

New Haven Review

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Mistaken Identities

Or “No, I’m not Sandra Oh.”

Pang-Mei N. Chang

The waitress at Atticus Bookstore in downtown New Haven looks at me and says, “You look familiar.”

I smile.

Although 100 percent racially Chinese, I’m accustomed to being mistaken for others. You might say that to people in the United States, all Asians look alike, but frankly, I’ve been mistaken for a native even in every Asian country that I’ve ever travelled to: South Korea, Japan, China, Thailand, Burma, Tibet, Siberia. Once on the New York subway, when I was tan, a young Peruvian man began speaking to me in rapid Spanish. Other times, I’ve been asked if I’m Cherokee.

In the past few years, however, my latest and most regular misidentification has been for the Korean-Canadian actress, Sandra Oh, who was seen this past summer as the stern schoolteacher in the film adaptation of Beverly Cleary’s *Ramona and Beezus*, but is best known for playing Christina Yang, a hardcore, blunt-speaking surgeon on the hit ABC TV show *Grey’s Anatomy*. Sandra Oh also played the motorcycle-riding single mother who falls for a womanizer in *Sideways*, and the pregnant lesbian who shares a villa with Diane Lane in *Under the Tuscan Sun*.

I’ve had people follow me for blocks, and approach me for my autograph. I’m used to sidelong glances in elevators and subways and receptionists excitedly reaching for their telephone the minute I sit down.

On the face of it, this can be quite flattering. But when you return to your hometown, New Haven, after nearly twenty years away—after living in cities as varied as New York, Boston, Moscow, and San Francisco—after all that, you just want to be known as you. You, the girl who used to spin in the bar stools at Clark’s Dairy until the owner told you with his heavy Greek accent to stop. You, whose father taught you never to ask for ketchup on your burger at Louis

Lunch, just “a medium rare with all the works.” You, who used to hike up East Rock with your dog and imagine that every other city in the world looked like this: Gothic spires, billowing trees, and three churches on a green.

I left New Haven as an eighteen-year-old and came back as a thirty-five-year-old, pregnant with my first child. My husband, a Russian-speaking American who’d done well as an investment banker in Moscow after the Wall fell, stayed behind in Russia, where we’d lived for nearly six years. I wanted to live with my parents while I had the baby. Then I was going to think about whether I wanted to return to Moscow to raise the child.

I moved back into the room that I’d grown up in. Though things were pretty much the same, I felt the changes more keenly. The big oak tree outside my window had been felled in a storm. Two of my schools—the Hamden New Haven Cooperative Education Center by Lake Whitney and Sleeping Giant Junior High School—had been turned into old-age homes. The office of Dr. Bornstein, my pediatrician, had once occupied a charming Victorian house on Washington Avenue in North Haven. It was now a funeral parlor.

And yet another part of me felt that no time had passed at all. When I took my daily walk up and down the single block of my parents’ road, I imagined the neighbors looking out the window and saying, *isn’t that the Chang girl? Has she come back pregnant? Where’s her husband?* At the Glenwood Drive-In, I embarrassed myself asking the familiar-looking young waiter if we’d gone to school together. He looked at me as if I was crazy, and I realized that even though he was still in high school, I wasn’t. Then, a few months after I had my baby, a woman came running up to me saying, “Sunny? Sunny? Is that you? You look great!” Sunny is my mother, who taught in the New Haven school system for thirty-four years. She was sixty-two years old when I got mistaken for her. Memory plays funny tricks, freezes people at all ages.

As a writer, I’ve never dreamed of being recognized by my face. Only once in my life have I been spotted out of the blue: I was sitting

with my family in a hot sticky airport in Mexico waiting for an early morning flight, and a woman came up to me and said, I recognize you from your book jacket. I felt instantly naked and exposed. But I honestly never imagined that I would be recognized for someone else’s face.

Psychologists say that there are four aspects of the self:

subconscious, conscious, secret, and blind.

Newly pregnant, I had a dream one night about a small house by a lake. When I woke up, I said to my husband, “We need to move to New Haven, and live in a little house by Lake Whitney.” That is how it is with me and New Haven. My conscious self, the part of me known to myself and known to others (my husband) was a good wife who wanted to stay alongside her husband in Moscow. But my subconscious self (the part of me unknown to myself and unknown to others) wanted to return to New Haven and raise our child there. I was sick of living in Moscow, of being taken for Siberian, Uzbeki, Kyrgyz, or Mongolian. I was sick of pulling on Versace to go to the supermarket, tired of the whole unreality of it all—the maid three times a week, the driver to fetch groceries and run errands. I wanted my kids to learn to pick up their own toys, rake leaves, and shovel snow from the driveway themselves. I wanted them to be able to wear L.L. Bean flannel shirts until there were holes in them, inherit twelve-year-old BMWs when they got their licenses. I wanted them to live a New England life like I had, not a wealthy expat one. I wanted them to have a sense of place, a sense of real home.

The part of self that is unknown to you but known to others is the blind self. And that is how it is with Sandra Oh and me. People see in me part of her that I don’t even recognize in myself: the turned-down mouth, the two-dimensional, almost Modigliani face. This is not your usual Zen beauty—a Gong Li or Zhang Ziyi—who moves with grace through exotic air. This is a kickass babe who crosses her legs, cusses, and speaks her mind, however roughly and abruptly. Sometimes, depending on her role, I have trouble watching

her on screen. I know that I look like her (although I don't feel like I do), and it's almost as if my secret self is up there. When she beat the shit out of Jack, her weekend lover, with her motorcycle helmet in *Sideways*, did I know that my husband and I were going to be divorced within five years?

The first time I got mistaken for Sandra Oh was in 2000, on a flight from Park City, Utah, where I'd been attending the Sundance Film Festival with screenwriter friends. As I got on the airplane, the flight attendant beamed at me and said to me, "Congratulations."

I had no idea at the time that she was mistaking me for the actress from the then-HBO series, *Arli\$\$.* Instead, I just smiled politely and thanked her. I figured she was just as happy as I was with my last-minute upgrade into business class. Only after she had given me a full bottle of champagne, and the guy next to me showed me a picture of Sandra Oh from *USA Today* did I get it. I let my seatmate know who I really was and he and I drank that whole bottle, laughing at our secret.

I didn't bother disabusing the flight attendant then because it seemed so unimportant. But now, I tell people, especially people in New Haven, that no, I'm not Sandra Oh. What is the point of a hometown if no one knows you? If people are more familiar with your doppelganger on TV than you?

Scarlett O'Hara has Tara. I have New Haven, the place I grew up, the place I return to when I have no place else to go, the place I come back to in order to feel grounded. Here, I wish to be known just as me—with all my history—and to be accepted as calmly as a tree with rings of age, gnarled branches and scarred trunk. So if you see me in New Haven, feel free to tell me I look familiar to you. But tell me because you saw me at the Neighborhood Music School fundraiser, or having an Absolut Greyhound at the Anchor. Please don't tell me it's because of Sandra Oh.

Map for a Forgotten Valley

*Dispatches from
Youngstown, Ohio*

Christopher Barzak

Mahoning Valley Blues

Where I come from is fields of clover, cows chewing their cud with eyelids lowered, as if they are dreaming. Where I come from was trips to the grain mill with my grandfather, my hands in my grandmother's summer garden, the mint on my fingers for hours afterward.

Where I come from was my father out of work, again, because of the union striking, and taking meals to the workers on the picket line with my mother, who always shook her head and threw her hands in the air during arguments with my father, pleading, "Why don't you leave that place? They don't care about you. Why don't you find some place where you are valued as the good human being you are, doing good work for other people?"

Where I come from is an emptied-out place, a hollowed space, a fruit with the insides scraped clean, the rind left out in the sun to spot brown with rotting. Most people have never heard of where I come from, even though the steel my father and grandfather helped make, the steel under the gray facades of buildings throughout America, has my town's name on it—Youngstown, Ohio—invisible, holding people up in the sky. They never think about the shoulders they stand on.

Bruce Springsteen wrote a song about where I come from, but most people still think Jenny is the girlfriend of the song's narrator, not the name of a blast furnace that has been destroyed, the thing that provided my home with sustenance for over half a century. Where I come from, even a lot of people where I come from mistake Jenny for a girl.

Where I come from, people talk badly about where we come from. It's as if we have taken on the town's failure as our own. When the steel industry left in the seventies and eighties, the community

tried to purchase the mills, for the town, as a group, to own and operate. But the steel corporations—groups of their own—said the idea was socialist, and would not sell their mills to socialists. Instead, they left their mills behind to rot. And for us, the town, to pay for their demolition three decades later.

Where I come from, we say, “Downtown’s so empty, you can roll a bowling ball down the main street and it won’t hit a thing.”

Where I come from, we don’t care too much for the government, any government, any party, because all of them have come through to take pictures with us, posing for a photo-op to suggest that they are concerned. When it’s time for a national election, suddenly a parade of politicians comes through town, eager to shake hands and tell us that they’re going to do something to make sure this place’s suffering ends. They seal their promises with smiles wider than the Mahoning River, a river that, like the town, I am sure not many people have ever heard of. But they aren’t concerned, not any of them, they are not truly concerned with where I come from.

Where I come from is a place that has turned away from the rest of the world, to finally make our own world, on our own terms. What used to be a city is disappearing: neighborhoods, theaters, storefronts, and streets. Some houses go up in fires set by their owners. Others are taken by scavengers, sold off piece by piece. And the city has a list, a very long list, of buildings to demolish. In their places are backyards with vegetable gardens, and down the street a farmer’s market, and across the way, a ragtag community theater is going to do Shakespeare in the park, and there are women now, three or sometimes four of them, who stand on corners singing spirituals, and a group of African American teenage boys who tap-dance down the main street of downtown, where no bowling ball will ever touch them.

Where I come from, they say we’re going back to nature, as if this is a loss of something. But I say it is a becoming of something different than a smoke-addled city, and a becoming of something

other than an overwhelming front of leaf and vine. It’s becoming itself, where I come from, as we walk away from everything we’ve been and everything we’ve been told we are, or will be, or should be, by people who do not come from where I come from.

Where I come from, we sing the blues. The blues is something you sing when you feel all alone in the world. And when we sing them, we are at our happiest.

All the Cows I’ve Ever Known

All the cows I’ve ever known are calling me home tonight, their voices lowing on the wind, under the winter moon that stares from the sky like a blind man’s eye. I am trying to remember what it was like before I took my first sip of language, before I got drunk on it, earned an education, forgot where I came from for a while in an effort to not be ashamed of it, felt bad about it afterward, wondered how I could be such a self-loathing fool, got over it; started to remember the grass beneath my bare feet each summer, the way my soles grew so thick from daily contact with the earth, a gravel drive couldn’t faze me.

I look up and the world is big again, looming. The trees I climbed so high I became like a cat and almost couldn’t get myself back down. The clouds, big as ocean liners, moving across the floor of the sky. Behind me are fields of clover, where I pull up the stiff rags of brown burdock by its roots with my grandmother. Weeding for the cows, she calls this, so that it doesn’t get inside them when they eat the clover later. “They’ll hate us if we let them eat this and they get sick,” she warns me, “and you don’t want a cow to hate you, no sirree.”

In the back woods, the cows are sitting beneath the shade of a copse of old-growth elms and beeches. In the summer, when the calves have all been born and my father no longer is called by my grandfather in the middle of the night to come down to the barn

and help him deliver another one—no more peering through a barn window to watch a calf slide out of its mother and fall in a steaming pile onto the straw-covered floor—I spend the afternoons with them under those trees, drawing them, petting them, talking to them, falling asleep against their warm sides. Their mothers hover over all of us, and occasionally one looks down at me and blinks, snorts, then lifts her head back up and stares off into the open space before her. My own mother says that those cow mothers must think she has a crazy son, and perhaps I shouldn't embarrass her in front of them by not knowing when to give them their privacy. She shakes her head at me, pets the back of my head.

The cows are Herefords, beef cattle: red body, white face. The two oldest, Judy and Jeanie, have horns. None of my nonfarming friends from school can understand that they are not bulls. "They have horns," my friend Michael says. "They're bulls." I explain that all cows have horns unless they've been bred not to, or maybe they've been cut off when they're young, but that those two were females. "Bulls," he says again. "Bull," I say, and we laugh and laugh.

My brothers join 4-H and raise a cow each year to take to the county fair in the summer. When I'm eleven, I join, too. My first cow's name is Patches. By the time a year has passed, I can ride on his back like a horse, and he never flinches. I brush him down as if he's a prize stallion, give him dried molasses in his feed each night to sweeten his meal. When I'm bored or lonely, I go out to the barn to sit against his side while he's bedded down. When I realize that, after the fair is over, the cows are sold at an auction, and a local grocer buys Patches and butchers him, placing the meat out in the cooler with a picture of me leading Patches around by a rope in the pasture, I stop eating beef and quit 4-H. It was supposed to raise us up to keep us on the farm, living that way, but it's had the opposite effect on me.

There were other cows after Patches: Duke, Buttercup, Lucky, Shotgun Red. I still trained some of these to lead behind me, even

if I'd given up showing them at the county fair. My grandfather's friends tease him about his herd of puppies. This is because my grandfather is as bad as me: talking to the cows like they're a part of the family instead of an ear-tagged number.

By the time I'm sixteen, though, I've grown further into the world of humans, or have been pulled into it by some undeniable force, almost a compelling, and all the cows I've ever known fade into the background, like my family: I am starting to separate, even though I don't realize it as it's happening. I read constantly. An aunt tells my mother it's not healthy for a boy to read so much. "It makes him happy," my mother says. "I'm not against anything that makes him happy." But with each word, each sentence, each paragraph, each page, I am learning things—ideas—that are carrying me further away from her. I am a leaf pulled along the current of language. It seems possible that it may set me free. And a year later my mother's crying as she and my father drop me off at college, only an hour away, proud but worried. Before she and my father leave, she pulls me aside and tells me, "Honey, don't you ever forget where you came from."

I say, "I won't, Mom."

Teary-eyed, she laughs and says, "I don't mean Kinsman, I mean me."

And here I am sixteen years later, still pulled along by the current of words. From a small farm in Ohio to a beach in Southern California, to the capital of Michigan, to the rice fields of Ibaraki and the frantic streets of Tokyo, back again, to the place I started. But all the cows I've ever known are gone now, sold by my grandfather after battling a brain tumor, afraid he couldn't take care of them the right way anymore. And this blind moon keeps looking down on me, blinking like those cow mothers did when I slept against the sides of their babies.

Now they snort and low, look down on me again. They know I'm here, years and years away, somehow trying to hear them.

To Be Worked Out

It was the earth here, you see, the limestone and the river, that brought those men who carried canes and wore tails and top hats. It was those men who knew the earth here could make iron, pig iron, band iron, and bar iron, railroads and railroad spikes, hoops and hoops around the world. They brought the people here to work the furnaces, they brought them from a world across the ocean where they had lived scratching the earth for roots and vegetables, foraging along the base of Eastern European mountain ranges during the desperate days of winter. People like that are strong and tireless. They work and work, because they have had it worse elsewhere.

There is fire in the background of these men, whose portraits I am trying to frame on a blank wall. The downturned shadowed faces in family photographs, the sepia stains across the faces in daguerreotypes placed under oval glass. The smoke that hangs over their little row houses that climb the walls of the valley here, in this fold in the earth, where each spring they must wash the walls, inside and out, clean of soot. There is fire and there is smoke behind them, behind their houses. The men stand with sledgehammers slung over their shoulders, as if ready for battle. And they fight: owners, scabs, a group of ex-slaves that had been led up from the south under the promise of work, without knowledge of a strike occurring. They fight the wrong people. They fight among themselves. They fight their brothers because their skins are different. They never look up at the control room's dark windows.

"We work them out," the superintendent tells Pastor Hudson when he is given a tour of the building, "and then get in a new batch."

Twelve-hour work days. Chemical explosions. Unshielded equipment. A body pulled away from the floor. Another steps in to replace it.

We work them out, and then get in a new batch.

These men are my father, my grandfather, his father who died

when my grandfather was five, killed in the mill. An accident, they say, an accident. When I straighten their pictures, or rub the dust away from the oval glass covering them, I can see the reasons for their downturned shadowed faces, their gloomy pallor.

Then the fire goes out, then the smoke goes away, and the men stand in parking lots, carrying signs, screaming, shouting, threatening violence. The mills are empty, and no one is coming to unlock the gates again, but the men will not leave. They scream and shout and call for the owners to come out, but the owners aren't inside. They are already in Guatemala, Mexico, Indonesia, Honduras, India, Haiti. They are no longer these men's owners.

When winter is over, a few men walk away, signs lowered, faces to the ground. Summer ends in warm light rains, and a few weeks later more men walk away, orange and brown leaves blowing around their feet in circles. More and more lay down their signs, go home, pack up their clothes, their children, their wives, their aging parents, and lock their doors behind them. Down and around the corner they go with their families, the dogs barking, the cats howling in their carriers or in the arms of little girls, until they walk down the street and out of the city, farther and farther away, until they disappear into the horizon. Those who return home and refuse to leave, their skin turns to stone one day as they are sitting at their kitchen tables drinking coffee, or on their front porches, where they used to look out and across the yard at the sidewalk or the neighbor children playing, or at nothing, nothing at all, just feeling the sunlight on their faces, the heat of it, and they never move again. They are sitting there still, these men, these men whose portraits fade a little more each year, no matter how I try to keep them.

We work them out, and then get in a new batch.

Salt Springs

The Mahoning River: You cannot touch it, you cannot swim it, my dear, for thirty miles. Do not take its fish: they are full of poison. Do

not dangle your toes in its dark water between Lowellville and Warren, where the mills begin to disappear and the dams built to hold the water for the mills begin to end.

Salt Springs is the closest translation for the Mahoning River, an Indian word we take for granted, like Mosquito Creek, Yellow Creek, Eagle Creek, West Branch, Meander Creek, and Mill Creek, the tributaries that feed the Salt Springs, that make the Salt Springs, a word we have taken, used, and abandoned. Deer used to lean down here to drink in great numbers, once upon a time, before steel came to this forgotten valley, the eastern gateway to the Middle West, an opening, an entrance, where once they cut down the forests to create the Erie Canal, and the fetid swamps that stagnated in the wake of progress brought malaria to settlers from New England, killed them. Mosquito Creek, the tributary of my childhood in Northern Trumbull County, is justly named.

