my left. “—So we just show up at the city cemetery and they’ll take care of it? Right then and there?”

Abdulrahman spoke quickly. “Yes, no problem. Like this.”

Rick did not seem convinced. His words became Arabic again.

At some point, Rick must’ve touched a nerve. Abdulrahman put on a new set of body language. His shoulders bore some responsibility now. His eyes wore a furtive and guilty hood. Yes, his hands were saying, perhaps I could do something. Maybe there is a small chance of helping you. “Okay, it is possible to put the body here in morgue overnight. Then, we make bury tomorrow morning. It is not our responsibility, I want you to know.” He looked at me sternly, though his mouth told me he was bluffing.

I nodded.

“Still, it would be better for the father to make bury himself. However ...” Abdulrahman leaned back again, falling into his soft leather chair. “But okay, we will do this.” He looked at Rick, who nodded. He looked at me with question marks in his eyebrows.

“Yes, thank you. Sukran.”

Forms were sighed, seals were affixed. I left Charlie sitting on the desk. I hesitated for a moment. I was worried about my boy. The government official did not stand up or speak as we left the room.

Oct. 24

Today someone asked me how I was doing. Usually, they ask about K.

Strange, I didn't know how to answer the question. It was someone at work that I don't know very well. Not even sure how she knew about the baby. I just stood there and stared into space. We were in a long hallway in the human resources building. I remember someone was trying to get by, but I was blocking the way. I sort of knew this was happening, but I didn't move. I couldn't.

The woman who'd asked how I was—I think her name's Sara—eventually took my arm and pulled me aside.

It was getting pretty weird for her, I'm sure. "I don't know, I don't—I have no idea how I feel." I made eye contact, did something with my mouth. Eventually, Sara moved on. She said that she would pray for me. I didn't try to stop her.

The house was clean. That's the first thing I noticed when I came home. K. didn't cry today, not once. At least not that I could discover. She doesn't look the same, though. She doesn't smile much. I tried to make her laugh. When we hug, her back doesn't tense up the way it's been doing.

K. and I had dinner together. The kids were already asleep. I've been working late almost every night. We had very little to say. We don't talk much these days, but at least no one's shouting or throwing things. Everything's back to normal. Things are going to be fine.

Three Poems

Mekeel McBride

Late in the Day

Door closing slowly. Sunlight's
entire weight can't keep it open.
Hide and seek and sleep's looking
for you beneath the dusk-beveled sky.
A whole flock of birds lifts and leaves
as if you had exhaled them.
The empty space inside your chest
that nothing ever seems to fill, fills now
with the quiet they have left behind.

Center for Wildlife: Red-Tailed Hawk
for Lorisa Ricketts

It surprises me, how little she weighs,
the red tailed hawk in my arms.
I'm holding her as I've been taught,
one gloved hand around her legs,
just above the talons, the other hand
gathering her against my chest,
her back to my heart.

Lorisa, who's force-feeding her says,
quietly, "*She's old.*" I barely hear
what she says next, sadness
stealing sound, "*So beautiful ...*"
The hawk's here because someone
found her by the road, hit by a car,
starving, blind in one eye.

I'm hoping the beat of my heart's
the least bit comforting
but know the truth is she's sure
I want to eat her. As if it were possible
for imagination to reach the wildest part of her,
I keep sending her images of treetops
growing smaller as she rises,

the wild fields beneath her
rich with mice and moles.
And this is what I keep sending,
love letters made of living pictures,
even after I settle her back into the cage,
long after the next day's staff
opens the small door to find her gone.

Wrong in Daylight

Baba Yaga lifted me out of my strange, arranged world
into one I understood where the witch, who lived
in a house that spun on chicken legs, harnessed

her anger into abyss for anyone who crossed her
and no matter how hard the hapless passerby tried
not to, in the end, everyone crossed her.

And she was everywhere, even at school
where bells rang us from room to room, each class
a kind of terrarium and if the others were vibrant,

healthy plants then I was a moth, an error, wrong
in daylight among the real children. I practiced erasing
myself with clock hand and chalk dust, fierce dreaming

to the edge of things, porch, playground fence,
railroad tracks, the last place anyone would look.
Briar Rose, the thread I followed to the burnt star

of a bad fairy blackening the christening; the dwindling
of the hearth fire into a nest of ash; from the sting
of the golden spindle, a hundred years of blessed rest.

