mojo

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Equine Variation No. 1 - Oil on canvas - 60” x 60”

DOCTOR FISH

Sitting on orange cushions with our cheeks carved into fresh leather, pasty blistered feet submerged beyond exhausted ankles in a forty gallon tank of polluted water with dead skin floating on an opaque turquoise and *Garra rufa* chewing at the loose bits of dermis; it occurred to me that the world was flat, at least until Yajñavalkya had his heliocentric vision. Though Inquisition convicted Galileo of heresy, the Copernican Revolution was not for naught.

After bungee jumping from the Wild Canyon gondola, with Grandma attached to my waist in the Sling Swinger, after four frozen mango margaritas, and before adequately digesting six piles of steaming nachos on the beach: What a wonderful idea! It was neither the inertia of our descent, nor the subsequent pendulum motion of our bodies as we soared like enormous American White Pelicans from one edge of the canyon to the other, gravity filling my perineum with blood and my anus with unclenched tropical air—which made it so special.

Ethereal warmth careening through a harness that looked like it couldn't hold a baby camel, as Grandma did prior to our departure on the canopy zip-line. She waited in a mammoth hammock, saving her energy for the main event. When time came she was ready. Our convivial crunchy twenty-year-old guides counted down from three—but dropped us on two. We plummeted and swore and clenched arms as we prayed to a god who abandoned us with Grandpa; shadows on the granite above dried palm fronds, diminutive as ants.

It was the expression on Grandma's wrinkles—the labyrinthine message of hieroglyphs which expanded and contracted with static in the breeze, and the horror beyond the sclarea between the black of the pupil and bloodshot retinas of a Caucasian celebrating her ninetieth birthday in Cabo San Lucas.

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Grandma wiggles her piggies in her tank, adjacent to mine. The fish nibble away the dead cells, exfoliating the dried shards of womanhood. Mom is sitting at the *palapa* bar across Marina Boulevard, double-fisting frozen daiquiris: banana, strawberry, mango. Shit, she would eat a dog if it pooped pretty colors and could be blended and crushed with ice and salt on the rim. She calls herself Dusty Tortilla with Lime, and surely there is not a a cornier piece of bitter cougar at this cantina; not yet anyway. She said my feet were too decrepit to be pampered by benevolent *Garra Rufa*.

"No way in hell Care Bear. Your peeling-neglected piggies will kill the fish."

She said it loud enough for tourists to listen—bloodshot eyes squinting with delight beyond three-hundred-dollar Prada shades, stoic; though betrayed by obstinate crow's feet.

***

The blue-illuminated effervescence is a sight to behold: me and Grandma sitting here after freefall, faces grimed with dried sweat and dust, the laces of our stinky Reeboks against the tanks covered in mud. Outside, bicycle taxi cyclists wave and poor Mexican children attempt to peddle trinkets to tourists, their cheeks against the bank-teller Plexiglas like starving blowfish. Adorning enormous sombreros, fortunate nonnegotiable foreigners with gigantic bellies are exercising F-bombs; while the poorest: broken and anemic by a complacence they can never understand fully. The woman behind the counter shoos them away and the room spins as Grandma sings Spanish lullabies. Mellifluous chanting, back to our wild embrace as they lifted us toward the glass-bottom gondola.

***

We were shivering, but Grandma lost half her t-shirt, so her left nipple was exposed, but that wasn't the worst part: this pierced purple tattooed specimen of magazines from the fifties. Grandma never told us she had tattoos. Hairy ears were the only piercings she adorned with gold. Here with this silver dollar hanging like a phallus as the machine engine coiled duct-taped safety ropes into a hot mess splintered with shadows of enormous American White Pelicans growing larger as if devouring the invisible space of the canyon that held us. The arroyos cupped us like pelicans mating midday. Mom watched from above. The flaps of Grandma's belly protruding like a birthday cake with vanilla frosting. It must have been hidden in the moldy basement refrigerator for ages. The jelly jiggling and an ambitious flying insect took a swipe at the pierced naval with a barbed stinger, but Grandma caught it between her index and knuckle and smashed its carcass into a fine dust and snorted it four hundred feet above the desert.