The river is not a river. Do not believe it when it introduces itself as a river. We know it for what it is: a tool, a resource. Not a living river, but a way of life. You take a river, see, and you build dams within it. We have ten dams along those thirty miles of the Mahoning. You dam a river to increase the water that sits at the feet of a steel mill. You take that water and you use it to cool molten steel, to cool the machines that have made the steel, and then you take that water, a hundred degrees and full of toxins, and pour it back into the river. Now that's a river.

Dead things swim these waters, and the dead are always jealous creatures. They want life, they want the life that's been taken from them. The river is no different. Do not be fooled by its shining, dark, slowly drifting beauty. It will kill if you let it. It will kill with petroleum hydrocarbons, it will kill with benzo(a)pyrene, it will kill with mercury.

These words are not of native origin.

Along this stretch of the Mahoning, the mills line up like old soldiers, guns slung over their shoulders, rust in the summer sun,

collapse beneath the weight of winter. In the spring, vines clamber along the wreckage of their histories, saplings sprout between cracks in their foundations. (The foundations, the foundations, we have lost our foundations. It will take a hundred million dollars to heal this river, the foundation of our foundations, the foundations we have lost.)

Odd flowers push up in the dead, brown fields that surround the mills and factories. Life struggles beneath their corpses, and the river flows beside them, waiting, waiting while the people wait and wait.

Death, after all, is not one-sided.

The Feral Houses of Youngstown, Ohio

The feral house is an odd creature. It lives among domestic houses, but I have seen entire packs of feral houses, too. They tend to roam in bands when their neighborhoods have been lost, forsaken, and huddle together in their emptiness, shedding their aluminum siding, their most antique decor, their copper piping and glass doorknobs. They are mangy and sometimes rabid. I have known friends and acquaintances who have been attacked by a feral house. They were only trying to take a photo, or they were trying to see what the house might have looked like long ago by entering through the front door, and then stepped on a nail, plunged through a floorboard.

I am fascinated by feral houses, and look to them when I cross their paths. Often I ignore the more domesticated, quiet, good houses I pass by. They are not dangerous, these good houses. Their histories have come to better ends. Romance does not exist in a domestic house; it's their sound reason and judgment, their sustained ability to hold up against the burdens of the world. I prefer the damaged pose of the feral houses as they patrol their corners like fallen heroes. In their disintegration they have been found. We measure love by its absence. We see what we have by what we have lost.

I once knew a feral house so well I visited it almost daily. It was on my way home from school, so I shouldn't claim to be noble: I did not go out of my way. But I did make a point of acknowledging it, instead of looking at anything else but it. We are trained to notice beauty, to flinch at scenes of despair, to unsee them. I have learned a different kind of vision here in Youngstown, though. I have learned how to find decay and disintegration, the coming apart of what was once composed, a beautiful process, a return rather than a disappearance.

This house, my feral house, is surrounded by disintegrating homes that have been abandoned for the last ten or twenty years. The doors have all been broken off their hinges, the windows smashed to pieces. The porch roof of the house across the street fell off during the first heavy snowfall this winter. The siding has been stripped from its walls, leaving silver insulation wrap to flicker in the sunlight. It was once a beautiful street, this street of feral houses, but I never saw it like that except in pictures I've found in the historical society's online repository. I love those pictures. I copy them and keep them with the ones I take of feral houses.

That's a secret of mine. What I do sometimes is, I take a camera and I ride the bus to different parts of the city where the houses are all disintegrating, and walk the streets waiting for a house to call to me. Sometimes I have to walk forever, sometimes it will happen right away. No matter how long it takes, though, one or two always demand that I take their pictures. So I snap pictures of a collapsed roof, the shattered windows that look in on empty, dusty, shadow-shrouded rooms, the wide staircase that leads up to the second or third floors of these old Victorians that have been abandoned for years, left to weather the weather and to observe their own decline as they take another step each year toward oblivion.

I have pictures from as far back as 1995. What got me started on this particular endeavor was the day I first heard their voices—the voices of the feral houses—and followed their directions until I

found myself on the north side of the city, where a pink house and a blue house stood side by side on a corner near the university, their windows busted out, their doors flung open. As soon as I arrived at the base of the front porch, where a step was missing, the voices stopped, and I knew what they wanted from me: to be seen for what they no longer were. Homes.

So I stood at the foot of that first feral house and imagined the families who once lived there, children laughing as they chased each other through upstairs rooms down to the first floor, imagined Christmas trees that had once decorated living room corners, parties thrown in wide hallways and dining rooms where people sat around talking about the state of worldly affairs. When I could see it all, finally, the life this house once had within it, I lifted my camera and snapped a picture. I think I hoped that everything I had imagined would be in the photos after I developed them, but the photos only showed the house as it was: sagging, broken, empty-eyed, a piano on the first floor, lid up, keys silent, the wires broken coils. When I look at these pictures, though, I can still remember what I saw in those empty, rotting, wind-driven, rain-swamped, gorgeous lovelies. I can still see the families I'd imagined living in them, I can still imagine what it must have been like to live within their walls, what it must have been like for the houses to have life within them.

It is spring now, so the houses are starting to be torn down again. Two years ago the city razed a hundred. Last year, four hundred more. We have a list, a long list, a very long list of thousands of feral houses that must be dealt with, destroyed, buried. Sometimes you have to amputate parts to save the whole, is our mayor's philosophy. It makes the place look better, but it is unsettling to someone who can hear the voices of these houses before, during, and even after they fall. There is always that squeal and moan as the wrecker breaks into them, the beams snapping before that final, quiet moment when the whole structure begins to collapse. Each time a house is demolished, I am watching someone's dream of a

safe life for themselves and their families on earth being destroyed, I am watching death take a city, stretching its shadow, house by house, street by street, block by block.

Except for the few people who have stayed behind to struggle, the neighborhood where my first and favorite feral house lives has been abandoned. It is true that Youngstown was once one of America's great hopes—it was called the City of Homes in its heyday—but after the captains of industry moved their work to poorer nations, thousands fled the City of Homes. In the last thirty years a hundred thousand people have stood up and walked away from their houses because they could no longer keep them. Down the street they went, saying they were going out for a pack of cigarettes, and never returned. Now the vines continue to stretch and wind their bodies over wood and brick and stone, over walls and rooftops, over cornices and cupolas, and the saplings continue to grow up through the cracks in rotten floorboards, the squirrels to nest in attics, the birds to build in the eaves of what's been left behind. You can't stop progress.

In a Forgotten Valley

It is easy for you to forget us, deep in a valley, living below the line of the horizon. In the past, we sent up smoke signals, met by the river to trade iron and steel for a face, a name, an idea of ourselves existing. But it has been years since you have heard from us, and rarely do you venture down the slope into the folded land where we walk across the soil rich with indignation and bitterness. A glacier made our home, came down from Montreal fifteen thousand years ago, a knife of ice slicing through the earth, making the Great Lakes and this cut in the land, a scar from Western Pennsylvania to Northeastern Ohio. The lakes here are plentiful, the earth filled with the stones and the dirt of other countries, other regions, the tools of native peoples, spears and arrowheads, mounds where once another kind of people who lived here before us are buried, nameless. The

valley can do that, it can hold us so close in its hands that it never allows us to live in the light of the upper world. A valley in the earth is an alternate universe, where the signals traveling across the flat or mountainous or long rolling hillsides or stretches of desert gleaming in the sun are lost in translation. In a valley, you are always waiting for the time lag to catch up, to finally hear the question asked a minute ago, for the other shoe to drop.

In my travels through this valley, I have seen the return of the eagles, the disappearance of houses and people, and am struck each time I look out my window by the way light sits on top of roofs and windshields, as if its reach is limited, only its fingertips can brush against us. The cows are lowing in the pastures, the silos gleam along the back roads, the buildings in the downtowns vanish in despair, and more and more it seems fate is a fickle spread of cards played in a game where we were never dealt a hand. We keep losing anyway: jobs, neighborhoods, parks, downtown buildings, sports teams, rivers, memories, people, homes.

You are in this valley now. Imagine the river and the ruined line of factories and mills, the brown fields that spread out around them, the greening of the soil that sweeps up the walls of the valley, where the houses of the people spread out and away in waves. There are gaps in the streets of certain neighborhoods, places that have disappeared, gray smudges, blanks in memory, words struck out of a sentence left unfinished on the earth's page. When you walk through this valley, the people who have not left it, who have refused to leave or who could not climb out or who could not imagine anywhere but this valley, the people of this valley will look at you and wonder aloud, "Where did you come from? Of all places, why did you come here?" Do not worry. An answer is not truly expected. Often those travelers who have made their way here cannot fathom the reasons for their journeys to such places anyway. Sometimes it seems they arrive by accident, as if they have been washed ashore after a shipwreck, and suffer amnesia, unsure of who they are and where they

had been attempting to go. They settle in with the other inhabitants for a while, and sleep like they always belonged here, have finally found home.

But it is a home that the people of this valley are never and always surprised by, as if every day is the first day, a constant historyless present, a dip in the fields of time and space. The days are short here, as if it is always winter, and a person can forget his own mortality if he can forget himself or be forgotten. Some find this a blessing; others perceive it as a night terror that shakes a person so hard they cannot return to sleep.

There is a game that you will learn to play here, that asks you each morning to remember your dreams, to replay them in your memory throughout the course of each day. If, at the end of an evening, before it is time to sleep once more, you can recount your dreams from the previous night with the vividness of the present moment, and have not allowed your dreams to evaporate as dreams do—if you can tell them true, you will sleep soundly for another night, carrying your dreams into an endless competition to retain the life you lead behind closed eyes. Those who cannot pull the thread of one night into the next day will begin to fade a little more each day until they are gone completely. When this occurs, the people of the valley will say of these disappeared ones, “They are no longer playing.”

In this valley, we have forgotten something. Outside this valley, we have been forgotten. But we are not gone, not yet, not nearly. Having traveled so far, having come down here to walk among us for a while, will you now remember us? Or will you, too, forget your dreams?

Christopher J. Korenowsky

*On running a library in the
age of Kindles*

Interviewed by Mark Oppenheimer

Christopher J. Korenowsky became the head of the New Haven Free Public Library and all its branches in October. In late September I spoke with him.

Mark Oppenheimer: When did you become a librarian?

Christopher J. Korenowsky: The long answer is that I don't remember a time in my life where I had not been in the public library arena. I have memories of being a child of the public library. I don't remember a time when it wasn't in my life. There was a library staff member in my local hometown library in Findlay, Ohio, who I remember seeing at story time, and she really took me under her wing. Judy saw whatever interest I had in the public library. When I turned fifteen and got my worker's permit, I went right back to the public library and got my first job there. Judy was now a colleague, and I got to share with her what she did to instill that love in me. I moved to Columbus and got my undergraduate degree at Ohio State University in English literature. Went right down to the main library here in Columbus when I was eighteen, got a job as a shelver at the Columbus Metropolitan Library and spent the next seven-teen years there. When I left, I was what they called a service area manager, and I was managing two of the regional facilities, and we definitely had a combined circulation volume of almost two million volumes annually. That is what I did until I transitioned to my current job at the Ohio Library Council. That is the statewide advocacy organization for all 251 libraries in the state. I am Director of Professional Development here.

It is not a line, and it is not BS, but whatever it was, I knew innately that public libraries would be my life. Going through undergraduate coursework, there was never a question that I would go on to get my master's in library and information sciences. It was never an option not to. A total gift to make it my career.

MO: What kind of stuff do you like to read?

CJK: I love adult contemporary fiction. I am a huge fiction reader, and very much interested in the genre currently called literary fiction. I get very enmeshed in realistic-based plots, character development; language is important. So you will definitely find me reading contemporary fiction. Love short story collections, and am never not reading a book.

There is a fantastic collection of short stories I recently read, called *Delicate Edible Birds*, by Lauren Groff. These collections of short stories are so distinct and individual. Her writing is sparse, but you really feel like you are almost reading poetry. I literally couldn't put that book down. I just finished *Red Hook Road*, it is by—I will spell her first name—A-Y-E-L-E-T Waldman. She is actually married to the novelist Michael Chabon. This is her second novel. She got into a lot of trouble a couple years ago because in an interview she said she loved her husband more than she loved her children, and there was a huge national outcry that really ripped her up and down. She wrote a collection called *Bad Mother*. I have to say, too, I just re-read *A Thousand Acres* by Jane Smiley, and it was so fantastic, modern-day retelling of *King Lear*, with the three daughters, set on an Iowa farm in the seventies. It was a million times better than I remember when it first came out in 1988. I couldn't wait to get home to finish it.

MO: Tell me about your background. Were your parents readers?

CJK: My parents were both educators. My father is a principal in Toledo, Ohio, and has been doing that for thirty-plus years. My mother, before she left the profession to raise myself and my sister, taught English literature at the University of Sidney. So I grew up with that educational background. It is ingrained.

MO: Do you think you'll miss the Midwest?

CJK: Boy, you know, I don't know if I am going to miss it. I am going to miss public libraries in the state of Ohio, which are very rich due to the good fortune of our state funding. No state in the nation has the robust state funding Ohio has. I am going to miss the exposure I have had in my current career to dynamic and innovative systems. But I'm going into this knowing that New Haven's public library system is hugely progressive. The five locations and the output the organization contributes to the spheres and communities we reach is so admirable, and I have nothing but the utmost respect for what New Haven Free Public Library has done up to this point.

What will be new for me is that the public library in New Haven is a city department, which is not the structure of public libraries here in Ohio. Having that element of city support will be new to me. It is a smaller organization than I am used to working in, but at same time I will be leading this, so that will probably be—how do I want to say this?—a good thing for me. I had the opportunity to spend a week in New Haven in August and honestly can't tell you the dedication I witnessed from the staff. The support the public library has from the city of New Haven and the board of trustees, who have a deep, deep, deep commitment to promoting the excellence of public library services, is really off the chart. And I can tell you, having had exposure to hundreds of libraries in the state of Ohio, that isn't always the case, so I am coming to a really good spot.

MO: Do we need more computers and fewer books?

CJK: I don't know that the answer is that easy. We can't say more computers, fewer books, more books, fewer computers. What I do know is public libraries are at a crossroads, and the makeup of industry will show you that in next three to five years, a lot of our library leaders will be retiring, so a huge amount of staff across the country will transition out of the industry. You have a new population of innovative, dynamic, excited librarians coming out of their master's programs who have no memory of what it was like before

the internet. And then you have people like me who remember life without internet and know life with it.

So because of the demographics of libraries and what will happen with new blood, for lack of a better term, we are in the fortunate position right now of defining what the industry will look like in the future. And certainly not being able to define a strong, robust, dynamic, truly global footprint will only be to our detriment. If we are to be relevant, we have got to be profession-leading in everything that is coming down the technology pipe regarding access to information, how it is managed, and what we take into the community.

Now all of that is not to say that the traditional aspects of librarianship should go away in any form. I am a firm believer that books are our business. Hopefully, when you think of a book, you think of a library, and maybe B&N and Amazon.com second. The trick is striking a balance between the old and the new. You don't want the traditions of the profession to not be honored.

MO: Are there some technology mistakes that librarians have made in the past, like perhaps investing too heavily in CD-ROMs, which are obsolete already?

CJK: That is a tough question to answer. With CD-ROMs, at the time that was "the wow," the next thing. If we hadn't jumped on that bandwagon, we would have been irrelevant. It is hard to forecast what will be a dinosaur five or ten years down the road. But in terms of things I made a mistake with—it is an easy answer—it was my not-100-percent-willingness to embrace new technologies. "I am a librarian, I don't have to think about Skype! I don't have to...." I am very much a book person, as an individual. I love the feel of the book, the physicality of the book, opening the book. But as a library leader, I have to make sure that perspective is just an individual one.

MO: In high school, I didn't want to go from vinyl to CD. I loved the cover art. CDs, who wants that?

CJK: But I was on the social-media scene fast, and I saw what that could potentially do for marketing, for telling the library's story in that framework. That has been really valuable. Good, bad or otherwise, that is a good example of a technology that the libraries have to embrace.

MO: How do you run a lending library with Kindles?

CJK: I don't know that that question has been answered. But it is incumbent on our profession to quickly have an answer to that question. Like every industry, the economy has in some cases decimated public libraries. One of the leading libraries in the U.S., in Charlotte-Mecklenburg County [North Carolina], they were in danger of having to close ten of twenty-two branch locations. And they were looked to as profession-leading, cutting-edge. It sent a shock wave across the country, as if it could happen there, it could happen anywhere. We are not exempt from what the economy has done to businesses.

MO: Solutions?

CJK: Public libraries have started looking at laptop lending. Perhaps you check out a laptop like you check out a book. Or you arrange to come to the public library and we have laptops you can book in two-hour blocks. So there is a recognition that we have to be able to provide not only software but hardware that meets technological needs in our community. But we have to be careful, because not everybody we serve knows how to use a laptop, sit down hook up to wireless, get going. We can't ignore factions of the community that perhaps don't have that access to technology.

MO: How much money should be spent on technology? Because it is an endless pit, right? Tech support alone eats up several salaries.

CJK: I have never been involved in laptop lending. But, as a pro-

gressive library team, we have to answer those questions. How do we devote resources? How do we cultivate a staff and team of employees that are fully developed to handle this offering? And how can we be forward thinking while still honoring those traditions?

The public library has to be able to create an exemplary customer interaction every time. From what I have seen, I am firmly convinced that our library team is very steeped in crafting that customer experience and promoting the resources of the library. I look at this as we're building on the best. I can't stress enough to you, my city officials, my board of trustees, that we compete for people's time and attention, and I want people to think about the public library as a first-choice destination.

NHR: Will you be looking to replace some people?

CJK: I am not looking to replace people.

NHR: Do you have the authority to?

CJK: Working with the city and the unions, the library can always look at staffing concerns.

For K. in South Africa

Nate Klug

Here among strangers I could love
and this trying and failing
to slow the rain down,
to find and feel my failings
in the earth's indifference—

here, where whole lives
ignite and happen
apart, in silence, like test explosions—

six thousand miles away, you write
(someone else's words)
of birds I wouldn't believe,
how dawn turns the grasses tawny.

I wake, sometimes, with the nervous ease
of the already lost. I study.