The Imprint: Ekphrastic Psychoanalysis

E. Powell

In this poster-print, he saw every patient he ever had
talking about love.

But everyone perceives different things,
the first session begins:

Tell me what do you see in this?

Some go into a trance to decipher
exactly what it is

abstract—silk-screened—barrage of Rorschach.

Each angel who appears in his Miami office
has read Wallace Stevens, has seen

fireflies in mating season

doppelgangers in the bedroom wallpaper,
trying to get out

a Grecian urn or a jar
upon a hill in Tennessee.

There is the husband who sees his wife spending all their money,

and the wife who sees the stars overhead, through the skylight, in bed all alone:

they both agree on one thing—both see their marriage vows in it,
but written upside down, in a red accountant's pen.

At night when Mrs. Rodriguez comes in to dust, she sees a red apple
in a butcher's kitchen, and knows this can't mean anything
too good.

The shrink had brought it back from his International Shrink Convention,
Barcelona, 1968.

He himself had once fallen in Spain one terribly hot summer,
it was then the smell of Sunday morning citrus imprinted in his mind,

and whenever he thought of the words "dusk" or "touch" or "desire"
he could smell Clementine rinds, blood oranges—

The Art of the Recap

*Spoilers, Easter eggs, and
listicles as cultural
obsession*

Rachael Scarborough King

This was a trying season of *True Blood* for blogger Meredith Woerner of i09.com, a science-fiction and fantasy site. Entering her fourth year of summarizing each episode with pithy lists of pros and cons, Woerner, along with her dedicated contingent of readers and commenters, began with elevated expectations. “*True Blood* is back!” she exclaimed in the first recap of 2011, which she posted on June 27. The enthusiasm, however, quickly waned. Woerner wrote that a mid-season episode was a “whole lotta nothing for a long damn time”; she described the season finale as a “wet fart,” writing, “So that’s it. The season is over. And it was well, fine? The worst season in *True Blood* history, very possibly.” As her reviews became more resigned and disappointed, a consensus developed among the dozens of unpaid commenters contributing every week: *True Blood* had jumped the shark. Season 1 was definitely the best, followed by 3, while 2 and 4 vied for the title of worst. season. ever. And as they soured on the show itself, the viewers/readers spun another narrative: i09.com’s recaps were the reason—or at least an excuse—for continuing to watch. As *True Blood* shifted from campy and melodramatic to just plain bad, viewers had at hand a rationale for their ongoing dedication: I did it for the recaps.

The recap is a genre of internet writing that combines the irreverence of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Zombies* with the shorthand utility of CliffsNotes. Every day, thousands of bloggers are writing summaries of almost every program currently on TV, offering scene-by-scene analysis of the plot, characters, sets, and Easter eggs—all those fun, insidery details you might have missed because you were too busy multitasking while actually watching the thing. Unlike in traditional reviews, the assumption behind recaps is that readers have already seen the show; spoilers and elaborate hypotheses are the norm. Hundreds of thousands of people are spending their time reading descriptions of TV shows that they have already watched.

The recap has become such a universal type of blog content that Choire Sicha, an editor for the online magazine *The Awl*, recently hyperbolized, “The Internet is about 55 percent composed of people talking about what was on TV last night.” The recap is not exactly an industry—I doubt many laid-off freelancers are restarting their journalism careers by watching TV and writing 500-word responses—but it is something.

Recaps are the online genre par excellence. They’re cheap and easy content, they’re profoundly multimedia in nature, and they allow writers and readers to take an ironically knowing stance toward the often sub-par material they’re dissecting. Recappers, relying on their cultivated commenter groups, tend to take a don’t-try-that-shit-with-me attitude toward the shows’ writers. Even a bad show, they seem to say, can and should be held to a higher standard; at the very least, recaps can demonstrate the fact that you know we all know it’s bad. As Woerner summarily decreed of the season finale of *True Blood*, earlier this fall, “Some of it was good, but most of it was bad.” So say we all.