“Nice skull bone on your titties Momma,” said my mother.

The bungee guys working the harness and control lever of the pulley agreed with nods and acclaim to the sculpture of Aztec gods. Joystick of Mario Kart caked in sweat. We had not spoken to the deities in ages, but here we were: Mom and me praying that Grandpa was not watching us through the crack in the gondola. Grandma was licking her lips and laughing, left mammary dancing in unison with the grinding of the wench.

***

The *Garra rufa* are working their magic, this aquamarine wand, as little children beg for *pesos* and hustlers of the worst persuasions propagandize their souls to regurgitate spiels that have inspired many a murder in front of Oxxo. My piggies are filled with blood, warmed by the soothing seawater and jaw bones of *Garra rufa*. The reddish log suckers swim in apparent retrograde motion. God bless the kangal fish with a purpose; not even these diminutive altruistic sea creatures are safe from the greedy capitalism of Los Cabos. A celebrity wedding this weekend will surely feature half a dozen tanks and the debauchery of Beelzebub and A-list a-holes and phonies who infiltrate the resort town, sparkly gluttonous hemorrhoids indulging nibble fish.

Grandma grabs my wrist and winks. This is the closest we’ve been since the gondola. I can feel her shaking, smell her skin, her cracked nails massaging my wrists like a razorblade to a girl who used to cut. The cheese quesadilla with mesquite chicken is smoking in the palms of a delivery man on a rusty motor scooter that releases more pollution than a third-world dump truck as the room spins faster, the water bluer, the doctor fish meaner, more obstinate, aggressive, greedy; the demeanor of Grandma’s face changes and she begins thrashing her piggies until water splurges over four sides, along with dozens of *Garra rufa*, and the walls and ceiling close in. The rainbow puddles encircle the stubble that has not been waxed in weeks.

***

We are lying on lounge chairs in front of the marble resort fountain watching the Clementine sunset. Our feet are soft and pallid. Grandma grabs my palm and there is no sign of an afternoon adventure excursion written on her wrinkles. I travel those facial lines and wedges and putting greens on her pores, tracing the hours, but there is no exit to the map and the doors have all been locked for decades. She sucks her lime and licks the pulp. Her liver spots glimmer, a constellation in a clear perfect patch of sky over the ocean. We wait for the Carnival Elation to depart, for its earth-shattering horn to blast us off to

sleep and reverberate through the arch. Another cruise ship skims the horizon. We wait till it vanishes into the Pacific while the sky is ripening into a tangerine and the sweet nectar of our veins is nothing beyond the purple murk of pomegranate margaritas and a decrepit gondola about to snap an umbilical cord as Grandma listens to the waves and we are alive, no more extinct than mammoths from the Holocene.

Equine Variation No. 2 - Oil on canvas - 60” x 60”

PEPPERONI NIGHT

I stand along the Grand Canal,
eyeing the gondolas
and one woman—
love that yellow hat!

But it isn't long until I'm
thinking of the canal
back home, the one I too
don't spend too much time by,

rudely leaving for the city lights
and a small pepperoni pie
that tastes so delicious,
one bite takes me to . . . whatever

the definition of heaven is.
Here in this hole-in-the-wall
America will always be great
and be that beacon to the world . . .

alright, I am getting carried away,
but love deserves exaggeration,
and, no, I haven't forgotten the yellow
hat, though it's gone now forever.

HOW YOU KNOW

After the burial, grandpa taught us how you know
which pecans are good to eat, how you shake them
gently by your ear to hear the rattling
of solid meat inside, or else the muffled slough
of rot, of fruit that fell too many days ago,
now losing shape, shell softening
to meet the long dark leaves that curled
their sharp ends up, that mossed the ground
to mute our footsteps, wet our fingers
as we sifted through. And on the other side
of the yard Aunt Cissy stood as if to face
a crowd, shouted *Mission Accomplished*,
and *Mummy had sex with Hitler*, her voice
mechanic, gruff like in the messages
she left on phones: “This is a Collect Call
from Cissy’s Clone” and my mother
said she couldn’t know now who she was,
that she was sick and her sickness was one of the blood
that sits watching you to decide when to uncurl
its limp body to bore through the walls of its cell,
and it touches you gently, you can’t even feel
how it strokes through all of you, smothering
thoughts like babies gently in a bed and they said
the medication didn’t work for her, the institutions
sent her back after weeks when the other patients