Better

Anelise Chen

Homer's brain: "Don't say revenge. Don't say revenge."

They say if you don't have kids you remain kids, and I think that is true of Leo and me. After fifteen years of marriage, we only have a cat, which is not even a dog. We are insecure, and fight about small things.

"It is an undeniable *fact* that in nature, rapidly senescing post-reproductive organisms just give themselves up to die," I tell Leo. "Female Pacific salmon, for example, voluntarily flop up on the shore to be eaten by seagulls. I've seen it happen, seriously, on the Discovery Channel."

Leo is a philosophy professor specializing in bioethics, so he thinks me an uninformed tourist in this area. To him, humans are so far advanced we have figured out a way to be compassionate to the evolutionarily redundant. "Many animals live beyond their fertile years," he keeps saying. "Intelligent ones. Baboons. It's called the grandmother effect."

I cross him by saying that one needs to be a mother before one can lapse into grandmotherhood. He gets annoyed, fills his bags with books, prepares to leave.

"Honey, I think, rather, you are like the stinking corpse flower; marvelous, but with a horrible sense of timing. Nobody can help you there."

Since the news Leo has been spending too much time at the university library. He says he is undergoing the necessary and painful process of digitizing his archive. Every day, he pages through clunky, elusive materials, makes photocopies from books nobody else checks out, and brings them home to scan on our antique scanner, the one we bought for full price in 1999.

I am also a professor. I teach contemporary French literature with an emphasis in diasporic Asian novels written in French. I usually spend the day in the tub, rereading and making notes in the margins, notes like: “leg. autofictive self-dissemination?” “ex. post-colonial post-semiotic trauma?” “make joke about Habermas here?” “etc.?” All the books I teach out of have long since lost their binding: They are kept together with color-coded rubber bands.

In the morning, we both get ready—that is, I put together a creative iteration of pajamas, Leo goes to the library, I walk outside to buy coffee, and when he is a far enough away, I hop into the tub, doze off, jerk awake when I hear him coming through the door, reposition, pretend to read. At this point in my life, I figure, who cares. One can never be sure whether one is glad to live or gladder to be dying soon. I think about this often, and also about dust; whether we are already disappearing; slowly, in specks of dead skin and dandruff, brushing ourselves off in oblivious, serene little snowflakes, one minute floating in an afternoon sunbeam and the next minute, gone.

Let me start over, actually. I want to try to tell this better. This is what happened: Last year, I turned forty-four. In Chinese, forty-four is a homophonic translation for “Die Die.” As it goes, my grandmother had been especially vigilant about warning me against suggestions of death: never wear white or black, never stick chopsticks upright in your rice, never leave your slippers facing in because ghosts will step into them, never have anything to do with the number four. Brainwashed at an early age, I’ve always had a horrible relationship with the number four, like, never eating four meatballs, only three or most of the time five, never agreeing to visit anyone who lived on a fourth floor, staying away from doctors with fours in their phone numbers. And yet, it was when I turned forty-four that my doctor without fours in his phone number told me that I would no longer be able to have children. “What the fuck,” I said, sitting there in my paper gown. “I’m only forty-four. My grandmother had my father when

she had no teeth.” The news was unreal. A gag. “It’s too late, Ms. Yee. I’m very sorry,” Dr. Patel said, as if I should have felt sorry for him, all slouchy and effeminate, having to put up with the wrath of so many menopausal women. But god, even that word—*menopause*. I wanted to throw myself against a doorknob. Did it even matter that Leo and I had gotten tenure-track positions at a very prestigious undergraduate establishment, one so important it is often lovingly referred to as a Little Ivy?

“I’ve never heard that before,” my father said. “But okay, if you say so.” He was on his death bed and needed something to be proud of. I told him the school was between Harvard and Yale—geographically—and this at least put a smile on his face.

Now he was dead and my womb was dead and when I die, my genes will disappear off the face of the planet as if I never existed. I should have listened to mother. “When you get to be a certain age you will feel a stirring inside you like a small seed that wants to bloom,” she said. I said: “I am not a tulip, I will bloom when I want to.” She said: “Be careful. Pay attention to yourself.” I said: “I have no time, Ma. My career.” She was sad, and we became distant. My dad wanted the credentials but she wanted the grandkid. I thought: “Success requires sacrifice.” Nobody told me time was always draining out of an hourglass and that one day it would be piled up in a heap, out from between my legs.

After, I had a difficult time with things: the telephone cord, kitchen utensils. Trees were there to be kicked. Oxygen made me angry. *You get too much you get too high / Not enough and you’re gonna die.* Where was the middle ground? In particular, I fought with Leo, because he didn’t care. If he wanted to, he could still have a mini-him. *Was it because I spent too many hours typing with the laptop in my lap? Maybe somehow the wifi radiated my ova?* Leo shrugged. We fought after watching a documentary on Stan Brakhage because in the last scene, white-haired Stan is sitting there with his new young wife and kids, very *déjeuner sur l’herbe*, watching fireworks. That’s

going to be you, and that's going to be me, I said to Leo, pointing first to Stan, then to the fireworks. You, dad. Me, brilliant combustible nobody.

Leo demanded that we go to couple's therapy. "Whatever," I think I said. We sat next to each other on this lip-shaped couch, sinking into its red folds, never looking at the doctor or at one another, just off into space somewhere. I watched the foliage rustle outside the window. Leo crossed and recrossed his legs, rubbed his hands on his thighs, taken with blind, repetitive movement like some caged beast at the zoo. I stayed still and answered with annoyance and determination, because talking about one's feelings was not in my upbringing. In my family we dealt with things through action. That was our grieving process. Leo complained to the doctor that I was manic, irrational, that I talked daily of adoption though it was evident I was too emotionally unstable to be anyone's mother. He wanted kids, sure, but not while the pain was so new. I was shoving the hurt in his face. It was something he didn't want to see, something rummaged out of the garbage.

I spent more and more of my waking hours in the bath, trying to feel the soupy, umbilical gentleness of it. I began neglecting my duties to my students. I cancelled office hours without notice. My lectures became sentimental and hurried. During the last class I made a reference to the episode in *Swann's Way* when the narrator is waiting for his mother's kiss, and I began sniffing. Students handed me tissues, looked troubled. At committee meetings I didn't talk to anyone but gorged on the free goat-cheese salads. I let my hair get weird. The once copious chili peppers on my ratemyprofessor.com rating dwindled to a sparse bouquet. One day, I went to class without really preparing anything and just asked the students what *they* thought about the reading. What did they make of Theresa Cha's invoking of the muses in each chapter? What about the use of photographs and inscriptions? And her relationship with the French language? They looked at me emptily, like mean sheep, with a hint of disdain, and I wondered if I had worked so hard and come

all this way to be silently criticized by teenagers. To them, I was just an old clown with a colorful hat on. They knew nothing of my critical success. They weren't there to see how certain people practically cowered in my presence at literature conventions. None of them had read my writing; none of them cared, they wanted their head petted while I spoon-fed them memorable quotes and told a few jokes. That afternoon I decided to go to the chair to see if I could take medical leave. "What's wrong," he said, eyeing me suspiciously. "Nothing," I said. "Exhaustion, I guess." He frowned and fiddled with his pencil for a while by putting it in perpendicular angles against the wood's grain. "You don't seem very sure," he said. "You know we need you this semester." That was my stuck cog. I was never going to change. I could never call in sick to school if I didn't really mean it. "Alright," I said. "Forget I even brought it up."

I had been pretending to read *Lost Illusions* (in the bath) when

Leo came in without knocking, desperate for a piece of toilet paper to wipe his runny nose with. "Cold out?" I asked without looking up, feigning a helpless immersion in the magical prose of Balzac. I could feel the cold he brought in with him, clinging like an aura to his clothes, his beard, which was now spotted with gray hairs. It almost had a smell—the cold; like damp wool. "Have you been in the snow?" I asked, noticing melting patterns on his parka. "I hope you found a clean patch."

"Yep," he said, fidgeting. "Threw some snowballs."

"What were you doing throwing snowballs?" I said. He picked at a sticky spot on his pants, tensing.

"I don't know," he said. "I felt like it."

I couldn't remember doing anything enjoyable in the snow since that day a couple years ago, when we both got the news that we were finally going to get tenure. The period before that had been horrific, completely devoid of fun. We were both stressed and emaciated, smoking too much. He was finalizing his book and using the last of his grant money to pay for this expensive German proofreader—Olaf, I

think his name was. When I asked Leo of the necessity of that expenditure, he said: “It *has* to be absolutely perfect, otherwise I can’t put my name on it, do you understand?” I was teaching, working on my book, and my father was dying. It’s hard to think about that time and imagine what it must have been like, because we never think we are capable of suffering until we do. I developed a temporary gluten allergy, having eaten spaghetti and donuts for every meal and then endless amounts of coffee. I remember battling some vicious adult acne. The dermatologist told me the problem was stress and hormones. “You can either have a child, or start taking birth control,” he said. “Either one will fix your skin.” I don’t think I thought twice which option I would take.

Anyway, that day we got tenure, we were both out of the house for some reason or another, which is rare for us. We had an answering machine because we were still in that period of not believing in cell phones. Our message greeting went: “Hello, you have reached Leo Farber and Diane Yee. If this is an important call, please leave a detailed message. Otherwise, give us at least two weeks to call you back. We apologize for the delay. Thank you.” Leo got home first and listened to both messages. The first one went: “Hi Leo, this is Andy. Boy, are you and Diane a couple of hardasses! Lucky for you we like people who are willing. Yup, that’s right, you got it! Congratulations buddy...” And the next message was a call for me, very much the same. “Can you believe it?” Leo shouted over and over. “This never happens!” We didn’t know what to do with ourselves. We just sat at home, trying to contain the news with calmness, and dignity, and a little bit of tea. Then Leo stood up and dug the keys of our old Volvo out of the change bowl. I smiled. We shoveled the car out and drove to the beach, the same one we used to go to the summer we first moved here, when everything was green and humid and we were reading *Bonjour Tristesse* (in the middle of an ironic Françoise Sagan kick), and there were smacks of jellyfish patrolling the shallow Atlantic shore. Since we were still brave, we jumped in anyway and swam like nothing could really hurt us as long as we believed it, and

it was true, nothing did. So when we got to the beach and found it half-blanketed with snow we kind of just stood there, dumbfounded, like we just woke up from a long dream, and Leo got down and laid on the snow, and I did too, and listened to the surf, which still sounded the same. We went to a nearby restaurant and ate. It was winter but I don’t remember it being white or bleak. I remember it being clean.

“Hey, stop it,” I said, as Leo bent down for a kiss, groping for one half-submerged boob. “Stop, I’m trying to concentrate on this,”

“Ooph,” he said, making a face. “Scalding bath.” This was not true, my bath was quite lukewarm, maybe even room temperature. He eased himself up from the tub’s rim, slow and aching, and went to take off his muddy shoes.

I guess I forgot to mention that Leo and I haven’t had sex for a whole year.

When I finally came out of the bath Leo was slumped in front of his laptop, scrolling through yet another gossip blog with a bored, disgusted expression, like a chaperone at a middle-school dance. “Done with work?” I asked, drying the ends of hair around my neck. “You have a minute to talk?”

“Nope. Horrible day. Dead-ended in the library,” he said. “Paged another volume of books and they forgot to include the index—again. They’re impossible.”

“What are you doing paging another volume of books?” I said. “Do you even read what’s inside the books?” I was leaning against the counter, arms crossed, thin, accusatory. Remembering everything made me feel hostile; I wanted an explanation, or I wanted Leo to make me feel better, but, well. “Look, forget it. I think we need to finish our conversation about the adoption thing,” I said.

“Don’t have time for it, sorry.”

“Leo. Please.”

“Don’t want to get into it with you anymore.”

“Why?”

"You know why."

"Because you're mentally ill? Because you have the emotional maturity of a twelve year old?"

"Damn it, Diane," Leo said, "If you say that again I'm going to have to never come home. I mean it about moving out."

"Go ahead, get a brand new empty apartment to hoard your photocopies in. Have your cute philosophical orgies with Olaf. I don't care."

"What do you want me to do? Not research? Not publish? Stay home all day and be miserable with you?"

"When was the last time you wrote something? You're doing enough research for five books at least. I think you're procrastinating, or lost. My colleagues can write books with a dozen books on their own shelves. Do you think Harold Bloom goes and pages a volume of books every day?"

"Right, because I respect what your colleagues do."

"And what's your book going to be about? Philosophical blah blah blah blah. Are you still going to use that episode of *The Simpsons* in your prologue? Oh, Professor! You are breaking so many rules!"

"You're pathetic, Diane."

"Don't you love me? Aren't you supposed to tell me to snap out of it? Help. Please. Or are you too self-absorbed to think about me?"

"You know what, I'm leaving. I don't need this right now, and you're hysterical."

Leo closed his laptop, unplugged it, and began rolling the computer charger into a tight ball. He picked out several books and put them in a duffel bag. A very bad feeling hit my gut, a very deep, bad feeling like being sucked down a drain.

"Who were you throwing snowballs with?" I asked, desperate.

"Nobody," he said.

"Come on," I snorted. "You walked Richard's kid home again, didn't you."

"So what."

"That means you're ready! You're ready, honey!"

"Diane, please."

"What are we waiting for? Haven't we gotten where we want to be?"

"I'm sorry. I can't. Too fast, too much, too soon."

"We're not going to live forever," I said.

"Thank God for that," he said.

This is when I think I rammed my head as hard as I could into the refrigerator handle.

Was it because deep down, I knew I would never be able to have a child? Maybe this is why we were attracted to one another in the first place. Maybe this was the kind of life we wanted all along. Leo thinks the decision to have a kid has to be like adopting a dog. Only impulsive people go to the pound, the pet store, think: that is adorable, I would love one of those, and actually gets the dog. Rational people have to do a lot of pro and con reasoning, a lot of list making before they can be really sure it's going to work out with positive returns. He has probably come up with a formula that tells him exactly what the ratios are, like, a number that quantifies the quality of the kid's life over the success of dad's career, set greater than or equal to one. All he can afford to do right now is walk a friend's kid home, have an intermittent snowball fight, and pretend that is enough.

What can I say to get Leo to understand that everything feels pointless right now and that I want to die? It was a pesky command: Die. Die. I've passed my prime.

Here are two funny stories. The first one is about how I decided that it would be okay to be an academic. The second is about Leo. My story happened in a bar. There were two men sitting next to me: One was reading the paper and the other was watching baseball on the television above us. The man reading the paper had seen something he liked, so he nudged the man watching the game and pointed at a photograph of a woman. "Hot?" he asked. The man watching

baseball glanced quickly and said, “Yeah. Sure.” “She’s a writer,” the first man said. “Heard of her?” “No.” I lifted my head because I thought maybe they were going to ask for my opinion. They didn’t, obviously, but left the paper when they got up. I slid over into their seats and looked at the woman in the photograph. It was Susan Sontag. In the picture, she looks young. She stares defiantly at the camera with a cigarette dangling between her fingers, wearing a heavily starched collared shirt. There were serious creases in her brow, and her hair was jet black and wiry, like mine. I decided that if I could help it, I would become like that woman in the picture. When Susan Sontag died in 2004, I was surprised because she never seemed like someone capable of dying. She was never a real person, she was only an idea, a photograph. I didn’t mourn her at all.

When Leo was still a pimply Eeks major—electrical engineering and computer sciences—not yet a philosopher, he went to a talk by James Watson, one-half of Watson and Crick. Leo couldn’t remember much about the talk, but afterward, he bumped into Watson buying a frozen yogurt at the student deli. Watson was already quite into middle-age. Leo told him he had just been to his talk and did he have any advice for him? Watson cackled and put his pale hands on him and said, “Plastic surgery, son. See my face? How smooth the area around the eyes is? That is what science is for.” For Leo, what this meant was: In addition to being a world-class scientist, Watson was also a great joker. For me, what this meant was: Even this man who half-discovered fucking DNA, whose name was forever going to be in science textbooks, was still going to be obsessed with something as dumb and shallow as plastic surgery because he was afraid to die. In the end, dying is dying. Dying is oblivion. The dying person is not going to know that the world remembers him. Because he will be dead.

But I am being melodramatic, I know. This is definitely what Leo thinks, even though he is crouched down on the floor and holding me while I cry, putting ice on my bloated forehead. Life is such

a bet, I am saying. You only have so many years that you can put on the table and hope that you win something. If you haven’t lost everything then maybe you can consider yourself lucky. Leo is holding me and telling me not to worry, that everything will be okay in the end. He promises that he will think about adoption. He says he will think hard about it and this gives me some hope.

When I stop crying, I look at the clock and see that I have wasted more than an hour freaking out. I feel nervous, like that was too much time. “Do you want to go for a walk or something?” Leo says.

“Right now?”

“Yes, right now.”

“Why?”

“Just because.”

“Okay, but we need a destination or I won’t enjoy it. I might have a panic attack.”

“So make an arbitrary one. Anything. The ATM. The library. No. Um, cookies.”

“Cookies?”

“Sure.”

“Oh, God.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

Leo waits. I am putting on clothes and a coat and a purple scarf and a hat I knitted that’s too small for my head. I am tying the laces to my boots. *What’s going to happen*, I want to ask Leo, just to get his honest opinion, so I won’t feel so confused, like a pear that’s been gouged out, all hollow in the middle and slowly collapsing inward, unknown to anyone. *I can accept that I’ve failed at something*, I want to say. *It’s okay that you’re not going to happen*.

Right now I am putting on gloves. I am walking down familiar steps, old marble steps that are indented in the middle, where decades of feet have trod. I hear Mr. Genovese, he is playing Satie. I am sensing a change in the air. In the park, there is evidence of change.

Bike tracks. Old leaves. Soggy ground. Glossy newspaper inserts blowing along in the sidewalk gutter. Small green shoots dotting the branches.

“Hey.”

“What?”

And when he says nothing, I know there’s no point elaborating. We’ve already had all our conversations and will continue to have the same conversations forever. And it is comforting, enough.

“What’s going to last longer,” I am saying, “the really weird shirt at Goodwill or the one everyone buys in the moment?”

“The weird shirt.”

“Lucien or ... d’Arthez?”

“Balzac.”

“Now or later?”

“Now,” he says. “Now.”