The genealogy of the TV recap is a bit murky, but online response to TV shows appears to be connate with the rise of the internet itself and, in particular, with the explosive spread of blogging and social media. If, as Marshall McLuhan argued, old media become the content of new media, then one of the first things the internet remediated was TV. Many of the early recaps were simply online forums devoted to sci-fi, fantasy, and other cult shows: *Buffy*, *The X-Files*, *The Simpsons*. The nerdy subculture of the early internet dovetailed nicely with the nerdy subcultures of these audiences’ finely drawn cultural allegiances. Here, it was not only accepted but expected that participants had watched every episode of a series more than once. The ability to notice when a show’s creators changed a character’s date of birth mid-series was a sign of expertise rather than insanity. From the outset, online discussion of offline TV programming favored obsession, devotion, and audience fragmentation.

But if it's obsession with a show that leads viewers to seek out recaps, what is it, exactly, that makes the written discussion so pleasurable: the quality of the writing, or the quality of the program generating the writing? Last year, Mac Slocum argued on TV Fodder, a blog he founded—motto: “Because TV is awesome and so are you”—that “the key to a good recap lies not with the ‘writer.’ It doesn't matter how snarky or funny or thorough you are. A good recap comes down to one tiny thing: The show must be awesome.” True, to an extent; an awesome show certainly makes me want to seek out more online response. But that isn't the whole story. There's an entire subgenre, which began way back in the late '90s with the Seattle season of *The Real World*, devoted to bad reality programming and any other show that “sucks/blows.”

The founders of Television Without Pity first “met” in a *Beverly Hills, 90210* chat room and started their site with only one show, what they called the “teen pap” of *Dawson's Creek*. I'll admit that the only reason (well, okay, 80 percent of the reason) that I continue watching the teen pap of *Gossip Girl* is so I can spend fifteen minutes afterward giggling at Vulture's “reality index” for the show, which assigns points for both accurate portrayal of life in New York and adherence to common sense and its own storylines. (Typical bullet point: “I hate professional gift wrapping,’ Serena grumbles, tearing at a tightly wrapped present. **Plus 4** for identification of a little-recognized but entirely extant Rich People Problem.”) These blogs couldn't exist without a healthy understanding that it's more than a bit ludicrous for a coterie of adults to earn money and spend their time reading and recapping shows about over-privileged New York teenagers, lusty Louisiana vampires, or delusional, Botoxed “housewives.”

The attraction of the recap, I'll propose, really comes down to two things. First, like any blog with a good commenter section, recaps enhance the reading experience by making you feel like you're part of a cultural niche that just gets it—whether “it” is how shockingly underrated or how deliciously terrible a particular show

is. Your boyfriend refuses to watch *Community* with you? Don't worry, just turn to Vulture's recap, where the commenters are so loyal to the show that the critic frequently has to defend his right to, well, criticize. Just starting the final season of *Friday Night Lights*? *Slate's* TV Club can catch you up on how critics and commenters received the episodes as they aired. This is a deeply communal reading experience in which you are relying on others having seen things you didn't, and then taking the time to write about them on the internet, all to make that static, corporate medium, TV, more fun. I don't read recaps simply for a summary of what I've already watched. I read them to discover the best of what I missed.

Second, readers of TV recaps feel as if they're participating in improving the shows themselves. Almost as soon as there were recaps, producers and show runners were monitoring and responding to them, both accepting and lampooning the people who would spend so much time dissecting each episode of a series. In 2000, Aaron Sorkin famously waded into the TWP comment boards, lost his patience with the commenters' critiques, then introduced a subplot in a 2002 episode of *The West Wing* in which the moderators of a Josh Lyman fan site are portrayed as obese, chain-smoking losers. Daily Intel's *Gossip Girl* recappers had a minor freakout when Josh Schwartz, the creator of the "Greatest Show of Our Time," revealed that the inclusion of three blog-reading characters in a 2008 episode was "a little bit of a nod to *New York* magazine's Daily Intel." And following her negative reviews of *True Blood* this year, Woerner offered a post titled "Why This Was the Worst *True Blood* Season Ever—and How the Show Can be Saved," with detailed instructions for the series's writers. "Don't get me wrong," she wrote, "I love *True Blood*.... But first we have to dissect the failures in order to fix the problems."