complained, and she said she'd been taken
and her body now was just a replica
they made to silence us. And I stopped myself
wondering how we knew she was wrong,
that her real body wasn't tied up
in some desolate government room, unlit,
strung with wires and tubes and expressionless
agents set square in the door, the shadows thickening
across their chests while whatever this was
stood here, malfunctioning, stuck
on a single phrase: *Mission Accomplished*
while we kept our heads to the ground
and knocked our little fists against pecans,
saving the good ones in our plastic bags
and leaving the rest to decay,
trying not to hear her just in case
it got inside us.

Beauty and Violence No. 1 - Oil on canvas - 33” x 43”

MY CHRISTMAS STAR OF DAVID

When I was eleven-years-old, two years before my Bar Mitzvah and a month before Christmas, during that post-Thanksgiving chill when the sky's burnt orange begins fading into December grey and the smell of wood-burning fireplaces saturates the neighborhood, that's when I found it. Just lying on the ground like a beautiful castaway. After the cherry pickers left, I snuck into our neighbor's front yard and picked up a limb no more than five or six feet long, but still with most of its needles intact. It looked about right for my plans. I quickly stuffed it down my jacket and zipped it tight so no one would know what I was doing. I knew exactly what I was doing. Kismet.

***

I don't remember exactly when my infatuation with Christmas began—somewhere between my preschool class rendition of *Twas the Night Before Christmas* and my first year of Hebrew School. And it wasn't as though I had become ashamed of my inherited faith, or that I had finally found Jesus after my four or five long years of searching. It had nothing to do with religion or spirituality. My fascination was as secular and aesthetic as Santa Claus and much more believable. I was a kid, Christmas was shiny, and I wanted it. Hanukkah just lacked that same holiday sparkle.

The scene outside of my suburban window every December was out of a greeting card. Snow settled softly on the pavement below and along the frozen gutters of the rooftops above. Reindeer glowed beneath their plastic skins and strands of multi-colored lights burned into the night. I imagined a giant calligraphy pen swooping across the sky and writing "A Merry Christmas to You and Yours" just above the rooftops, curls of smoke from happy chimneys nonchalantly billowing around the curves of the "Y" and "S". The perfect Christmas card neighborhood: each house standing as a shining beacon of cheer connected to the next, creating a chain of light that wrapped around the corner and up the hill like a living Christmas tree. Then there

was our house—the perpetually broken bulb in the strand that screwed up the whole thing.

I guess we weren't completely broken, more like blinking intermittently thanks to my dad. He came from a long line of unhandy people, but believed that he could break the chain with his kids. I think the idea was that because he was "teaching" as opposed to simply "doing," the home repair gods might finally imbue him with the handyman know-how so long denied to his family. It would then be his penance to pass it on to us. We didn't have a toolbox per se, but instead an old wash bucket that held the hammer, wrench, and whatever other odd tools we owned. I'd drag it behind him as he scouted the house for the repairs that we would tackle together. Videocassettes of *This Old House* were faithfully referred to when the living room lights went out after fixing the doorbell or when the kitchen sink wouldn't stop overflowing after tightening the pipes.

"Just hire someone!" my mom would plead, blow-drying the soaked pages of her cookbooks. "Not all the kids need to go to college—hire someone!"

"Why?" my dad would ask. "We almost had it that time."

That Hanukkah, my dad had been dutifully installing book shelves into every room of the house, an improvement he deemed an absolute necessity, he created the Mega-norah and immediately instituted its erection as a long-standing family tradition. A Mega-norah is exactly what it sounds like—a giant Hanukah menorah made from two-by-fours, a stepladder, and chutzpah.