The Skiing Life

An appreciation

Eric Weinberger

Wives endure, snow melts.

—Irwin Shaw

I took my title from James Salter, who wrote a celebrated essay in *Outside* magazine in 1992 about the skiing life. It seemed an important distinction to make, between simply skiing and a life on skis, and some of us are, or have been, obsessed by it. Tourists ski. What we did is something else, elevated and more profound, of course; such is our snobbery. It's like the tourist-versus-traveler dichotomy my onetime writing students sometimes mentioned as if they discovered it themselves, but there is no good word for the skiing traveler. The closest term is *ski bum*, but most of us who have been one are tired of it, and it doesn't apply to Salter, already a mature man and ace fighter pilot when he took up skiing, and an accomplished writer moving in an elite social set by the time he took up the skiing life: following the circuit with Robert Redford for the movie *Downhill Racer*, the script of which he wrote; visiting Irwin Shaw and his high-society friends in Shaw's chalet in Klosters; moving in the late 1960s to Aspen, where he still lives some of the time; skiing the Streif with Toni Sailer in Kitzbühel. Ski bums, while not necessarily younger, are certainly poorer, and live mostly by mooching off the beautiful people with whom Salter associated, although whether he was one of these beautiful people is problematic. His memoir, *Burning the Days*, talks obliquely of its author as a solitary, obsessive man, often tantalized and tormented, most comforted when in the air—no one I know has written more expressively about flying—and in thrall to the power and mystery of women. Even his brief essay on the skiing life mentions, à propos of nothing, this beautiful elusive woman or that one: a Swiss in a “close-fitting ski suit” as they skied the Lauberhorn in Wengen; the movie-producer's girl in Aspen who

leaned over to whisper in his ear; the turbulent Meta, who died in an avalanche, like her father before her. In the one letter Salter wrote me, a stranger, seventeen years ago in response to something I had sent him about life in Kitzbühel—the Aspen of Austria and a place he knew well—he wrote of Steffi, who ran the bar at the Goldener Greif hotel. “She knew a lot of stories,” Salter wrote, “and it was a comfort to talk to her.”

My own skiing years, which were spent in the Alps, in Kitzbühel and various places in Switzerland in the years following my college graduation in 1989 are marked by memories of unattainable women: some tourists, some locals, and some, like me, ski bums from various English-speaking countries. My Steffi, perhaps, was Eveline, an extraordinary teenage beauty, not quite eighteen, at the Weisses Rössl, who seemed destined for the arm of a count or a shabby German movie star, such was her glamor. She was likely to meet this man at the hotel where she worked as a receptionist; I would come in to talk to her fully expecting that she might, just that afternoon, have been swept away to Biarritz or Monte Carlo. I used to buy my stamps from her—she was younger and better-looking than the girls at the post office—and sometimes we met for a coffee, until a chance tirade about Kurt Waldheim, then president of Austria, being victimized by Jews soured her to me, and we didn’t speak again that winter. At the end of the season, my friend Billy Matthews, who had played hockey at Yale and then played for Kitzbühel in the Austrian league, told me about her remarkable effect on Roberto, the hotel’s proprietor and a hockey fan. Billy used to take his meals in the Weisses Rössl, and was often joined by Roberto; each time he saw Eveline, he put his hands to his cheeks and gasped. Once he shot his arms, Nixon-style, into the air in triumph: “The most beautiful girl in Kitzbühel, and she works for me!” he shrieked. “She works for me!”

Given the opportunity, eleven years ago, to give a talk on the skiing life to a small gathering at Harvard, I spent the fall going through things I first read some time ago, and was struck by how little litera-

ture there is on skiing, and how it is nearly all written by men, and when it is not about skiing is frequently about women. Some of the most moving—also perhaps the oddest—passages in Hemingway’s *A Moveable Feast* are near the end, when the author, his wife, and baby son are in Schruns, in the Austrian Montafon, and already another woman, who would become Hemingway’s second wife, has entered the scene. The skiing, lavishly described, is superb; the inn, the Hotel Taube, splendid; but hovering over everyone’s head like a black cloud is the return soon to Paris. Caught between two women, Hemingway writes of himself: “One is new and strange and if he has bad luck he gets to love them both. Then, instead of the two of them and their child, there are three.” John Updike’s story “The Rescue” is about two women sharing a chairlift, then skiing down past the scene of an accident. Updike being Updike, it is, of course, about adultery, or at the least the hint of it: another fantasy of men being competed for by women. A John Cheever story, “The Hartleys,” depicts an unhappy young married couple from Manhattan and their seven-year-old daughter, who is killed in an appalling freak accident on the baby slope outside their New England lodge. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, writers on skiing cannot resist ski accidents; most shattering of all is Graham Greene’s *Dr. Fischer of Geneva*, his darkest novel, in which a lonely middle-aged man named Jones, a translator at a chocolate factory in Vevey who knows a brief happiness for the first time in his life, loses his young and beautiful bride in an accident much like Michael Kennedy’s, without the touch football. Accidents, death, women, and skiing all seem connected through the precariousness of life: All are in some way about thrills and thrill-seeking, despair and glory, the pride that comes before a fall, as if the essence of the skiing life could be distilled in the form of Greek tragedy.

These last three—Greene, Cheever, and Updike—were writing about the travails and tragedies of tourists, holiday skiers, not what I have here called the skiing life. Greene’s ignorance of skiing betrays him in *Dr. Fischer*: As befits someone who never went up the slopes

himself, he shows an inordinate respect for the Swiss ranking system of *pistes* as blue, red, or black, as if somehow the trail classification scheme might have had a hand in the girl's death; as a plot device, he has locals speaking improbably of the ski patrol, as if their exercises were somehow curious and remarkable, rather than monotonous and routine. Updike seems to know rather more—his descriptions of the act of skiing, lyrical as one might expect, ring true—although he was known to be, God help us, a golfer.

By contrast, Irwin Shaw's famous skiing story, "The Inhabitants of Venus" (the title embraces love and living in the same breath), betrays that its author, at least for a time, lived for skiing—for long spells in ski resorts, in Klosters, where Prince Charles was nearly caught in an avalanche that killed his bodyguard. In Shaw's story, Robert Rosenthal, a man rich and attractive to women, of course, is riding the cable car, in Davos, probably. Around him are excitable young Americans, Italians, and Germans—including an older fellow, he realizes with a heart-dropping thud, who had nearly finished him off years ago, before the second world war, when Robert was a small boy skiing on his own one afternoon at dusk and fell and broke his leg. This German, skiing by, removed his skis and offered to get help from the village, but hours later, no help came and young Robert had to struggle down on his own, until finally rescued by a Swiss peasant. He had given his surname, Rosenthal, to the German, and that was enough for the man to leave a small boy to his death, an act that made Robert's parents decide that Europe was no place for Jews, and so they emigrated to America. Now Robert sees the man again, is sure it is him—the icy blue eyes, the frosted hair, the snarl of the lip—and knows he must kill him before that day is out, while they both are on skis.

Shaw's story, published in 1963, or before I was born, showed to me when I first read it that the skiing world I knew had always been like this: the clothes and fashions; the chirpy girls and broad-shouldered, high-spirited boys; the mixing of the populations; the

local's contempt for tourists on whom his livelihood depends. In a passage Shaw explains his title:

The Germans were sun gluttons and could be seen all over the hills, stripped to the waist, sitting on rocks, eating their picnic lunches, greedily absorbing each precious ray of sunlight. It was as though they came from a country perpetually covered in mist, like the planet Venus, and had to soak up as much brightness and life as possible in the short periods of their holidays to be able to endure the harshness and gloom of their homeland and the conduct of the other inhabitants of Venus for the rest of the year.

The Germans of the 1960s have remained, joined by other inhabitants of Venus from grim northern climes, such as the Dutch, who, although they refuse to believe it, behave much like Germans when they are abroad, in groups, and making merry (their children are the worst-behaved in the Alps); young Scandinavians, discovering the pleasures of cheap alcohol; and particularly the British, who bring their own surly proletarian culture to the easy-going habits of the Alps as they do to the Spanish beaches. Americans are no better than any of them, of course, much as we might like to think otherwise. In the skiing life, we become alike. Not so much the Germans, perhaps, who live close by and have money and buy vacation homes; but the rest of us, who stay on, take jobs, perhaps marry, intermingle to the point that—and as a tourist you might never realize this—the man or woman who waxes your skis at night, cooks dinner in your hotel, bartends at the Crystal or Top Pub, or even owns the business itself, is quite likely no local but rather Swedish or British or Dutch, perhaps Australian, possibly Kiwi, or even South African. There are so many more of us than you think, even in these ancient idyllic places, in the old family-owned hotels; in the village of Saas-Fee in the Swiss Valais near Zermatt, say, where everyone is named Super-saxo, Zurbruggen, or Bumann; or in the village of Morgins, not sixty

miles away, still in the Valais but French-speaking, where everyone is named Donnet, Monay, or Gaspoz, and where I spent a very long time myself.

Skiers struggle to explain to nonskiers the addictive power of our sport, and why some of us might chuck in the life we know for the peaks we can only aspire to. A gossip columnist in the *Sunday Times* of London once wrote that she never trusted a serious skier for a boyfriend; she saw these people—she was writing about men, but no reason they can't be women—as crippled in some essential way. Skiing was, in her words, “a replacement activity” for the ordinary, everyday difficulties of maintaining human ties or relationships. I dismissed it at the time I read it, but perhaps there's something to that. If I look hard at the person I was in my twenties—the solitary nature of my existence, free of entanglements human or otherwise—I can say that for all those years and winters I was very nearly skiing for my life. It takes a prisoner of uncommon eloquence in John Cheever's novel *Falconer* to describe this euphoria:

It was a very heavy and beautiful snow that, like some juxtaposition of gravity, seemed to set the mountain range free of the planet. We drank some coffee or schnapps in a hut—waited twenty minutes or half an hour—and then there was perfect cover everywhere, perhaps four inches that fanned like spume when we turned, a gift, an epiphany, an unaccountable improvement on our mastery of those snow-buried slopes and falls. Then we went up and down, up and down, our strength inexhaustible, our turns snug and accomplished. The clinicians would say that we were skiing down every slope of our lives back to the instant of our birth; and men of good will and common sense would claim that we were skiing in every possible direction toward some understanding of the triumph of our beginnings and our ends. So when you ski you walk on beaches, you swim, you sail, you carry your groceries up the steps to a lighted house ... you kiss a rose.

We skied that day until the valley telephoned the summit to close the lifts and then ... we swaggered into the bar, where our cups and everything else were brimming.

When I lived the ski life, I knew I wanted to be a writer. A man is impressionable in his early twenties just out of college, and reading Salter and Hemingway and others made me feel that skiing and writing—and everything else—could be, would be, possible, inevitable. At the end of my first winter in Kitzbühel, nearly two years out of Yale, I sat down to write a book about that time in the fashion of Hemingway's *Moveable Feast*, fifteen or so roughly chronological chapters from early December through the end of the season with the same characters surfacing throughout. The first one written, meant to be the last of the fifteen chapters, was published later that year in Alan Ross's *London Magazine*. It was the first of three pieces, all on a traveling theme, I had published in short order in that magazine, sort of a lesser-known *Granta* or *Paris Review* but known for publishing Paul Theroux, Derek Walcott, William Boyd, and others when they were getting started. It was this piece, which I had entitled “Frauensschuh” but Alan Ross renamed “Ski Bums,” that I sent to James Salter at his home in Aspen. “I liked the piece,” Salter wrote back. “I hesitate to call it a story but, of course, you didn't. The beginning of it was especially good, the first three paragraphs with their straightforwardness and evocation. I don't know if you're really 23 years old but the piece seems youthful, ingenuous.” He added he didn't like the term *ski bum*, which seemed weak to him, and he is right; but I still haven't found one better. He concluded with some writerly advice: “Style, structure, authority—those are three words I often return to that are the essentials of good writing. Good luck.” Seventeen years later the book has not been published, but I still think that sometime, somewhere it will be. I wanted to call it *The Ski Bum Papers*, a title I was never satisfied with but felt this was the best I could do. All the good titles had been taken, one of them

Coming Down the Mountain by Andy Martin, a Cambridge don and lecturer in French moonlighting for a winter as a sports reporter following the World Cup races. I met him when the White Circus, as it is sometimes known, came to Kitzbühel; he came into the shop where I worked to rent skis for the weekend, and we talked for a while; we were to meet later that night. But, as I found out by reading his book when it came out the next year, a girl got in the way. There, to my surprise, I am mentioned on page 156: "At midnight I had a rendezvous with Eric, an American ski bum with a degree in history from Yale. He'd been in Kitzbühel for months and was writing a novel about American ski bums in Europe. Silvia and I agreed to meet in the Harlequin disco half an hour later. 'Don't be too long,' she murmured and kissed me goodbye." Well, the girl never came; Martin had been stood up. It had been the briefest of liaisons, a stolen kiss and a cuddle and a date for that night, and in the next page of the book he discovers that she spent the night with another man. But none of that interested me very much. What surprised me was Martin's description of me as writing a novel about ski bums. I couldn't remember telling him that; I didn't even think I had conceived of the project at the time. I certainly wouldn't have called it a novel, but there it is in print, so I must have. I believed I was there to ski; I took no notes, but I remembered everything about that winter, and much less about the seven that followed. Salter's letter became my talisman, the laying on of hands from a writer to a young devotee; those early pieces in *London Magazine*, coming as they did in my first two winters, convinced me that I was a writer, not a bum, and this became my conceit, the necessary escape, as I began to see it, from what started, after a time, to be too confining, too boring, even too lonely: a life spent mostly in villages, in mountains.

Writing and skiing are still two of the things I think most about; perhaps, if I'm honest, they're the only things I'm really interested in. They belong to the private sphere. They can be shared as much as one likes, or not at all. For me there is also perhaps music, but its

rhythms can be found in both skiing and writing; similarly there is scenery or landscape, but the sweep of this can be encompassed in the act of skiing; the lone figure on the hill imposing himself upon the mountain, a futile but touching act, really. Yet as Salter has written, "Though countless skiers have been down these trails before, it seems they are still unconquered." Every snowfield is virgin territory, every skier his or her own pioneer; skiing is the conqueror's art. Skiing, like writing, is a means of remaking and reshaping the world as I would have it, and also like writing it doesn't matter how many have come before. These trails and mountains are mine, for the act of having descended them once or a hundred times. No one can take them away from me. Salter writes in the same passage that "skiing ... is a world unto itself. Its glories are nearly indestructible. It embraces one entirely. It is a journey that follows a journey and leads one through days of almost mindless exertion and unpunished joy." It is when the skiing stops, I have found, that one is in trouble. Those chairlifts back to the top are lonely, cold rides, and I had more of these, alone, than I can count: too many things to think about, too much to unsettle the mind. Then the joy is punished. I left the skiing life because it seemed that if I wanted to be a writer, and have anything to write about, I needed to involve myself among people in a way I felt I couldn't, living in mountains. But while an addict might recover, his addiction marks him for life; there is always the temptation, the fear of relapse. I never forget the thrills, the small excitements, those heady days, pink on my cheeks, goggles crusted over with a light frost that I wipe away with a gloved finger; the setting off, a click of my poles for luck, snow scraping under my skis, the valley floor opening up before me so much that, with only a little effort, I might leap far into space and fly above it. It comes back to me even now, writing these lines, as it often does once the summer ends; it doesn't take much to bring it back. I can be talking with people about Iraq or the high rents in Cambridge, where I live, but really I am thinking about skiing. I'm remembering something

a long way off that lies at the tips of my fingers, in the way downhill racers, before their turn out of the starter's shack, close their eyes and put their hands together and run down the course—bumps, jumps, and compressions—in their minds.

In his memoir Salter describes a needling doubt spending days with Irwin Shaw and his beautiful crowd at Shaw's chalet in Klosters:

A circle of interesting people began to appear regularly, people who would not have come there except for him. They were always in a crowd, it seemed. It was the best time of his life, and probably the most ruinous.... Of course what I blamed him for was the very thing I was afraid I was doing myself: living in a world that was not truly mine.

The mountains keep their own, both those who are born there and those who might come later but can truly be said to belong. That I didn't belong, really, I sensed even in my first winter in Kitzbühel, even before I knew that I would be doing this thing for years to come. One of our friends there was an American, Chip Bennett, who taught at the ski school, as I would myself the next year. Always full of grandiose, outlandish plans, always with an eye for the main chance, Chip's latest money spinner was printing cheap sweatshirts with some racing theme, a death-defying slogan and an illustration on the front. "You schuss the Streif, you risk your life," was the one he had, now pink after too many washings with colored clothes; the Streif is Kitzbühel's notorious downhill course. My good friend Axel Naglich always thought this was very funny.

"You know that shirt he wears? 'Schuss the Streif and risk your life?' Well, Chip Bennett never schussed the Streif in his life," said Axel, who had schussed it, repeatedly, as one of the race *vorläufer*, or forerunners, each year since he was nineteen years old.

"I know, but he wishes he had," I said.

"He wishes," Axel said. "He wants to be a downhill racer."

"More than anything in the world."

"How old is he? Thirty?"

"Thirty-two."

"Forget it," Axel said, brushing his hand by his cheek the way he always did when he said *forget it*. "Not a chance."

"Do you think he did?" I asked. "When he was younger, have a chance?"

"No."

"He was never good enough?"

"No."

"And he never will be?"

"No."

There was silence for a while, and then he said, "He should do something serious for a change. Not keep coming here. How long has he been coming here? Ten years?"

"Ten years," I said.

"Forget it," Axel said. And then he pointed his finger at me. "Don't you become like him."

"I won't," I said.

"I mean, do something serious with your life. Not like him."

"I will."

"Ja, you promise?"

I tried to see Axel when I was last in Kitzbühel, for a day in January twelve years ago; but we missed each other and now I doubt we'll meet again. But for that season he was my closest friend, a native Kitzbüheler and still the best, most thrilling, and extraordinary skier I have ever seen, talented in so many ways: an artist and graphic designer, a hang glider, a student of architecture at the university in Innsbruck, a champion Austrian moguls skier and a downhiller who could have gone far had he been willing to devote his life to skiing, to forswear his ferocious all-night partying, to properly train. You see him in the news sometimes, if you follow

skiing; he and his Kitzbühel pal Christoph Reindl have twice won the Twenty-Four Hours of Aspen, a murderous competition in which two downhillers go again and again, for a day and a night, down the Aspen racecourse, stopping only for rest on the ride back up. None of us will ever be like him, or ski like him, and the risk of hanging on too long in ski resorts is starting to think that this is the only thing that matters.