The TV-Internet feedback loop doesn't exist only between recappers and producers. It's also, and perhaps more important, between recappers and their commenters. Without traditional copy editors and fact-checking, writers rely on reader response to correct

errors, maintain plot continuity, and draw connections the recapper may not have noticed or may have left out of the summary. Overly earnest commenters can spontaneously produce spoken-word poetry, as in this nymag.com comment on an early *Gossip Girl* episode: “i definitely knew eric was going to be gay with asher / but serena killing someone? / that was never even a consideration / plus it looks like she’s going to cheat on dan in the next episode / & they’re going to break up / i keep thinking of how they unrealistically did it in an ‘abandoned loft’ / & i almost want to cry.”

Many blogs post “roundups” of the best comments, promoting them to post status. But even for those average writers toiling in the depths of the commenting mines, or lurking readers who never post their own responses, the sense of back-and-forth between writer and audience is one of the most integral elements of the recap experience. There is even a dimension of enjoying recaps that is separate from the show itself; as one Gawker commenter wrote to blogger Brian Moylan in a February post, “Brian, I cannot read your *Top Chef* recaps any more because they are better than the show.” Recapping manages to make watching TV feel as engaging and participatory as the other social media that have taken over the web in recent years.

Like many other genres of internet writing, then, the recap blurs the line between amateur and professional criticism and journalism, and not only in a financial sense. The traditional TV-critic model assumes that the person being paid to write is more knowledgeable, more insightful, and more interested in the program under discussion than the average reader. Recapping in many ways assumes the reverse: the writer is offering one take on the show to serve as a springboard for further discussion and analysis by the truly dedicated and expert viewers. There is a sense that the narrative of the recap, like a kind of open letter between the writers and readers, is unfolding and evolving along with the week-to-week fluctuations in plot and quality that characterize even the best TV shows. A pan this week could turn into a rave the next, and the serial quality of the writing maintains the

productive relationship between the recappers and the commenters. As Jessica Pressler and Chris Rovzar, who have spent the past four years recapping *Gossip Girl* for *New York* magazine blogs, wrote of a particularly confusing episode earlier this year, “Only in the fullness of time, when historians and scholars have studied the *Gossip Girl* texts, will we truly know the answers to these questions. Until then, all we can do is compliment and judge the accuracy of the minor details in our weekly reality index!” Recaps are the first rough drafts of ... media studies dissertations?

The recapping phenomenon muddies many of the divisions we take for granted in entertainment media: between watching and reading, consuming and producing, and enjoying and criticizing. The ability to participate in these conversations turns traditional TV watchers into blog readers and comment writers, who perpetuate an ongoing, back-and-forth mode of engagement week after week. For me, recaps and other internet genres like them provide a comforting rebuttal to the recent proliferation of articles about the supposed death of reading. Like other online reading, recapping isn't between the covers of a book, but it is addressing more people than ever before, who are “talking” with each other about what they read. And it's more tied to personal, local networks of communication than to the national media brands that are supposed to be all things to all people. What the narrative of the decline and fall of the American reading public sees as a new, lamentable change may actually be more like a correction of a historical anomaly.

In fact, the communal, feedback-oriented cultural consumption that recaps call for has a lot in common with some centuries-old reading practices. In the eighteenth century, similar types of reading communities emerged as literacy rates climbed and books and newspapers became more accessible. The new and trendy genre of the novel was the lowbrow reality TV of its day, and it generated similar cultural hand wringing and won't-somebody-please-think-of-the-

children commentary—as well as huge volumes of feedback, in the form of letters, for bestselling authors such as Samuel Richardson and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Back then, people were much more likely to read in groups, share letters between families and friends, borrow newspapers, and get novels from subscription libraries than they were to read their own books, alone. Reading was just one form of cultural consumption, and it was often a collective activity. From the news-generating coffeehouses of London to the fiction-focused atmosphere of women consuming novels together, reading was understood as taking place within a community of other like-minded readers.

Take Jane Austen. She was not only a compulsive writer from her teenage years on, but also an inveterate novel reader, at a time when most novels, in the words of one magazine critic, were seen as “wretched trash.” (Sound familiar?) Novels had recently become more plentiful and readily available, and new circulating libraries made it relatively easy and affordable to read one novel after another, compulsively and indiscriminately—leading to accusations like those we hear now about consumers becoming “addicted” to TV, video games, and the internet.