Handydad begins construction of the ritual Mega-norah with an eight-foot tall stepladder that acts as its base. Two long wooden planks are threaded through the top rung of the ladder so that they protrude evenly from each side, and are then hot glued into place. I wish I could say this is the only time of year that my dad feels the need to hot glue something into place. Next, nine large candles are gathered, mostly bargain-bin scented candles, but he has been known to use flashlights in a pinch. These "candles" are of course hot glued into place—four on one side of the wooden arms, four on the other, and one in the middle, the shamash, on the top step of the ladder. And there it is, a giant Hanukkah menorah—the Mega-norah, placed proudly in the front yard, my dad's attempt to keep up with the gentile Joneses.

"Do you see? Do you see them?" he would clamor at us from the front yard, gesturing towards the stopped cars outside of our house whose drivers wondered if they should call someone about the burning cross in the front yard. "They've never seen anything like it!"

So every wintry eve of Hanukkah as a flood of neon began to swirl around our home, my family trudged outside to light the Mega-norah just as our ancestors would have done for thou-

sands of years had they access to long-reach lighters and hot glue guns. Cartoon figurines and formations of Christmas lights seemed to leap into the night, towering over my dad's flickering creation as if just waiting to crash down upon it and drown it out. But it never happened. In the uniformed sea of suburbia, you can always spot the Jewish house at Christmas.

***

When I was very young and we visited my Grandma Molly at Christmas time, she'd bring the chairs to the kitchen counter so we could watch Christmas specials together. We'd watch them on her little black and white TV set, me standing on my chair, leaning over the counter, elbows propping up my head, chin digging into my palms, while she bustled back and forth making me hot cocoa and Jell-O snacks, food which I assumed for too long was a normal Christmas tradition.

"I can't believe you're watching that schlock," my mom would say, passing through to make her coffee.

Inserting bits of Yiddish into conversation is one of my mom's favorite secret pasttimes. When I note that Kismet doesn't really apply to finding a parking space at the grocery store or figuring out who did it on *Law and Order* before the first commercial, she is surprised every time to learn that the word has come out of her mouth. Isn't it funny how she can't stop saying that word? And isn't it strange how she so seamlessly and effortlessly uses Yiddish in every day conversations even though she didn't grow up with it, like us? Ah, Kismet.

But she had a point about the TV. It distorted the holiday in my five-year-old mind. In these Claymation marathons Christmas wasn't established as a sacred commemoration of a savior's birth, but rather as a mystical-magical spectacular full of flying reindeer and talking snowmen, all of who could sing with perfect pitch. Entire towns bonded together in yuletide harmony, using nothing but the Spirit of Christmas to fend off whatever monsters, or bad guys, or monster bad guys that were bent on destroying Christmas that year. Why did they hate Christmas so much? What could they possibly get out of destroying it? Who knew? But it made for some great entertainment in half hour chunks.

"Why don't you turn on Sesame Street for him?" my mom would ask. "He loves Sesame Street."

"Oh, he doesn't need that," Grandma Molly would answer while wrapping me up in a hug. "We're going to take a walk through the neighborhood to look at all of those decorations, aren't we, buddy?"

"Sorry mom, we have to get on the road early," my mom would respond, looking into her

coffee and out of Grandma Molly's eyes. "Sam has an early meeting tomorrow, we don't want to be on the road late." Another deep sip would avoid the resulting glare. "Look, I'm sorry."

***

I braced the branch tightly against my body and zipped my coat around it to avoid suspicion from any nosy neighbors, even though its upper half stuck out above my head while the lower half was also visible below my jacket line as I ran. Every step where the branch didn't smack me in the face, it hit me in the crotch like some sadistic human metronome and I hoped no one was watching. I feared what a phone call to my house might sound like.

"Hello, Jane?"

"Oh hi, Becky. How are you?"

"Hi, not much—I mean good, um, I was just wondering something."

"Well sure, Becky, what is it?"

"Well, um, is your family Christian now?"

"Excuse me?"

"You see, I just saw your son bringing home a Christmas tree so I just thought I'd ask if your family would like to come over for eggnog and caroling. It's Thursday night, nothing too fancy, but if you all could wear your matching Christmas sweaters, there will be a photographer there so... Jane… Jane?"

I cut across my neighbor's yard so that I could enter the back utility shed undetected from the house. No one would come here until the spring when the screens were put back in the windows. Silently, I positioned the rakes and lawn mower into a fortified haven for my little Christmas branch, a little lighter of needles, but still just as beautiful. It all seemed like it could be some kind of TV Christmas special to me—keeping hope alive, taking joy in the small things, and all that junk. It made me feel special like everyone else.