“You promise?” he asked again.

“I promise,” I said, and we left it at that.

Small Worlds

One of us was young and sick, the other old

Olivia Parkes

It began with pneumonia. The inflammation provoked a pneumothorax to deflate my left lung and sent me to the ER. The first thing they did in the ER was to cut a hole in my side, shimmy a tube between my ribs, and sew it to my lung lining while I cried with my mouth open into a pair of rubber hands. The second thing they did was to send me to the third floor, where the other lung foundered. Important numbers dropped on a monitor screen, so the panicked resident put me to sleep, intubated me, and handed me over to a ventilator.

For a moment I lived only in my eye. Of course I knew that I was there, on a thin white bed with my jaw squeezed open and my tongue depressed; but I was not in the bed, jaw, or tongue, not really. A neuromuscular blocking agent had paralyzed my skeletal muscles, most notably the oropharynx, larynx, and diaphragm. I tried to scream with it, the eye, because the rest of me was locked. My eyes are blue; they have always been this color. An emergency intubation is a fairly violent procedure, one its recipients rarely remember. The anesthesiologist did not wait to ensure that the drugs had taken hold, and I lay paralyzed before I lay unconscious. I wanted to tell this to the woman pushing the tube down my trachea because it seemed important, but I was far too small. Wide and blue and mute. I remember the stillness of my chest, my father's hands, and that scream gathering in the only piece of me I still inhabited. It did not speak or breathe or feel and when I woke up two weeks later the horror of it was in me still. They put me in a little bed in a little room, and I stayed there for a very long time.

My grandmother lives alone, in a small one-bedroom at the top of two flights of hard red stairs, in zone five, Beckenham, Kent. She very rarely descends the stairs. Once a day the telephone rings and my mother is there, but more often it is silent. The silence brims

with the inconsonant ticking of various clocks set to various times. She is too old to hear them or to worry at approximations within a half an hour. I can hear now, as though half immersed in her little bathtub, the syncopation of those clocks, the laconic contribution of the dripping tap.

The assault of a tracheal intubation on debilitated lungs may induce acute respiratory distress syndrome, or ARDS, a severe lung dysfunction associated with trauma that devastates the microscopic air sacs that pass oxygen to the bloodstream. It extended my time on the ventilator, in a chemically induced coma, from a projected three days to two weeks, and left my lungs stiff with scar tissue, with bullae leaking air, with a lining too slick and inflamed to oxygenate even an inactive body. It wasted me, that long sleep. Left me muscleless, soft-boned. Twenty-five pounds lighter, yet the weight of that body pressed into the plastic mattress, enormous, while the tubes burrowed in, feeding and pissing and breathing. They lived for me. With so much hollow plastic in me, the doctors harnessed me into a four-walled world and they said to me, *now you must get well*.

Hospitals are hard places to get well in. When I stood for the first time in that room, a nurse at either elbow, I discovered I had forgotten my perpendicular relationship to the ground, and realized with surprise how tall I was. I am still this tall, and have been for a few years now. Until then I was growing still, bones stretching up and out while feet expanded to convey them. The incremental changes of growing older pass by unnoticed, until from a certain perspective, they reveal themselves. Lying in the narrow tub in Granny's bathroom, knees bent and folded to the right, belly emerging like an atoll. Each year I found the view of my body altered; I sat higher, the island moved north, the legs extended, the knees emerged.

We came each summer, my sister my mother and I, to stay with her. Whenever we arrived I'd take a bath first thing, to soak out the airplane. Often when I was younger and more of me lay there submerged, Granny would keep me company. She would settle on the

closed lid of the toilet seat and we would agree that there in the tub with my ankles crossed and my hair burgeoning under water, I really was just like a mermaid.

When I stand for the first time after waking up in the hospital, for three wavering seconds, I know that it will be a long while before I walk out of this room. The first thing about the room is that there is no window. It is painted a color that is not a color. There is a narrow mechanical bed. I am plugged into the wall behind me and, by various leads, to a trolley at my left, which I imagine visitors might like to hang their hats on. Unfortunately it is very full and very busy, draped with drips and monitors that describe me scrupulously in numbers. I read them all the time. A fleshy vinyl armchair squats before the trolley. To my right, a toilet that I am not yet able to make use of, and a cheap unpleasant chair. When I can rise and walk three paces to it, I will endeavor to sit for, as my nurse puts it, "as long as I can tolerate it." A different parent sleeps in it each night. A curtain on a rail separates my capsule from the beehive of nurse activity, the corridor of the intensive care unit. Sometimes it is open and sometimes it is closed.

Dr. Saleh pulls back the curtain and looks at me with a frown inside his smile. "How are you feeling, Olivia?" He says my name often when he speaks to me; it is his daughter's name as well. He really says that first syllable, *Oh. Oh-livia*. I call him Dr. Sailor because that's the way the nurses pronounce it and because he gets around on the bandiest pair of hornpipe legs I have ever seen.

Dr. Sailor comes nearly every day, and when he does I ask him questions. They have always been about when I will be well, though the answers have suffered a series of postponements. Three days on the ventilator became fourteen and "after that chest tube comes out" became one tube replacing another until they stopped trying to take them out. *All right*, they said, *if we just snip off the top of the lung, here where the worst of the leaks are, you can be out of here in seven days*. The forty-minute surgery to complete this procedure took two hours and the surgeon had never seen such sick lungs.

They look just like liver, is what he had to say about that. A day or two after this inauspicious pronouncement, Dr. Sailor came in to tell me that I would need to forget about the seven days. They had become something else. This is all right, I suppose; in the room, I do not know what a day is. It is always now, for both the past and the future are unintelligible.

The real problem comes a day or two later, when the doctor suggests that we “talk about reality.” When he enters my familiar spare reality, in which it has been the twenty-seventh of September for thirty-one days, he finds me sitting in the chair. I have been in it for four hours and forty minutes and though my lower body has slipped forward, I am waiting for another painkiller before dragging it back. The good news is that Dr. Sailor wants to talk about the reality that will, he assures me, exist: one beyond these four walls. The bad news is that he wants to talk about its compromises. When they take the tubes out of my side and the lung holds without them, I can join the world with its future, I can go. But when I go, the tube in my nose might well come with me, attached to a portable oxygen generator. *Don’t worry, they’re very modern now. You can recharge their batteries every four hours, Oh Livia.* He changes the nature of my confinement, he makes it worse.

How long will I need it? *I don’t know.* Will I always need it? *I don’t know.* Will I be able to kiss without it sing without it will I always be this tired? *I don’t know.* The world that he describes outside the little room shrinks; I am afraid. My mouth stretches. Open, grotesque, turned down at the corners. I remember my parents in the room, standing there. They look down into that gaping mouth of mine, its grief. It must be as dark as anything. I sit there at its bottom and see a smaller world. They reach down and pull me out, closer to their own gray heads. They heave me up and I sit there like the scrapings from a dinner plate. I haul my haunches flush to the back of the chair and as my torso yawns its protest I ask the two of them, *doesn’t he know that I was happy?*

I had been. I had been blooming. I was twenty, fully grown and never younger. In the spring I fell in love for the first time and all summer long I bloomed with it. I was my own promise. The summer just before my hospitalization had been spent working in London, and much of it lived in the four tiny rooms of my grandmother’s flat. The apartment is sparse and sundry, private, solitary. And all the while there, playing endless hands of cards with her and drinking endless cups of tea, I bloomed, there, for a brief while in the close quarters in which her long life dwindled. We always sat in the living room; it was the only place that really accommodated more than one. There is a staunch old sofa poised in front of the television my grandmother cannot hear, and beside this pair, in the light of a window, a table with chairs. The potted plants my mother bought her, at the window, on the table. When I see us we are always at the table too. Granny and I are playing Remik. There is no hurry. My mind wanders so largely beyond the confines of these four walls. *I am blooming*, I think.

“*Yayush*,” the old woman croons as I shuffle the cards, “you are dreaming.”

In the hospital, I stand up a little longer each day while someone holds my arms. My sister times me and the monitors protest an escalating heart rate. Thirty seconds, one minute, one thirty, two minutes. When I stand with my mother, I’m taller than her. “You’re like the little mermaid,” she says. She means the one from the original fairytale, who feels knives in her feet when she walks on dry land. This seems apt but perhaps a little too romantic. I reply that I feel like one of the polyps languishing in Ursula’s sea-cave. I mean the ones from the Disney film. We are both right.

My mother tells me that the last time she visited her mother she had to clean eggshell off the little galley kitchen ceiling. Granny had put eggs on to boil and forgotten them; they blew up while she was playing solitaire. I see her, shuffling from the kitchen to the sitting room. She has boiled thousands of eggs, what can these few be

to her now, now when she is waning? In the hospital each morning my parents ask the cafeteria staff to boil two eggs. The staff do not typically do this, but they have seen this gray couple every morning when they start work and they think, *it is no trouble, really, to boil these eggs*. We all think that maybe I will eat my thousand eggs, and then I will be well.

Granny is very nonchalant. Perhaps this comes with living. A story: The telephone rings, she answers. She tells my mother that today, on her way out of the bathroom, she saw a dark man standing in the corner of the hall. Nonchalantly, then, “I believe that he was Death.”

My mother sits at my bedside though she is meant to be in England with her mother. She goes as frequently as she can because the old woman is fading, but she flew to New York instead because it seemed that I was. She braids my hair and pins it in a crown around my face; it’s filthy and I do not want it touching me. As she fastens one plait, as securely as you can please, to the top my head, I remember the man in Granny’s hall. “As securely as you can please. And you must tell Granny that she is not allowed to die until I am well.” I feel this. I don’t know for which of the three of us I say it.

When I leave my room for the first time to walk in the corridor, I look at people, I want them to see me. I have only ever walked to the toilet ten paces from my bed, with a nurse carrying my chest tube box, and plugged into the oxygen stream in the wall. In the corridor I look at them all, the nurses, the visitors, the women at their desks. Among them lies a woman on a stretcher and she is the oldest thing I have ever seen. She is yellow-white, a candle. Her hair frizzing out from her head is the same tallow color as her skin. I try to guess her race but it has drained from her, and she is only old. I look at her unblinking, breathing, breathing, rolling the oxygen tank behind me. *Do you see me?* If I am witnessed I am here. She closes her eyes against mine and I walk and walk until my father makes me turn around.

My grandmother, now ninety-one, has been sinking into

herself for some years now. She has shriveled down to rather modest proportions. Stooped and curled, she shuffles on swollen feet like a woman in a shell. On that first walk down the corridor I am as old as she. With each step forward I walk myself backward, ever so slowly, to the forgotten vigor of my youth. I walk past the other rooms and count the exit signs passing overhead. A group of Hasids is waiting for the elevator. I can’t go in the lift yet.

My father’s feet are swollen too, from walking and walking, each day to and from the hospital. In the corridor he holds my chest tube while I pull the oxygen tank and counts his steps; he has walked with them long enough to know each one to be three feet in length. I walk one hundred and fourteen yards by the measure of my father’s stride. Small steps, sock-footed, feet close to the ground. Back straight because I hate that I am curled and withered, and my eyes are wide with asking. *Do you see me?*

Every day at about eleven o’clock a woman pushes a cart down the hospital hallway and cries, “Newspapers, newspapers.” My father tells me that a sign on the front of the cart says NO CREDIT in big black type. This is funny. This is funny even though I don’t have the strength to get out of bed and buy myself a newspaper, and even though with one look at me, the woman with the cart would refuse me credit on any grounds. My father knows that it is because of funny things like this that I will get better. His beard has gone completely white.

I walk farther every day, I eat my soft-boiled eggs, another bouquet of flowers arrives. An enormous bunch—perfectly symmetrical, shaped like a teardrop, the taper at the top achieved by the soft green buds that cap a set of snapdragons. Many of the arrangements are like this: sculpted, ascending, morbid. After a day or two the water will start to stink like nothing else. This one, like nearly all the others, includes chrysanthemums.

“What do they think they’re doing,” my father asks the nurse who fiddles endlessly with my IV, “sending the flower of death to

a hospital?" He is joking, but there is no response; the nurse disapproves. When she leaves, he continues, "Oh well, she's Asian. No sense of humor. How would you expect people who eat jellyfish to have a sense of humor?" This is the kind of bad joke that I am too tired to challenge and that always succeeds in lifting my spirits. We agree that it might be best to give all my flowers to the receptionist on the first floor.

The last time I saw my grandmother I was holding two plastic bags full of dead flowers. My taxi was outside, we were in the doorway, and I was taking her rubbish down on the way out. It is difficult for her to descend those hard red stairs. That time was like every time I leave, colored by not knowing if there would be time for me to leave and come again. She apologized that there were three bags of garbage, and told me that two of them are potted plants that had died. *It is no trouble, no trouble at all, I love you*, I said. From the hall window I saw the cabbie enter the building, coming up to fetch me. *I love you*. I was on the landing. She had to explain about the flowers. "It is the one you love," she said, nearly out the door, "your favorite," yes, the daisies, "in Polish their name is *stokrotka*," the cabbie in the stairwell, "it is little thousand leaves and that is you, you are like that." She had to tell me this, there was not much time, she had to tell me that one last thing and she pressed them on me, urgently, those last words: "little thousand leaves that is you, you are like that, *Yayushka*, be happy, that is the thing." It was raining and there was the cabbie at the top of the stairs. *Sorry*, I said, *I've just got to take out the rubbish*. As I descended, the slap of feet, I shouted up to her to keep well and inside I cried, *old woman mine, love like water and I will grow for you*.

There it is: her life, at its end, confined at the top of the stairs. She leaves it three times a week to buy bread, eggs, tomatoes at the co-op on the corner, she drinks long-life milk in her tea. It is all right, I think, that at the end of nearly one hundred years and one thousand boiled eggs, she should live at the top of those stairs. It is

well that, for those short durations, I live with her. Enact in love and games of cards, with little conversation, a changing of the guard. At the end of the summer I to descend and she to abide. She will be there at the window when I return, or she will not.

It was never, I thought, a question of my returning. She has lived and I am living. Even as I left her I was blooming. Little thousand leaves, a thousand promises. We left it unspoken that she was at the close, that I came once a year, that a year for her was a very long time. But it was there in that pressing of my hand, in *that is the thing*. I trotted down those steep red steps, the ones she descended with a focus and a labor then unknown to me, when a year was as yet nothing.

There it was: my life at its beginning shrunk smaller than a one-bedroom granny flat. In the hospital, my life was twice confined. The first: I slept and woke in the fear of death and four walls and today, today, today. The second: I sank in the fear of life with a circumscribed future, with not just space and time constricted, but all my promise. On the fourth of November, two weeks after Dr. Sailor told me that I might well live in compromise, I walked down the corridor on the third floor of New York Methodist Hospital wearing bedsocks, a pair of men's long underwear, and a canary-yellow raincoat. A nurse said, "You can't go out without shoes on." I didn't have any shoes, but it did not seem significant. I walked into the lift. I left it and I clambered into the waiting taxi, without a sniff of manufactured oxygen.

If you are young it is very hard to settle for being old. And if you should fall open in front of those who bore and raised you, they will pin your hair very firmly around your head and take your arm and walk you to the toilet, or down a corridor. They have done it before, but to see them do it again will be a resurrection. And if you should be forced to make the effort, the excruciating endless drudgery of reclaiming, lifting, dragging that stone of a body pinioned there to

a mechanical mattress, to a trolley, to a wall, you are not going to settle for a compromise. You will get well because you want to live and you will get all the way well because, really, isn't that the thing?

I am unconfined now. When I lie it is in repose rather than in anguish. And in repose, thoughtless and alive, I go drifting, in that nameless accumulation of feeling, fragments of books and bus rides, nostalgias real and imagined. A slice of ham on blackened toast and card games, endless card games with grandmother; when I was a child I sat under the table to hide my cards. And when I drift, I wonder if that could be what it is to be old. When hearing dims and recedes, does the gentle accumulation of one's life, these lapping whispers, become a roar? I will find out.

Yes, I will be happy. I will be happy to love or buy newspapers or suffer, to live out the glorious poverty of this glimpse that I am given. I will hold my eyes wide for it. They have been blue since the day I was born. Throughout my sickness, everyone remarked upon how large my eyes became. *What big eyes you have*. For several reasons, perhaps. Dad posited that it was "all the jollop" in me, the drugs unfurling in my system. Or perhaps the face that held them had grown thin and small and hollow. But I felt it too, that I held them open, as widely open as I could.

Four Poems

Verandah Porche

Sudden Eden

For that pinkish haze across the orchard,
ten thousand blossoms on a widow's peak,

we forsook The Revolution
and bought the farm.

He bought the farm means kicked the bucket,
croaks Maynard, our helpful neighbor, who *did*

decades later, never owning
what he woke to milk.

September 15th, the sun, a blanched peach,
our possession. In the kitchen,

I have heard the mermaids singing,
Hale and Elberta, Hallelujah.

The wood stove hums Home Comfort.
Cool, pare, halve, stone.

Leave half-an-inch of head space,
tips the manual.

We slip
our hearts

into wide-mouth
winter.

Law of Falling Bodies

Gravity draws equally on light
and heavy apples.

Syncopating wind: the Baldwins
patter among the Merinos who
nose them, chomp and ruminate.

We mosey through the orchard
sampling the crop. Late fruit
keep its edge as frost

fleeces the pasture. The ewes
are easy. Soon the ram will
coax them, hooves on flanks,

filling their girth with singletons,
twins, triplets to dive down
in a driving blizzard, slide out

or be midwifed, thrive or totter,
huddle by the south wall,
lolling in winter sun.

Eight apples for a pie.
And one for the plump lamb,
a flawless drop.

Sizing up her side
I map our chops.

In Wild Strawberries

June.... the red scent.
two young men I know
hunt

frais du bois
savoring the foreign
frisson.

Heart-seed berry
(the Narragansett
named it)

thriving
in a habitat
for serpents.

Up the acid pasture
they bend crawl sample
share *fragaria*.

One palm paints
the other.
Sun consents.