Much of the Austen family’s reading material was obtained via circulating libraries, part of whose appeal lay in access to their membership lists, and Austen inserted these institutions into many of her novels. She also filled her letters to family and friends with lists of the books, almost all novels, that “we”—the Austen family—were reading together. The Austens, as she wrote on December 18, 1798, “are great Novel readers & not ashamed of being so.” It’s clear that their reading decisions were made within a group of neighbors, friends, and families, with whom they exchanged and discussed books. While the Austens could not easily influence the authors they were reading, they could react to and shape the reading habits of their own community. Once Austen became a published author, her novels were built into the same system of circulation that had

offered her literary models, and in 1814 she wrote of *Mansfield Park*, “People are more ready to borrow & praise, than to buy—which I cannot wonder at.”

This type of communal reading was a fundamental element of the media environment in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A variety of technological and cultural changes in the Victorian period ushered in the type of literary reading—private, quiet, individual—that we now worry is dying out. And while I don’t think we’re going to be giving a TV recap the same cultural status as an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century novel any time soon, the new genre lets us experience a type of reading that derives as much of its pleasure from its context as from the work itself. Austen would have read recaps and not been ashamed.

What I want to suggest, then, is that what we think of as the “traditional,” separate way to watch or read was actually part of a twentieth-century historical blip in which culture became less communal and more private and individualized. This is a trend that in many ways is now being reversed across a wide spectrum of entertainment. The recap’s transformation of viewers into readers and writers demonstrates just one way in which contemporary cultural consumption may have more in common with what was happening 250 years ago than with what was happening fifty years ago. Then, as now, privately owned books were the province of an educated elite, while the masses enjoyed a wide array of cheap ephemera and pirated copy. And then, as now, keepers of the high-culture citadel—educators, critics, established authors—proliferated more and more words bemoaning society’s declining tastes and sophistication. You want people to go back to reading middlebrow novels? Imagine trying to get them to read only in Latin and Greek.

Of course, there are slight differences between the types of reading happening now and those of the eighteenth century. The material transformation from page to screen has an impact, we’re told, on how we process information, encouraging us to focus more on reading many things at once than on engaging with each text

individually. More important, the level of connection and speed of communications is beyond what could have been imagined in the eighteenth century, itself a time when better printing technology and modernizing postal systems were making correspondence faster and more reliable. But if we're concerned about the outsized impact the "death of reading" narrative seems to be having on contemporary cultural discourse, we might do well to look at how earlier readers dealt with new genres and media—principally, the novel and cheap, widely available print—to reflect on our "new" reading habits. The mode of community-based, response-focused reading and writing that I've been describing here, and that has become so central to life online, has a lot more in common with earlier forms of reading and sharing information than with the twentieth-century emphasis on private reading of individual books.

And, well, at least recaps let us all get together online to agree that vampires' deep feelings, love triangles, and conflicts with witches and werewolves—what io9's Woerner recently called "schlock on schlock on vampire cock"—are silly. Watching supernatural sex on TV might be fun, but anatomizing supernatural sex positions on the Internet is completely hilarious.

Ad Lacum Curtium

W. Travis Helms

The dream had spelled the city at such length
so many days, that none, for sure, could say
with prophecy or heart what was the way
to salvage their sworn ground, begun to sink.
“Beside himself, the boy was standing there,
just staring, staring down into the vent,
wondering what the prophetess had meant,
and then we saw him leap upon the mare—”
Everywhere, the clean, familiar trace
of ficus effloresced. “Fortune loves the bold—”
someone had said, to make it ordinary.
They cut an ox to consecrate the place,
and praying, tied a rope around the hole,
as daylight caught the polished statuary.

Note: As Livy (vii.6) describes, the Lacus Curtius is a sinkhole in the Roman forum, named for a young nobleman, Marcus Curtius. As legend had it, a contemporary oracle had proclaimed that Rome would be delivered from impending military defeat if it sacrificed that which it held most dear into the chasm. Curtius thereupon plunged into the opening in full armor, on horseback, whereupon the earth closed over him and the city was saved.

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