***

There is no wrong way to spell Hanukkah, though according to my computer's spell check there is no correct way to spell it either. Get somewhere close to a phonetic pronunciation, throw in a couple extra N's and K's, maybe an umlaut or two, and we'll take it. Seriously. That's a pretty accurate representation of Hanukkah on the whole—it's weak, accommodating, the adorable, boyish sidekick to Christmas' mighty superhero. It's not even a major holiday by Jewish standards. Hanukkah was only made to seem larger so that manufacturers would have a way to sell stuff to Jews at Christmas time. Memorial Day is probably Hanukkah's closest American holiday equivalent. Like other Jewish holidays such as Purim (slant equivalent

of Halloween) or Tu Bish'vat (Arbor Day), Hanukkah simply commemorates yet another time when someone tried to kill off the Jews, and yet again, it didn't take.

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When I was nine years old, I loved school and I was in love with third grade. It was that magical time in life before hitting puberty when girls were still just weird-looking boys who didn't like dirt, popularity rose and fell with the acquisition of the latest video game, and I was thinking clearly. I did some of my best work that year, some serious art pieces, mostly in watercolor and glitter stick, but some in pipe cleaner too. Christmas time burst with artistic possibilities. Past teachers had thought it was cute that I liked Christmas so much and believed they were the ones ushering me into this new world.

"And you say Santa gets eight magical, flying reindeer?" I might say to them. "Nine with Rudolph? Get out of town!"

In actuality, I knew this world well, very well I thought, just as well as anyone else in my class.

It was the day that my class was making Christmas trees from construction paper—a favorite medium of mine—when Mrs. Volmer approached me. She knelt down on her tan corduroy pants and nudged her narrow-framed glasses down her nose so that she could make effective eye contact with me. She was the kind of teacher who tried to make a difference every day, and believed establishing good eye contact was a good place to start.

Mrs. Volmer gently slid the jagged-cut, green triangle from my desk.

"Jeremy, would you like to make something else for art class?"

"No," I said, "I'm making a Christmas tree."

A boy with a rat-tail looked up from his desk for a moment before quickly returning to his own jagged, green triangle as if to confirm my point.

"Well sure," she said adjusting her position on the floor, "but maybe there's some better—something more geared towards you that you'd like to make."

"Um, I dunno." I had no idea what she was talking about. I wondered if she was referring to my experimental work with googly-eyes that had been so well received during Halloween. Or perhaps this was finally my invitation to have my piece appear in the middle of the wall outside our classroom, the coveted prize for all third grade artists.

"Well here, why don't we do this?" She quickly cut out a perfect green triangle and laid it on top of my frayed one so that one triangle was upside-down and the other was pointing upwards.

"See?" she proudly appraised her creation. "The Star of David. That's your star. Pretty neat, huh?"

I nodded or made some gesture close to it before she was content to walk away.

It turned out that my initial suspicions had been correct and outside of our classroom my star stood in the middle of the forest of Christmas trees that hung on the wall.

I later learned that Mrs. Volmer had been helping me feel "more comfortable and less out of place in my surroundings." I had discovered this while overhearing a conversation between her and another teacher where Mrs. Volmer had also mentioned how she just couldn't figure out where the other half of my star had gone. It was just a single green triangle now, frayed and pointing upwards, as though someone had torn off the other half.

When I told my mom about Mrs. Volmer's nefarious scheme to hijack my art project, she failed to respond with the instantaneous rage-fury that I had wanted from her. She squeezed me in a hug and said she'd talk to Mrs. Volmer, but told me that I should try to think of this as an opportunity to show everyone how special I was.

"When I was a little girl I never had a chance to stand out. I never had a chance to do anything. Don't you want to show everyone how special you are?"