Desire in a Spring Squall

So (goes the snow)

Let silver

edges

mesh

embed

enfold!

Limbs

double

in bulk.

Lie down

in a

pasture

thicker

than

thieves.

O snow

you make me

want to.

Marriage Envy, Marriage Shame

Damned if you do/don't

Pamela Haag

My husband John and I got married on the night of the living dead, Halloween 1998. It was an aptly harrowing choice, because marriage has been a somewhat scary adventure for me, although I'm still married, twelve years later.

I'd just moved back to Baltimore from New Haven, where I'd gotten a Ph.D. at Yale. My girlfriends and I in graduate school were mostly marriage skeptics or agnostics, perhaps because we'd imbibed an intellectual cocktail of Marxist feminism and the post-structuralist musings of Judith Butler concerning the performative nature of sex difference (don't ask). Whatever the reason, few women among my friends wanted to be boring old heterosexuals who endeavored to "do" conventional femininity, or marriage.

Instead, some of us inhabited a cultural hothouse where one could feel almost self-conscious or embarrassed for not being erotically outré, bisexual, or sufficiently queer. I make no claims that this was representative of America, circa 1992, or that it made sense; still, it was only a more exaggerated case of a larger northeastern trend toward "lesbian chic" and "gender-bending." You could be with the other sex, certainly—but ideally in some eccentric, sophisticated, or at least troubled way that subverted the assumptions of true love. We had a nebulous apprehension (on some level, doubtless correct) that the world and its Structures and Systems were always trying to trick us into false consciousness and, from there, into subjugation.

Marriage struck me as an intellectually rustic idea. The rejection of "cloying domesticity"—whatever I meant by that phrase—ranked high among my personal-advice mantras.

Now we were marrying anyway. Apparently marriage believed in us, even if we didn't believe in it. "As I'm sure you're aware," remarked one of these friends from Yale (who had just gotten married herself), "Halloween is the one date in the year, according to Celtic tradition, when time is suspended, and the boundary between living

and dead is considered porous. So you're not really getting married at all. How clever of you!"

My wedding was a cocktail party with a marriage attached. With my "I Can't Believe It's a Wedding!" wedding, I did my best to obscure the usual iconography, the visual evidence that I was Getting Married. I wore a silver dress, and we didn't have formal bridesmaids or groomsmen, just readings. We eschewed flowers in favor of an exuberant number of votive candles. A few of them, placed in bags, caught fire outside the Quaker meetinghouse where we held the ceremony, and my sister Carolyn had to stomp them out. "Ah, the smell of paper burning," she says. "It always reminds me of your wedding." We got married at the meetinghouse because it seemed the most cozy and informal option (and the least Officially Getting Married in its design). But because we weren't members of the meeting or marrying according to Quaker spec, we had to add a disclaimer at the bottom of the program: "This Is Not an Official Quaker Wedding."

I gave a toast to our reception guests that our marriage was the most elaborate ruse ever to get out of opening the door for trick-or-treaters.

But all this calculated eccentricity was itself one example of a larger marital fashion. For the past two years I've been writing a book about the ways that marriage may be evolving. In my research I've often heard the phrase "wedding industry," or the "wedding-industrial complex," from engaged couples disgusted by the relentless consumerism, if often overcome by it nonetheless. But this isn't an industry at all. An industry mass-produces the same homogeneous product according to the same assembly-line mechanical processes. Weddings today tend to do the opposite. Couples aspire to display their personalities, quirks, and passions, and their singular view of marriage.

In my day and in my circle of friends, the fashion was to have a wedding disguised as a happy hour or a rodeo and smuggle some vows in. Marriages ranged eclectically in their particulars. In one

memorable year the weddings I attended ranged from a Catholic high mass to a luau and pig roast to a weekend adobe-cookout affair where the bride wore a lovely sea-green beaded and sequined cocktail dress to her desert ceremony. Another friend had the hardest time finding a rabbi to perform a ceremony because she told the candidates she was planning on a big sushi buffet and an open bar for several hours before the vows. One rabbi worried, "But ... then you might be *drunk* by the ceremony!"

It's my hunch, to paraphrase a rule from evolutionary science, that the marriage recapitulates the wedding: the wedding ceremony is the germinal expression of the marriage and the wedding's assumptions are often amplified, happily or tragically, as the marriage unfolds. That certainly seems true in my case, as my ambivalent, halfhearted feeling toward the estate of marriage was symbolically obvious in the design of my ambivalent, halfhearted ceremony.

Naturally, then, wedding styles interested me as I was working on my book. As part of my informal research, I attended the 2008 Wedding Merchants Business Academy, held in Phoenix, Arizona. Each year the Academy brings together vendors who produce weddings (sometimes wearing headphones, like a techie backstage at a Broadway musical) or sell wedding-related goods and services. The wedding merchants are a well-groomed, pretty bunch. All the women here look like brides, and all the men sound like FM radio. Many of them promoted other things—Jell-O, Wal-Mart, prescription medications, to name a few—before switching to weddings.

I glean from my time at the Academy (and from other sources) that the incipient trend in 1998, toward ever more personalized and unique weddings, has only grown stronger over the last decade. The most interesting exchange at the convention takes place after a presentation by the renowned wedding consultant Lovelynn Jensen. Her talk is called "Capturing the Bride *You Want*." Decidedly unromantic hunting and predatory metaphors like this are, discordantly, fairly common at the Academy, since the business is so competitive. Jensen confirms that brides are "jumping out of the box these days.

They want to make the wedding their *own*, they want to make it *different*.” To illustrate her point, she bounds energetically among three mannequins dressed in wedding gowns symbolizing the three major brands of bride: the “modern bride,” the “edgy bride,” and the “vintage bride.”

It’s been a long day, and most of the wedding merchants slouch obediently if listlessly in their seats, exhausted by speeches intended to rouse them. But Jensen inspires a philosophical meditation in the audience about what exactly a wedding merchant is in the business of doing.

A wedding consultant in the audience says that she thinks of herself as a “wedding author. I write the bride’s story” in the reception and the details.

“Brides today are personalized,” another agrees (were they ever anything *but* “personalized,” to themselves at least?).

Wedding merchants are in the “*service* business, not the product business,” the next audience member enthusiastically concurs. “We sell emotion. We’re selling how the guest feels when they walk in, how the guest feels when they get a key chain” as a favor. Another wedding planner chimes in: “You must find out where the bride is emotionally and where she wants to end up emotionally,” because ultimately it’s all about “making the bride feel comfortable with herself. She’s buying *herself*” in the wedding, her dream identity of herself as bride and wife.

As wedding styles go, so go marriage styles and marriage contract law. As a wife you can have the “modern contract,” a pre-nuptial or postnuptial agreement, perhaps (these have soared in popularity over the last two decades, although rejected by judges in the 1950s as contrary to the public good); the “vintage contract” (a religious “covenant marriage,” for example, as offered in Louisiana and other states, setting strict limits on and preconditions for divorce); or the “edgy contract” (a same-sex marriage contract,

perhaps, as offered in Iowa and some New England states, or a “heterosexual licensed domestic partnership,” as offered in 50 cities and eight counties, a phrase that jarringly calls to my mind handgun ownership laws: “I’m licensed to be a heterosexual domestic partner in 10 states”). The legal momentum, although uneven and contested, is, as in wedding fashions, toward marital choice and the customizing of marriage with private meanings, obligations, and incentives around money, property, children, divorce, and other issues. The trend is to offer what one legal scholar describes as a “menu of marriage options,” as is already the case in Scandinavia, France, and New Zealand.

The wedding merchants have a point. A strange one, perhaps, but a point. We’re “marriage authors” as much as we’re wedding authors. As marriage becomes less imperative and more optional, each marriage—by which I mean each spouse, and the two of them, combined into a third entity altogether—is able to imagine itself as an author of its own private story, not an actor in a shared, common script. The customized marriage achieves in marriage law what the bride wants in her wedding: It seeks to be, in a word, unique.

This flight from marital orthodoxy to heterodoxy, you’d think, might support greater marital happiness, at least insofar as we have more freedom than our parents did not to marry, to imagine marriage in new ways, or to choose other options. And nothing’s to stop us from customizing and tweaking, and being truly “personalized” to ourselves in matrimony, even within the shell of traditional marriage.

It hasn’t necessarily worked out that way. The “happy marriage” makes for interesting dinner conversation. Ask people in their thirties, forties, or early fifties if they know really happily married couples of their own age. I set a modestly ambitious bar for them. I’m not asking for the blatant mythology of the married couple with “no problems,” but I am asking for a marriage that is something more sparkly than “stable” or “reasonably contented.” I’m asking for a marriage of their generation that they might actually *envy*.

Once, a wife declared herself extremely happily married, which was a warm and memorable moment for me. Usually, however, my companions crinkled their faces, thought for a minute before shaking their heads, no, not *really*. In casual conversation on the train a single man in his early forties allowed that theoretically he liked marriage. *Finally! A non-religious marriage defender!* But, he elaborated sweetly, “I wouldn’t want any of the marriages I see around me. *They* all suck.” Some of the people I canvassed hazarded more freewheeling, feisty critiques. I heard that marriage was “over-rated,” “stupid,” and something that “doesn’t make any sense.” The anti-marriage stance is like an emerging collective pivot, a predictable overcorrection to the often smug, often morally sanctimonious, often saccharine Ain’t Marriage Grand sentiment of the influential family-values discourse, among others.

I’m an envious person, and nothing stirs envy in me like that rare bunch of gaudily happy marriages that I catch in the peripheral vision of my life (although it may well be that, like “normal people,” the only truly enviable marriages are those that we don’t know too well). I see these husbands and wives laughing and engaging in crackling repartee in hip restaurants. They must go home and have berserk, rollicking, hanging-from-the-rafters sex—with each other, I mean.

The latest embarrassment is that my Marriage Envy has attached to geriatric couples, whose ancient marriages are handled gingerly, like relics, in the features sections of local newspapers: “Centenarian Couple Dismiss the Fuss Over Their 82-year-old Marriage,” headlines the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, illustrating the genre. “Both use wheelchairs now, so he carries a mechanical grabber to pick up anything she drops.”

During the 2008 presidential campaign I watched John McCain’s mother being interviewed on C-Span. A still-stunning dowager, Roberta McCain recounted tales of dances and parties with her handsome, dashing husband, and of their whirlwind courtship and elopement to Mexico.

I had Marriage Envy for a Republican presidential candidate’s ninety-one-year-old mother!

“What’s going on down there?” John shouted to me from the second floor, as I laughed at Roberta’s account of giving birth in time to make that week’s fun-loving Friday happy hour at the naval officers’ club.

“John McCain’s mother. I *love* her.”

“Hmmm ... creepy.”

I never thought I’d end up with Marriage Envy for my parents, either, but I’m not alone in this. As one of my friends observes, there’s little more dispiriting than the realization that your 60-plus parents may well have a better sex life than you do.

My parents, in their early eighties, have a successful, even frisky marriage. As they get older, they look out for each other and tend to each other graciously and subtly. They’re enjoying the rich dividends of a marriage with its own private, epic history. They attend a beautiful historic church in the gay district of downtown Baltimore and now champion, among many other causes, the ordination of lesbians into the ministry. They occasionally brunch on Sundays at locales favored by Baltimore’s hip gay population. My parents are cooler and more politically au courant than many twenty-five-year-olds.

One Sunday, a new member of the church approaches my mother and asks her, “Who’s that grey-haired man that you sit with?”—as if my octogenarian mother were engaged in an illicit courtship in the pews.

“That’s my husband of fifty-six years,” she responds, amused by the misunderstanding. She and my father still exude “new relationship energy.”

There’s a survivorship bias in my geriatric-Marriage Envy: Older marriages have, by definition, survived to *become* older marriages. But I suspect that there are other generational and cultural factors that make them the object of envy. Here are some of my parents’ secrets. They never planned on living so long; they had no better alternative to marriage in the 1950s, and they had low expectations.

“In our day,” my mother tells me, “you made your bed and lay in it.” Occasionally she tried to edify me. Whenever I discarded another nice young future son-in-law with a safely bland personality, she would chide, “There are worse things in life than being bored and unfulfilled.” Sometimes she’d add, “Honestly, you’re so *extreme*.”

My parents and the McCains wed in the heyday of the marriage consensus, when marriage with children was the norm and “everyone was pregnant,” as the late John Updike recalled in a *New Yorker* essay. Unlike the “personalizing” wedding trends today, my parents and their cohort married in obedience to orthodoxy and script. They gave out Jordan almonds wrapped into tulle sachets as favors and the brides wore white gowns and hid their faces behind veils. Weddings in the ’50s proudly displayed a bride and groom’s willingness to be submerged in a social role, and that was the whole point. The bride didn’t have to write a wedding script, she just had to *perform* successfully the one she was given.

There wasn’t a contingency that the *Vogue* guide to etiquette hadn’t choreographed. Use “a large silver cake knife decorated with a white satin ribbon” to cut the wedding cake. “With the groom’s right hand placed over the bride’s, the couple makes the first cut together, in the *bottom* tier of the cake.” Or let’s say you’re “a girl from North Dakota who has a job as social secretary to the wife of the American ambassador in an important Asian country.” It could happen. And let’s say you get engaged to a man in that very same *important* Asian country. “Under the circumstances,” *Vogue* instructs, “if the ambassador and his wife should offer to give [you] a wedding, it would be perfectly good form for [you] to accept.” That’s good to know.

These marriages enjoyed the humble consolation and perhaps, in fortunate circumstances, a sort of happiness, of being all in it together, following the same script.

Was that the source of my Marriage Envy for the pre-feminist era, then, the idea of having only one script to follow and not much choice? I mulled this question as I worked on my book, but concluded

that this was not really what I longed for. I don’t believe that the secret to an enviable marriage is to have no choice or freedom in the matter. The marriage consensus of my parents’ day could exact an unforgivable toll on the spirit, for women and men alike, and for those who resisted the heterosexual norms. “I hadn’t really wanted to marry at all,” remembers feminist writer Alix Kates Shulman of the early 1960s. “I wanted to make something of myself.... But I knew if I didn’t marry I would be sorry. Only freaks didn’t.” With the consolation of consensus often comes the oppression of conformity.

Although it’s not my view, some factions in marriage politics today would indeed favor a return to the marriage consensus that they attribute to a prelapsarian world before the 1960s. Marriages *were* better back then, they would tell me, when being single, living together, separating, or getting divorced weren’t so easily available. This “defense of marriage” is one part of the cultural milieu in which we do marriage today. For example, a loose confederation called the “marriage movement,” which first coalesced in 2000, wants to revive traditional marriage as a social consensus (many in the movement also want to combat same-sex marriage), and combat many of the attitudes evident from the Wedding Merchants Academy. Participants in the marriage movement question the trivializing, throw-away, consumer-choice mentality about it. They feel, as do many sociologists and historians, that marriage shifted from being primarily a social institution and obligation in the nineteenth century that fulfilled many roles, functions, and practical purposes, to becoming more of a romantic, sentimental pursuit of love and emotional fulfillment in the twentieth century.

In fact, the opposition to same-sex marriage should be contextualized, although it rarely is, within a broader campaign, anchored by the marriage movement, against what amount to liberal, secular, and humanist views of heterosexual, legally traditional marriage. These views include: a diminished distinction between “husbandly” and “wifely” roles in marriage, no-fault divorce law, cohabitation, non-procreative marriages, and the decline of spousal “interdependence,”

as one of the marriage movement's five goals describes it. In other words, as a matter of politics and policy, if you don't happen to be gay, but you are a liberal, then don't think that the same-sex marriage policy debate is irrelevant to you, or is relevant to your life only empathically as a matter of principle. They have something to say about your big, fat, straight marriage, too.

Around 2008, a decade into my marriage, I stared at a bit of the marriage movement's handiwork almost every day, for months. The billboard became visible about a mile up the road from the supermarket where I shop: *MARRIAGE WORKS*. The billboard featured a beaming, handsome African American couple in a tuxedo and a veiled white wedding gown. The couple was posed, and the billboard sited, so that they smirked down at me on their endless wedding day from sanctimonious heights. In the picture itself the husband hovered imperiously over his diminutive bride. The campaign was targeted at non-marrying, low-income Baltimoreans, but the newly-weds looked as if they should have been starring in a Viagra commercial set in South Beach. The billboard materialized overnight, jostling for roadside space with Burger King, Under Armour, and garishly tinted vitamin drinks. Use this product and you'll lose ten pounds; buy this shampoo and your scalp won't itch; get married and you'll look and live and dress like this, gorgeous and prosperous. The billboard's sponsors, apparently, didn't have too many qualms about promoting marriage as a sacred institution by advertising it on billboards, or on sooty city buses alongside ads for VD prevention and debt consolidation.

It wasn't long before graffiti artists vandalized the high sheen of the endless wedding day of the Couple from Central Casting. An anti-matrimonialist with a spray can scratched out *WORKS* and replaced it with *SUCKS*. Another slapped *GAY* across the chest of the beaming groom. The feisty emendations made me laugh, but the original message still peered through. I read it, almost every day, and it annoyed me but it pricked my conscience all the same. *MARRIAGE WORKS*.

By this time, I was living in a state of embarrassingly passive semi-happiness in marriage, and I am not the only spouse to find herself in this state. Semi-happy marriages became the more specific topic of my book. I'm not talking about the usual ups and downs of any long-term relationship, but a more brooding, ongoing shadow-box with the idea of marriage, and a more wrenching ambivalence about it. In semi-happy marriages, for example, the melancholy spouse spends an inordinate amount of time wondering if he or she should be married, and spends a large amount of energy reconstituting all the reasons and rationalizations for still being married, and arguing internally about whether or not this is good enough, even when the spouse has—as I do—a truly good and decent person as a spouse, who in no sense “deserves” to be divorced, and whom is still loved in many ways. Still, ambivalent spouses feel that important things are missing in these marriages, and it becomes harder over time for the ambivalent spouse to square the marriage with his or her own soulful yearnings.

Happy spouses who occasionally have problems do not find themselves awake habitually at 3 a.m., staring out the window and contemplating divorce.