In a way my mom was my first conduit to that other world of mistletoe and holly. Before converting to Judaism my mom had been raised Protestant, baptized and all that, but her family had never been very devout, not as she got older anyway. And so in high school when she met a nice Jewish boy she confidently decided to trade in her jingle bells for matzo balls, and her original sin for Jewish guilt. I spent many December nights at my window looking into our neighborhood and thinking it wasn't fair that she had gotten to make a choice, but I hadn't. It wasn't fair that her choice affected me. I was born into following a religion that despite my extensive Hebrew schooling, I barely understood. But I understood Christmas with its flying reindeer, talking snowmen, and Jell-O-snack-cocoa drinks.

***

Grandma Molly had never really seemed to approve or disapprove of my mom's conversion and marriage to my dad. She never really seemed to care one way or the other. My mom has suggested that she had thought this unusual since her mom always had an opinion on everything, and always made sure my mom knew what that opinion was.

"As long as you're happy, Janie," Grandma Molly had told my mom, which made my mom worry.

Ultimately, it was about getting grandkids for Grandma Molly. Her first husband died

when my mom was just nine years old and my Uncle John was six. Grandma Molly immediately became the family's full-time provider and little Janie became full time mom to her brother while only in elementary school. My mom cleaned the house, made the meals, walked John to all of his activities—she didn't really have time for any of her own—and did all of the ordinary things that kept a house in order. Their family dynamic was one that operated better with implied orders and slams of the door than with spoken words, but it was a family that operated. My dad notes this. My mom doesn't like to talk about her childhood. Grandma Molly saw grandchildren as a chance to retry motherhood, maybe try it for the first time. What she didn't see was how her daughter and son-in-law might have plans for her family that didn't involve her.

What she didn't see was her daughter moving across the state to Pittsburgh where her husband would begin law school and I would be born, followed by my brother and sister. We lived nearly five hours away from Grandma Molly, but when I was young we'd use the Christmas break to travel across the Pennsylvania Turnpike to find Grandma Molly and her new husband Cal waiting for us in their driveway. No church services, no preaching, just every December 25th spent together.

Grandma Molly threw down the whole megillah for Christmas: honeyed ham, candied yams, and desserts with multiple layers. Christmas crooners on the radio, pageantry parades on the TV, Whos playing Who-tumblers, Who-rumblers, and Whos playing holiday Who-ball in the yuletide Who hall—you know, the Whole megillah. Grandma Molly's house was decorated discreetly—a wreath neatly hung on the front door with a few strands of white lights stationed on the trees.

"Keep it classy, buddy," Grandma Molly had said.

On Christmas Eves we'd all walk around the neighborhood to look at all the other houses, lit up like neon motel signs, Grandma Molly pointing out how "tacky" they all were. Secretly, I thought we were actually jealous of these other houses, and every house I pointed out was one that I wished we could all live in together.

Most vividly I recall waking up to the Christmas tree in the morning. I didn't think of it as classy or tacky, just beautiful. Tidy red ribbon tied in bows around every branch mingled with lustrous silver ornaments in perfect formation. Everything in its place. Its splendor was all encompassing on those mornings when everyone seemed pulled in to its presence.

Then one year we didn't go to Grandma Molly and Cal's for Christmas. We didn't see them at all that year, or the next. It turned out that my mom and Grandma Molly had had an argu-

ment, an argument over something concerning my mom's method of raising her kids. Nothing dealing with religion as far as I know, but maybe it did. I don't know. We were never told anything because we were so young at the time, and as we got older, it became more difficult to ask.

My sophomore year of college in Indiana I was on the phone with my mom, trying to convince her that it made more sense for me to spend the Christmas break there when it came up.

"C'mon mom, the plane ticket is too much. It's just smarter this way."

"That means we're not going to see you again until May. That's almost a year."

"It's not even ten months."

"And where are you going to stay?"

"Mike said I could stay with him and his family. You love Mike! Remember how he's so clean and polite, and how maybe that could rub off on me?"

"And you didn't come home for Rosh Hashanah or Yom Kippur this year, sweetie. Not that it matters to me if you go to services. It's just good to have you home. You know I respect you to make your own decisions."

The art of Jewish guilting is a craft honed over time, passed down through the generations for centuries. Never having had a Jewish mother, my mom's attempts at it are largely works in progress.

"You do what you feel is best, right? Whatever you want, it's fine by me. But wouldn't it be nice to get away from the stress of classes for a little, huh? Do they even have services at that kvetchy school of yours, do they?"