And in these contemplations I did wonder what had happened to that marital subversive streak or that “unique,” radical spirit of doing marriage my own way that was so evident a decade earlier in our wedding? It was roughly around this time, and the time of the Billboard, that my surprising Marriage Envy for geriatric couples really grew. True, I had all the choices and freedom in the world, unlike those suddenly-enviable marriages like Roberta McCain's, but what had I done with them? I'd been stubbornly persistent, but ambivalent, in marriage, and I hadn't tried hard enough to shake up the comfortable status quo to make it better. I had to wonder why that was so.

I was interested to learn during my work on marriage that new divorce patterns in the United States tell a much larger story,

in which I am one data point, of marital persistence in American subcultures where we might have least expected it. Several states in the Bible belt, where traditional marriage is fervently supported in both politics and values, have a divorce rate almost 50 percent higher than the rest of the country. The mother ship of liberalism, Massachusetts, has the lowest divorce rate in the country; Oklahoma has the highest. There is also an unprecedented class divide in the U.S. marriage rate today, with the more affluent and better-educated marrying more, and more successfully, than less affluent and educated peers.

There are many reasons for these divorce trends, but insofar as values play into any of them, it seems that the values of the most secular, affluent, and educated support marital endurance better than the others. I may fall more on the *SUCKS* than the *WORKS* side of the equation (more snark, less sanctimony toward marriage); not all of us in the marriage-persevering classes are enraptured with the state of our semi-happy marriages, and a few of us may even suffer Marriage Envy, for geriatric couples, but ironically we are, in the aggregate, the Stick-It-Out faction of the twenty-first century. Being “pro-traditional marriage” isn’t our political stance but it is apparently our reality.

Then again, I’m not so sure that the pro-marriage message hasn’t worn me down over the years, and set a perimeter around my thoughts and imagination when it comes to marriage, even though it’s a message that has metastasized from the other side of the marriage culture war into my liberal soul. In some ways, I’ve come to feel that the “family values” campaign really did work, on me at least, much as I oppose it politically. Like other Americans in their forties today, I grew up in a disorienting moment. We spent our childhoods in the “divorce culture” of the 1970s (although my own family was an intact one, I was breathing the cultural air) which placed a high value on what now feel like the quaint matters of “self-discovery” and “personal fulfillment,” and we spent our adolescences in the divorce

backlash and family-values smackdown of the 1980s, which placed a high value on personal responsibility, sucking it up and sticking it out, and aspiring toward a heavily mythologized pre-feminist marriage and family life.

In my own case, each time I might contemplate doing something differently and maritally eccentric, or separating, or divorcing, a Greek chorus, assembled over years of pro-marriage cant, frets, mocks, chants, and advises in my head like ambient ethical Muzak. Its unwanted but persistent backbeat is, essentially, *MARRIAGE WORKS. DON’T DIVORCE*. My chorus changes, but has included conservative James Dobson of Focus on the Family, my parents, a generic pudgy white Southern Baptist minister seen glancingly on a Christian cable channel, acquaintances, and neighbors. Occasionally I cast members from my son’s carpool line. “What will *people think*?” This Greek chorus—being a chorus, after all—isn’t the most important character in my marriage, but it is a pervasive and inescapable one.

To me, marriage culture today feels like a hybrid offspring of the 1970s and the 1980s, of unprecedented choice overlaid with shame about divorcing, rewriting the rules of marriage, being less than contentedly married, or not marrying at all. That shame can weigh heavily.

My friend Jane writes to me one day to muse on the theme. She’s intrigued by the gap between what she astutely calls the “public and private faces” of marriage, and the “cover stories” that marriages craft for themselves. Jane is divorced from her second husband, and has one child. A close friend of hers has just confessed things about her marriage that she’d never intimated before. Apparently, the friend had eliminated all potential confidants for one reason or another, and went through the crisis alone.

“She doesn’t feel comfortable confiding in married women friends in her social circles, for fear the wife would tell the husband; she doesn’t feel comfortable telling her unattached or divorced friends, because she feels her problems might call attention to their [single] status; she

doesn't feel comfortable telling her siblings because she doesn't want to hurt her husband's stature in the family. I think it's a common plight," Jane says.

I agree. It's a common plight. The shame of confessing that you have a queasy marriage, even to family and friends, came up when I talked to people for my book.

"When my marriage was imploding," Jane continues, "I didn't tell anyone my stories. I didn't think my friends would understand; I was embarrassed by the story, in-law conflict, and flimsy cover-up by my ex. Looking back, perhaps there was a sense of shame that I'd chosen someone who turned out not to have the character he'd represented he'd had. I mean, bagging a marriage one year after you have a child, with a sleep-deprived mother, is pretty harsh." Jane's husband had been the one to leave, but the shame of marital failure attached to her, and she was more concerned about her reputation and her ex-husband's reputation than she was eager to seek support from confidants.

We *choose* to marry, after all, in a moment when we *do* have choices in the matter, and when the old marriage imperatives have faded. People don't want to make the wrong choices, or have to admit to it. Jane concludes, "If people had open marriages—open in the narrative sense—then more people would know just how bad other people's marriages really were." Jane imagines that that sort of candor might help us arrive at new social norms for marriage, or at least usefully crack open the "public faces" that shroud marriage. But after many years, perhaps the Kabuki shadow of a happy marriage can become almost as deeply cherished as a happy marriage itself.

Indirectly, the sources of my marital shame illuminated the sources of my Marriage Envy. I might feel the shame of marital eccentricity or failure today—just as my parents would have in the marriage-consensus heyday of the 1950s. However, I don't have the offsetting consolations of communal nonchalance that they enjoyed. Marriage was nonchalant for my parents in that it was assumed.

They had the consolation of a consensus, *esprit de corps* culture, where everybody was in it together, in the same boat with their happiness or their travails. For example, William Whyte's influential work, *The Organization Man*, described suburban cultures of the 1950s that were sources of conformity, exclusion, social judgment, and homogeneity—but also sources of "warmth," densely woven community networks, and steadfast social support.

Eventually, I realized that my occasional, unexpected outbursts of Marriage Envy for the pre-Betty Friedan housewife weren't a longing for an era of no freedom, or what some anti-feminists rue as the demise of "chivalry." Nor was it envy for an era with one marriage script to follow passively, at whatever cost to health, spirit, or soul. Some might indeed want that orthodoxy, or oppression, back, but I am not one of them. Instead, I long for something, perhaps, like a marital community.

By marital community I mean a place where at least judgment would co-exist with a broad feeling of lifestyle camaraderie or support. (You can find that today, certainly, in orthodox Jewish communities or in some conservative Christian congregations or communities, but I don't know of a secular, liberal, feminist-friendly version of that sensibility.) I have in mind a place where you don't do marriage and parenthood in isolation, to say nothing of doing it, as we sometimes do today, in a tacit spirit of what is perhaps best named "lifestyle competition" with our peers.

For examples of this lifestyle competition, you need look only as far as the infamous "motherhood wars," between stay-at-home and wage-earning wives, or to the many books and memoirs—often quite engaging—from a range of lifestyles that make "cases" almost juridically for or against marriage (whereas, in the 1950s, you'd no sooner see a book making *The Case for Marriage*—Linda Waite's 2000 work—than you'd see *The Case for Being Gainfully Employed*, or, *The Case for Not Being a Murderer*). Other works make The Case for or against divorce, or for or against single motherhood, or they make the "case," as Lori Gottlieb recently did, for marrying

“Mr. Good Enough.” Or think about the perfect-parenting anxiety and competition that Judith Warner documents and captures so vividly in her important work *Perfect Madness*: parents jockeying for advantages, comparing themselves remorselessly to other parents. These marriages, and parents, are decidedly not comrades in arms with each other. They are rivals. To paraphrase wisdom from the dating world, you’re not your marriage, but ambassadors for your marriage, the official representatives and defenders of your lifestyle decision.

It seems to me that we live in a moment that has conflicting impulses around marriage, one pushing toward historically unprecedented latitude and the freedom to be unique and “personalized”; another pushing toward shame and judgment, a continuation of the family-values revival that began in my youth. One moves into the twenty-first century, the other back to the nineteenth. The combination of the two impulses can make us lonelier in marriage, more restless about being married, given all the other choices out there, but also more timid about changing our marriages or even confessing to our marital misgivings. It has made me feel all three of those things at the same time. A husband whom I interviewed put my feelings perfectly: “In marriage and family,” he said, “we’re all in it together, in the same ocean. But we’re not in the same boat. We’re alone, in our own private boats.”

All the Petty Offenders

Tess Wheelwright

“Enrique de la Cruz Guerrero,” continued the deputy clerk of Honorable Glenda G. Gerald’s Magistrate Courtroom 3B.

“*Presente*,” mumbled Enrique de la Cruz.

“Present,” the clerk said, turning slightly to the Honorable Glenda G. Gerald, who nodded. “José Luis de Dios Martínez,” read the clerk.

“*Presente*,” said José Luis flatly.

“Present,” repeated the clerk to the Honorable Glenda G. “Juan Canche Fuentes,” read the clerk.

“*Presente*,” was Juan Canche.

“Present,” the clerk relayed to the Honorable Glenda, who nodded again—a gesture the deputy clerk couldn’t help but suspect wasn’t in part a lightly scolding affirmation that *mmm hmm*, as Her Honor had said she’d meant, the rules were the rules: The clerk had indeed to translate this cognate, along with each and every other syllable uttered in Magistrate Courtroom 3B, when it wasn’t ape’s work as when it was—against what the clerk had considered merely the slightest of protocol tweakings, recently proposed by herself and overruled by the Honorable Glenda, in the latter’s chambers after session, causing the clerk to have to fix her eyeballs on a stress ball on the judge’s desk till they throbbed a little from restrained rolling.

“Rodrigo Zacualpa León,” read the clerk.

“*Presente*.”

“Present. Julio Guzmán Ortiz.”

“*Presente*.”

“Present. Javier Tun Calderón.”

“*Presente!*”

“Present. Ricardo Aramburo del Río.” Et cetera, et cetera. Juan Armica Armiga. Diego Perrera Pérez. Et cetera. All were, as always, where else?, all present. Also Juan Carlos Camal was. And Salvador Cervantes Delgado.

You know what the deputy clerk had really wanted to be? A hair stylist. She wouldn't be, she'd known—her immigrant single Mami stylist hadn't slaved away as a stylist so that her one daughter could et cetera et cetera stylist. Still, the clerk felt she had a natural talent; she certainly had great hair; she subscribed to a certain logic that she should be where that was what mattered most. Or she could open a small travel agency, she'd at times thought: run trips down to spas in Jalisco where she supposedly still had some family. A lot of things, you know? She considered she'd met with a great many people with less upstairs than herself—and with lesser hair no less. When the T.A. she was seeing in her senior year of college offered her the paralegal gig in a little local office, which became, through a later lover, a clerking post in Tucson, which became, before long, twelve years and counting, clerking day in and day out in the humorless shadow of the most Honorable of Glendas, she'd said yes because she'd decided on nothing else yet. She still had not. All this to say that, as year after year she clerked, she clerked dogged by the sense that it hadn't really been her idea. What had, for that matter? Men in any case loved the deputy clerk, especially at first.

Francisco Sosa Martínez. Víctor Coyoc Perrera. The clerk wondered how change found other people, or it them. José Vega Toral. These things get laid out by chance, said her Mami. Pablo Ehuan. And if chance itself didn't find her? Fausto Zapata de Jesús. Shhh, just give it a chance, said her Mami. Molina Gómez Camal etcetera Raymundo Hoil Juárez.

After roll had been called it was time for justice to be served, or at least for the Pablos et cetera to shuffle forward in fated groups of five to the five awaiting mics like some battered quintet, except with shackles and belly chains, and each with his court-appointed lawyer looming behind and most often a head above him, to proffer a rueful pat on the angel wing or an inaudible consolation—and except with earphones through which the deputy clerk's voice was transmitted hung from their ears and under their chins like the stethoscopes of some unnerved and extremely alternative medical team, or of boys

too old to play doctor playing doctor and not enjoying it very much at all.

"You've been charged with the petty offense of illegal entry. If you plead guilty, your answers will help establish the facts of your guilt," the deputy clerk translated into their ears. A couple of the petty offenders tugged at their earpieces.

"Each of you has a right to a private trial," she translated.

A pock-cheeked defendant with a sunglasses tan and a stiff-looking U.S. Navy Seal t-shirt looked up at her questioning; the clerk gave an instinctive little shake of her head.

"I understand that each of you is a citizen of Mexico or Guatemala. If this is not true please stand, there is no one standing," she translated. "If any of you have legal authority to be in the country, please stand, there is no one standing. Mr. José Gómez Martínez, how do you plead to illegal entry?"

"*Culpable*," said José after a beat and a little prompt from his attorney, as they'd have gone over sometime between when they'd been first acquainted and this session, both events since lunch.

"Guilty," she translated for the judge.

"Mr. Juan Luis Contreras Fuentes, how do you plead to illegal entry?"

"*Culpable*," said Juan guiltily.

"Guilty," said the clerk blankly. "Mr. Iván Chuj Perrera, how do you plead to illegal entry?"

"*Culpable*," said Iván.

"Guilty. Mr. Alfonso Ruíz Marín, how do you plead to illegal entry?"

"Gweel-ty," said Alfonso, with the most tentative of superior smiles.

"*Culpable*," translated the clerk automatically.

"Excuse me?" said the Honorable Glenda to the deputy clerk.

"Excuse me?" she said to Alfonso Ruíz Marín.

"*Culpable*," Alfonso surrendered, dropping his deadened eyes. Honorable Glenda waited.

“Guilty,” sighed the clerk. “Mr. Carlos Viesca Álvarez, how do you plead to illegal entry?”

“*Culpable*,” Carlitos complied, lesson learned.

“Mr. Rodrigo Arias Higuera, how do you plead to illegal entry?”

“*Culpa*—”

“—Guilty,” the clerk accidentally—honestly!—interrupted, earning a scowl nonetheless from the Impregnable Glenda. Well, *sorry*, she shrugged. They continued, without further hiccup: Guerrero Suárez de la Cruz Chuj Galindo etcetera Hernández etcetera Silva. This part was over in less than an hour.

The previous convictions crowd always took a little longer but only a little.

“Judge, he’s proven he can stay away, he hasn’t before this entered the country since 1989, he’s a taxi driver in Michoacán,” one of the defenders tried listlessly. The Unemotional Glenda gave him six months.

“Mr. Domínguez del Toro is the sole provider for his mother and grandmother in Chiapas, which as you Your Honor know is a very depressed area of Mexico,” one of the rookies tried. That one got nine months from the Discretionary Glenda.

A third, especially diminutive offender with a previous and somewhat inconceivable citation for battery got 264 days. During that, he’d see at least a hundred of battery himself, the clerk had to suppose, from what the detention officer who was her lover and technically her fiancé, though it had been awhile since they talked about it, had said regarding what happened to batterers, not to mention little Mexicans, in lock-up.

After court the deputy clerk would have liked to have had a little TV time and maybe a clamato with a stick of celery in it, but the detention officer wanted to go to the Home Depot. He was pricing lumber for a deck or for a dog shed for a big dog he was apparently also pricing; in any case he was pricing lumber. He worked guarding the yard down at Lower Buckeye Jail. He liked what he thought

of as a certain compatibility of their two professions. “Maybe he’ll end up in there with me, never know,” he’d say, cheerfully, when the clerk told him of a day’s sentencings. The DO for his part stayed in a good mood about his job. He liked it. If you wanted to, he liked to say, you could leave LBJ a better man than when you went in. They had classes on fathering, classes on you name it; you had your meetings for whichever religion you could think of, Methodist, if you were Muslim, whatever, you had an hour you could go into the dayroom and do what you needed to do. As for himself, he wasn’t one of these badge-heavy guys who got off on laying into them. Better to let them sort it out themselves. Hell, you could chat to him on the yard if you wanted, same as if you were anyone, he didn’t have a problem. Course with the Mexicans it was harder. Even the ones who did speak a little English pretended not to to keep life simple. Do get them a translator and even if it’s two black eyes they’ll tell you anyway they fell in the shower, it’s always they fell in the shower.

They parked in the handicapped spot, which the DO called the government spot. Inside, the clerk suppressed yawns. The DO looked at hardware. “Give me a pound of tenpennies,” said the DO. Twice. “Translate,” said the DO to the deputy clerk, shaking his big red head. The deputy clerk ignored him. The employee was Pakistani or something, she judged; in a minute he went for the tenpennies. When they walked by the lumber shelves a Mexican guy scowled at the DO, or at her, or both, but the deputy clerk didn’t make much of it. When they turned the corner coming back, though, there he was again, and if he couldn’t’ve been said to’ve exactly lunged at the detention officer, he did step into him shoulder to shoulder, hard enough that you heard it.

“Jesus!” snarled the DO, and his fists were up, until the deputy clerk put her hand on his arm. “Fuckin’...” said the DO, glowering over the clerk’s fine hair.

“Let’s go,” said the deputy clerk wearily. “Sshh, let’s go.”

“Who the F?” fumed the DO, and he kept fuming, in the check out, out to the truck. “I don’t like it, let me go in and settle it.”

“Shh, let’s go for a cold one,” said the clerk. “Honey,” she added—without sweetness, she knew. Sometimes, not rarely, sweetness cost the deputy clerk more than she had.

“I *knew* I knew him, too,” muttered the detention officer. “He was in till last summer. What’d he say anyway?” he asked the clerk. The deputy clerk didn’t say anything. She looked out the window at the paved desert. When after a while she caught a look at the DO in the side mirror, she would’ve sworn for a second he was crying, then ruled he was only rubbing a dry eye and humming a little. The clerk watched him, sidelong. He scratched the inside of his nostril with a thumbnail. He lightly lifted the corner of his mustache with a little blow off a shelved lower lip. Once some darker thought seemed to drift onto his inner horizon, pulling his eyebrows toward each other and down at the bridge of his large nose briefly, and then seemed to pass along. And again the clerk looked to the desert, and was entered, surely and suddenly, like she’d swallowed it, by that old deputy clerk feeling that she’d been plunked at random down into the middle of her life, not to mention this Ford F-150, and that just as easily as she could and probably would become this DO’s wife with this feeling, she could slip from the Ford at the next red light, not look back, head to Mexico, on foot through the desert, against traffic.

“You work down at the jail, don’t you?” was what the guy in the lumber aisle had said. “Fucking tyrant son of a fucking bitch gringo.”