"That's not what kvetch means, Mom."

"Yitzhak Yirimiahu!" Where use of the middle name typically signals the coming of hard orders from most gentile mothers, the issuing of my Hebrew name by mine meant the additional unwrapping of guilt. "You've never been away from home for Hanukah or your birthday, but if your heart's set on this and you really want to break our—"

"We used to spend every Christmas at Grandma Molly's, but that broke!"

The words had stormed out of my mouth as an involuntary reflex to her argument, but now that they were out there I let them breathe. They breathed for a while.

"I'm sorry," she finally said and I could tell that she was walking around the kitchen now, drifting from one end to the other in near silence, clutching the spiraled cord in her hand, and trying to hide the hurt on the other end of the receiver. "You do what you feel is best for you and we'll support you in it." She paused again. "I mean it. I love you."

Sometimes my mom understood how to use Jewish guilt better than I gave her credit for, and

though I would have never acknowledged it, I was becoming a master at it.

***

On another December-grey afternoon, a couple weeks after my great Christmas branch heist, I was stealth-waddling home from the bus stop again with an overstuffed coat. I had taken to wearing large scarves and hats so that whatever stuck out of my coat would be covered. This way if the neighbors saw me, the worst they could do was to have an awkward conversation with my mom about my accelerated hunchback.

This time, instead of pine needles, I was smuggling home a collection of Christmas ornaments. I had been secretly creating them in school, using notebook paper, crayons, paper clips, gum wrappers, whatever was lying on the floor. Every afternoon I had bootlegged more of these hand-cobbled ornaments into the shed to decorate my tree. I was driven, committed to creating a real Christmas tree. One that truly looked how I thought a Christmas tree ought to look. And it was happening. Spacing out all of the cut-out ornaments evenly on the branch made it appear a little less like the Charlie Brown Christmas tree and more like it had been snapped off something larger. Like it had belonged to a greater whole that could maybe absorb it again if it had to. But it was this visionary drive for perfection that ultimately betrayed me.

***

It wasn't until my Bar Mitzvah, six years after I had last seen her, that Grandma Molly returned. I didn't even know that she had been invited. As it turned out, my dad had managed to convince her and Cal to come to my Bar Mitzvah without telling anyone. Without telling my mom. He will forever strive to fix the things that cannot be repaired.

I first spotted Grandma Molly from across the parking lot and had an immediate impulse to run. It was strange, but after six years my desire to see her and guilt over believing that maybe I had been the cause of this rift had faded some, and I suddenly wondered if she was the criminal, if she had been the one who had done something wrong.

Maybe she and Cal were running an illegal gambling ring out of their basement that my parents had stumbled upon. They had sworn that they wouldn't go to the cops, but told her that she could never see us again. Or maybe Grandma Molly had been pulling a con all this time, masquerading as Vivian Snow, the wealthy Swiss heiress, cozying up to some wealthy baron to steal his bank account from under his regal nose. These seemed like acceptable reasons why I hadn't seen Grandma Molly in six years. I figured it had to be something like that.

It felt wrong, out of place, watching them drift across the temple parking lot, beneath the Hebraic lettering of Temple Rodef Shalom's moniker. She, dressed entirely in red, cut against

the fading mint dome of the synagogue behind her. Everything about her stuck out. It just felt wrong—familiar but unsettling, like straying into the deep end of your backyard pool for the first time, and I became drawn to her if only to understand how this disruption in the universe had occurred.

I had many questions for Grandma Molly that day, many that I wanted to ask then and more today that I wish I had thought of at the time. I wish I would have asked her something, anything, if only to say I had given it a shot. But in the time that it took me to cross the parking lot, mumbling to myself different ways to say "hello", I only managed to ask her how her trip had been. It had been fine. Just fine.

In an instant my mom had appeared and thrust herself between Grandma Molly and me. Her face calm, her hand trembling, pressed hard against the lapel of my new suit, she demanded to know what her mother was doing here. I honestly cannot recall anything of significance that was said on that blacktop. All of the words exchanged were benign and ordinary enough to escape from memory. But it was the depth of the tension, of dark calm before a storm whose origins would never be traced, which still permeates my mind.