Albeliz Díez Flores was having a worse day than the clerk. She was walking, as she had for the past two, under the more-or-less cover of the mesquite trees of the Pima County desert, thinking every drone was one of these drones they’d been told about that tracked desert motion with infrared, and every new shadow one of their trucks with beds on scissor-lifts that could shoot up ten meters in the air on the spot. Only today, unlike the previous, her stomach was twisted and poisoned-feeling from the pieces of cactus she’d been given to lick when her sister had split one open with her nail file

after they’d given up on finding water. Albeliz had been sucking her lip from thirst and something like an enormous pimple had popped out below her nose and stung.

“It’s like coco,” her older sister said, in English, about cactus. It wasn’t. She’d been to L.A. seven years ago and told them this was lot easier than it was. “It’s very juicy,” she sniffed. She’d been lightly crying for approximately fifteen hours.

“It isn’t,” Albeliz had observed. Their third sister looked at Albeliz with a scolding little headshake. Well, it wasn’t.

“How well can they see me if they get me with their drone?” Albeliz asked the capped head in front of them.

“Not too well,” said their little *coyote* from Chiapas.

“Can they see my face? Can they see my hairstyle? Can they see my...” He wasn’t even any fun to tease. He was shy; he was too shy to look them in the eye except the third sister a little bit, who was the nicest; he was constantly looking all around them and seemed more scared than they were. It wasn’t a business for guys like him anymore, he’d told the third sister last night when the other two were ass to ass in sleeping bags, ears to the desert. The *narcos* run it now. They run you through their highway system underground; they have the money to be your uncle at the port of entry and the papers to prove it.

“If they saw the way we still do it they’d laugh,” he said, looking over at Albeliz and the oldest sister. “Or kill me,” he said. Eugenia, the youngest, shuddered a little. “But, that is, we’ll make it,” he said quickly. Albeliz didn’t feel too reassured by him. She thought often of the \$3,000 that had been the price of his dubious protection, for which she’d sold everything she’d owned. She’d even sold her little dog. For another thing he kept telling them “right over there,” and at night any lights they saw, was L.A., which must’ve been what he’d been told to say, but still.

“We’re not stupid,” Albeliz had said finally, and they hadn’t talked again, until now.

“No, you’re like a little green target,” said the skittish smuggler.

“You could be a cow.”

“How do they know I’m not a cow?” He kept quiet for a while and Albeliz thought maybe they weren’t talking again.

“I guess they figure if you’re going south-north and keep going south-north till you get to the Arivaca road you’re probably not a cow.”

When they heard an engine rev it was already close; they must have scared it up. A kid on a four-wheeler was racing at them, calling, “Don’t run, don’t run,” which their big sister sniffingly translated but only for Albeliz because the other two were running. Within the very same seconds that Albeliz realized this was Border Patrol—he was so young, his hair was flopping as he’d bounced up, he looked like Kevin Bacon, his Border Patrol suit looked like a Halloween costume—he’d snapped cuffs on her wrist and her chest was in the sand.

“Head down, please,” he said, at the same time a second agent sputtering in from the east added, in Spanish: “Don’t move is right! If you pick up your heads there’ll be problems.” This one laughed a little as he dismounted onto the sand. “I’m serious,” he said. “This guy’s a racist; he’ll make sure there are problems.” And he laughed again. The Kevin Bacon-looking one looked at the desert under his feet.

“You two traveling alone?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Albeliz.

The two officers stepped off a little and conferred in low voices: “Yeah, I got another one; he’s in the truck with Adams. He ran, we went down together.” The Mexican-American one nodded; he made a call through his radio and soon a truck pulled up and Albeliz and her sister were told to get in it.

“Thirsty?” asked the Mexican, enjoying, still, some joke all his own. Albeliz vowed she wouldn’t pull from the straw of his Big Gulp when it was hovered near her swollen lips, but then she did. She gulped and gulped. Her lips did it. Her tongue swished in the soda madly; her scraped throat pulled it down madly like Sprite was air.

Her eyes burned down on the cuffed wrists in her lap.

“Can you turn down the heat?” she asked once on their trip back toward the border.

“What?” the joker mimed from the passenger’s seat beyond the glass, his hand cupped around his big ear. Hot air shot at Albeliz through the vent overhead; she pressed the button to talk again but this time they didn’t turn around. Kevin Bacon avoided her eye in the rearview mirror. He looked, Albeliz felt, repentant; he looked accidental in this role as her antagonist, as if he would have done things differently, very differently, if he could’ve gone back to his youth—but first maybe he’d stay there a while, where it was simple, building with Legos on a rug, his lip between his neat tiny teeth in concentration, humming an improvised little shanty unawares. Albeliz sucked her lip thing; sweat ran under her sweatshirt down her sides.

When they got dropped off in Nogales, Sonora, they signed a voluntary return form and the *migra* left laughing. The guy who’d presumably gone down in the desert with Kevin Bacon took off limping down the highway. Two tall *norteños* standing next to an unmarked van said they were volunteers for a relief agency back on this side and that they were there to help. Albeliz couldn’t make her brain thread impressions into thoughts and got into their car after her sniffing sister. Before their drivers let them off in front of a cinderblock one-story—wands of extra rebar wobbling wretchedly in the wind from the top of its unfinished walls, rusting in the long wait for fatter, two-story times; a battered-looking bunch of men loitering at its mouth, sweating with their t-shirts in their back pockets, saying little, spitting in the dust—the volunteers asked Albeliz and her sister for money. Fuckers. If there be any love in the world at all, send Albeliz one non-fucker, just one. Without looking at Albeliz, her sister uncoiled a humid twenty-peso bill from the little roll she’d bound in her bun.

When they got inside the shelter, Albeliz’s sister stopped crying for a minute and then started again. A police officer, an oiled,

soft-fingered little fatty with a sneer at the corner of his butt-looking mouth, ushered them onto a bench. Albeliz loathed him very fiercely on the spot. She thought of the little dog she'd sold. Her sister had taken off her sneakers and was peeling her socks off her blisters, to which Albeliz's reaction was a vague shame. Albeliz felt her sister wishing to speak, but Albeliz kept her eyes directed away. The last six days were like a bag of broken glass; they were like photographs that had fallen disordered out of someone else's purse onto a sticky public floor. When she thought of the days in the desert she could see herself only from a distance, from above, perhaps from three meters up on a scissor lift, the brim of her baseball cap aimed at her sneakers. On the bus north between Agua Prieta and Nogales they'd been shown a grainy comedy about jailbirds and everybody'd laughed too hard.

The chubby little officer with the hair oil holding the tracks of his comb was working through the people on the bench one by one, bullying them if they were thinking of crossing, bullying them if they'd failed. "For women especially, there's no excuse good enough to leave your family," he schooled someone, meanwhile sizing up Albeliz and her sister from across the room. "The border bandits know all the hiding places for your money," he assured them, absently thrusting the two fingers of his right hand into an imaginary she-migrant's vagina. Albeliz's loathing jumped and doubled.

Mexican, crossing to the other side with the documents of someone else is a federal crime, a schoolroom-looking poster warned from the opposite wall. *Before going far away, think of those who stay behind*, a doctor's-office-looking counterpart appealed, showing a sad old man with his chin in his hand.

A timeworn, smeary woman with fake fallen tits and what looked like dried shit in her ponytail limped past the sisters toward the telephone.

"The *migra* hit my uncle," the officer's next subject charged.

"What, you think they want you to go home to Chiapas and tell your friends it was a picnic?" sneered the chub.

"I'm from Guerrero," said the kid.

"They got across but I didn't," said the old whore hoarsely into the phone. "Yeah, but I couldn't keep up." A kind of loony-looking older guy crouched down quickly next to Albeliz:

"You were out there? How many days to—"

"Get away from them, friend!" called the ass-mouthed officer, and the mad-eyed migrant smiled crookedly and stepped off. Another failed migrant with a long sad face and one arm and one floppy empty sleeve like a slack sail, who'd been in consultation with the officer when Albeliz and her sister first arrived, reappeared out of a back room expectantly. They'd put up half the money for his bus ticket back to Oaxaca if he promised to work hard and take care of his family and stop getting big ideas about what he didn't know anything about, he was told by the soft punisher on duty.

"I have like seven pesos," the guy whispered sadly, patting his pocket with his one hand.

"Alright, we'll put up the whole thing, and I never see you up here again," sighed the chub, as if the money would be his own. Albeliz understood now about his fine watch. She pictured her sister sniffing her sorry thanks for a bus ticket back to Hidalgo, sniffing sorry to their daddy, to her man that she forgave him, she forgave him, forget it. The ticket back to all that held out like a dog treat in those sausage fingers.

Albeliz went outside for air. Next to the migrant shelter was an abandoned-looking shop of which clients were unimaginable, posting a dozen faded signs disqualifying one from entry: no shirt, no shoes, dog, booze, foul language, no money, wrong money, sick, violent, lonely, hungry, failed, futureless, sorry. Inside stood a single old copy machine centered between stained limed-cement walls. On a cracked cement planter out front a teenage couple was kissing so deep it looked like they were eating each other, really chowing down on each other's faces, squeezing each other's other parts like they were saving them for later. Albeliz ignored them. *Fucking piece of shit shop, crappy crappy sick copy shop, go suck yourself you bad*

vibe shit shop, close, rot, thought Albeliz, feeling full in the chest of swarms of stinging winged beasts, feeling that the whole of her life had led to this, this moment, this awful wall, absurd tablet of prohibitions—and now what but to hurl herself into a headfirst tear at it; let her end be against the crumbly cement wall of the most god-damned shop on earth. She moved back next door and inside.

“How are you going to leave your family like that, *hombre*?” the officer was punishing, tireless.

“My family’s all in Maryland,” said his latest wretch through missing teeth. “I don’t know what I’m going to tell them.”

“Something!” said the cop, like he’d had a really good idea. He shuffled along. His next concern was a girl about Albeliz’s age who wouldn’t open her mouth to answer his questions. She was shaped like the Tasmanian Devil and had thick, thick, glorious hair held back over one ear by a gold barrette, matching gold hoops in her dainty ears, and dainty feet. Also a long scar along her throat like a shadow of her jawline.

“You’re going to tell me where you’re from, honey. You’re going to tell me where you think you were going,” the officer said. She looked straight ahead at the wall like a cow sleeping, lids half dropped, mouth set. The chub laughed and moved provisionally on. Albeliz slid over.

“Central American, right?” murmured Albeliz.

“Guatemala,” said the girl without turning her head.

“Can you sound like you’re from Veracruz?” The woman shook her head once as the guy turned back to them. Blood had dried black on her jeans at the crotch. By her far eye a little scar was raised like a BB buried.

“I won’t go back there,” she whispered to Albeliz flatly.

“Of course you won’t,” whispered Albeliz matter-of-factly, quickly, surely, as if the fate of this stranger had long been her business—and in that same second, Albeliz was suddenly sure of many other things—in that big lit-up showcase of a still, roomy second. She knew for one that she couldn’t go back to Hidalgo with nothing

to show and buy back her dog—not because of the shit she’d eaten to come this far, but for the shit this girl had eaten. When you’re low and you meet someone worse off than yourself it only makes it worse, the guilt an extra little rude fly buzzing unwelcome in and out of your eyes and nose, when you already smelled like shit to yourself. But when you’re really low, Albeliz now knew—when beside you the big sister who taught you to walk would suck off a cop, crying the whole time, for a ride back to where she’d only just escaped from, bruises still purplish—meeting someone more fucked than yourself is a lifeline. It’s all full of grace. The short term becomes the long term; it becomes the only term—as changing the luck of this beat-on, balky little stranger became all Albeliz could have said she was for.

When the girl cleared her throat Albeliz looked up to see a fifty-dollar bill peeking out the end of her sleeve, like a magician’s trick. Albeliz blushed and wracked her instincts. Redly, Albeliz raised a brow and rubbed together two fingers and a thumb for more. The corner of another bill was lined up with the first the next time Albeliz looked. She nodded.

“Hidalgo.” Albeliz was interrupted by her sister’s whimper to the officer. Their turn. Albeliz inched automatically away on her seat. She shook her head in warning but her sister pretended not to see.

“And now you wanna get back there and stay there, am I right, sweetheart?” prodded the agent. Her sister looked guiltily at Albeliz. Again Albeliz shook her head; again her sister looked away. She dropped her eyes and nodded. Albeliz’s heart whacked in her throat. Now or never.

“What about where I’m from?” Albeliz said quickly, standing up, stepping away from her sister—her voice wavering once, which she hid, she hoped, in a cough. She touched the Guatemalan’s shoulder. “Me and my cousin, that is,” she followed. The officer looked from her sister to Albeliz to the Guatemalan dubiously. Albeliz fixed him with her very top-drawer don’t-fuck-with-me, -don’t-even-begin-to-fuck-with-me face and held it. He lost his little smirk. Albeliz

held on. Albeliz's sister began to cry again but kept it muffled; if Albeliz saw her again she would thank her. The agent's eyes slid at last down Albeliz to the floor.

"You girls want a ticket home?" he asked quietly, finally. Albeliz handed her jacket to her accomplice, who folded it and zipped it into her backpack. The girl stood; Albeliz stood. Together, like they'd practiced, they nodded. "And where's that, then?" asked the officer, sighing.

Albeliz looked a last time at her sister and pulled her cap back out of her back pocket. She pulled it on from the back by the brim like a hood. She looked with shadowed eyes at the officer.

"Tijuana," she said.

Court started late because they were short chain. One warden had proposed sharing one between two offenders and his supervisor had seemed to consider it before the first warden laughed cruelly. The deputy clerk had slept badly. Coming up the stairs to Magistrate Courtroom 3B, she felt like she was pushing through sand. The names on her list crawled like little ticks on her page. Eugenia Diez Flores. Raul del Río de Dios. Carlos Jesús Perrera Guerrero Sánchez Ortíz.

"I've got to make a sudden trip to San Diego, sorry," she'd tell the superiors. "My Mami, my mother, isn't well."

"Ahem," would go the unrelenting Glenda.

What happened next just happened. It started to, and then it didn't stop.

"Javier Zacualpa Sánchez," roll-called the clerk.

"Juan José de Dios." She swallowed.

"Diego Delgado Gómez." She snuck a last look around.

"Javier Zacualpa Sánchez," she said quietly. She waited a beat; she fought a loony little smile. The Glenda only waited.

"Juan José de Dios," she whispered. The only raised eyebrows were from the cheap seats. If the clerk had dared she would have winked their way.

"Diego Delgado Gómez," she laughed. One of the attorneys looked briefly confused but when his colleagues didn't—one was unwrapping Trident; another was tucking a BlackBerry stylus into its little sheath—he sat back.

"Javier Zacualpa Sánchez," she enunciated. The ceiling fan beat slow revolutions overhead.

"Juan José de Dios!" the clerk near-yelled.

"Diego Delgado Gómez," she hooted. Five years from now she would find herself in San Diego still, maintaining a slate of regular customers at Albeliz's Beauty, where her boss was fair if not overly warm, the Central American cutting at the next chair a great chef of paches and tamales, and while the former clerk would still be able to number ninety-nine disappointments, probably, if pressed, still a whole lot less would make as little sense as now. She'd have a little daughter who often made her laugh, and who held herself as patiently as a little cow as her mother plaited her brilliant hair.

But first:

"Javier Zacualpa Sánchez," the clerk trumpeted. "Ahem, Juan José de Dios," she defied. "Diego Delgado Gómez," she cried. "Javier Zacualpa Sánchez!" She muffled hysterics. And on it went like that for the rest of the time the deputy clerk held that job.

Three Poems

Sally Dawidoff

Alison Torres

—If we fill our heads
with flowers, we'll dream
of nothing but flowers. Say
flowers.

—*Flowers*, I said.
Past lights-out. My mom
& her dad in the kitchen,
her mom & my dad
in the nuthouse.

—*Flowers*.

—*A carpet of flowers*.

—*Dandelions!*

—*Shhh*.

—*Dandelions*.

—*Cornflowers*.

—*Clover*.

—*Clover*—

—*Clover blossoms*.

—*Violets*.

—*Bluebells*.

—*Buttercups*.

—*Miles of buttercups*.

—*And miles. . .*

—*Miles. . .*

—*Pretty. . .*

—*Butter*—

—*And of*—

Mad Libs

When I was a young _____ but old enough to _____

NOUN VERB

the bus to New York City, my father would pick me up at _____

NOUN

Authority. We’d go to _____ King and buy _____ and

NOUN FOOD, PLURAL

walk around Times Square eating them. I liked the billboards, especially the gigantic

Right Guard can spraying deodorant into the air. One time, we were waiting to

_____ 42nd Street, and he _____ me on the mouth. I

VERB VERB, PAST TENSE

stepped backwards off the curb (no _____ in the gutter, phew!). Dad

GROSS NOUN

got _____. “You act like I’m trying to _____ you!” he

ADJECTIVE VERB

sputtered. I’m easily startled, which makes people think I’m afraid of them. We went

to his apartment—he was going to broil chicken _____—but I left and

BODY PART, PLURAL

counted the _____ city blocks back to the bus station. In that whole

NUMBER

entire city, there was never a witness to us. One person to say, “_____

PRONOUN

_____.”

VERB PRONOUN ADVERB

Madrigal

I have a lesson with the choirmaster; I just
Have to catch him first. (“Him”: my father.)

In a rental car at Foster and Willow, he guffaws,
Seeing I’m winded. He takes off.

I run like a girl. *Weepe, weepe, myne eyen.*
I care not! In my tinny soprano,

I call to my love, who loves me still—*My hart*
Can take no reste! Myne eyen shall ne’er be blest.

I call to my love, who cares not.
Hall-Benedict Drug on Linden Street—

He loiters by the magazines (my father).
Hefts an ancient axe and splits my skull. Cruell

Wynde, what do I care? I’ll sing my heart out.

The following individuals have supported the *New Haven*

Review through generous donations. We wish to thank them for their confidence and support in our effort to represent the talents of writers from the Greater New Haven area and across the globe. The *New Haven Review* is a community-inspired effort and depends for its success on readers, writers, subscribers, donors, interns, volunteers, and a whole assembly of individuals of good will. We wish we could thank all of them right here, right now. But for the moment, we shall let tradition dictate the matter and offer our deepest thanks to our individual donors:

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