At the end of the day, Grandma Molly sat in the back row of a synagogue, my mom in the front, and they both watched me become Bar Mitzvahed. As my mouth effortlessly rattled off years of memorization, my mind receded to thoughts of why this was the first time I had seen Grandma Molly in years. Regardless of whose fault is was, now that she had returned I expected someone to give me the reason.

Your mother has turned your eyes away from Christ and the one true faith.

Your mother was jealous of our relationship and afraid she was going to lose you.

I have been studying deep-sea plankton totally undisturbed in the Mariana Trench for the last six years.

Your grandmother wants to criticize how I raise my kids when she didn't raise her own.

Yes, I did! I raised one good child and one disobedient child.

John and I both turned out fine and I am proud of the decisions that I've made without you. Your grandmother wants to control the people in her life because that's what she believes love is.

I hate your mother. She took you away from me and now I've come back to claim you.

Your grandmother hurt us. She hurt me. I won't let her hurt you.

But no one offered me any such explanation. I thought of different questions. If this was a disagreement between parent and child, wasn't it the parent's responsibility to fix it, even if

it wasn't the parent's fault? Wasn't that what my parents did? Didn't Granma Molly love my mom? Didn't she love me? If Grandma Molly did love me, how could she have allowed this to separate us all this time?

After the service Grandma Molly waited patiently in the receiving line until it was finally her turn to see her grandson. She hugged me, told me that she loved me, asked if Jell-O was still my favorite food—it was—and walked away. Though I have spoken with her on the phone since, that was the last time that I have actually seen my grandmother. To the best of my knowledge, she is not now nor has she ever been a deep-sea marine biologist or Vivian Snow.

***

Christmas has been interpreted and reinterpreted nearly every conceivable way, with everyone from Charles Dickens to Charles Shultz giving a go. Most renditions demonstrate how it creates this staggering sense of community, unavoidable and inescapable, demanding that we all put aside our differences if only for a day to eat some fruitcake together. This wasn't officially voted on or anything, but at least in America it's pretty much accepted that Christmas is the holiday when this happens. If the holiday designated for this purpose happened to be St. Patrick's Day instead, I probably would have tried to catch a leprechaun to stash in the back shed.

There are significantly fewer interpretations of Hanukah, none of which really focus on community. The most well-known one centers on the popularly coined "Miracle of Lights" tale. The story goes that after reclaiming Jerusalem from the Greeks, the Israelites discovered that there was only enough lamp oil to light the synagogue's menorah for one day even though it was supposed to remain ever burning. However, the small amount of oil miraculously lasted for eight nights until more could be retrieved and Hanukah commemorates this notion of persistence and triumph over all odds. But sometimes I think about a different aspect of the story.

Kicked out, torn away from the home they knew, the Israelites managed to return and rebuild, but was it the same? When they repaired the temple, did it feel as it had before their exile or was it just their best attempt at a recreation? Was it all just a desperate grasp at manufacturing something that was beyond reclamation, could never be retrieved? Or could it have been simply laying the foundation for something new?

***

After taking my covert route home through our neighbor's backyard and unlatching the stiff barn doors, my eyes jumped to my Christmas tree's normally bulwarked hiding spot in alarm. The leaf rake that had always been stationed to the rear of the tree was now flanking the

lawn mower-potting soil barricade to the right, and I knew. Someone had been there.

I frantically tore apart my stronghold and my fears were confirmed; my Christmas tree was gone.

Too many trips to a work shed that no one visited unless they absolutely had to—God, this was rookie stuff! I knew I was in serious trouble, the worst trouble. I immediately abandoned any hopes of getting my tree back. I had committed a serious crime—maybe the most egregious sin within a Jewish household—and there would be no room for negotiation.

I wondered if anyone had ever attempted to hide a fugitive Christmas tree in a Jewish household, or utility shed before. If so, surely he was dead by now.

As I took the long way inside, treading around the garage, I passed the Mega-norah and felt its endless undertow pull me in. I knew then that I would be forever anchored to my father's ram-shackled contraption and that any thoughts of escape from it were futile.

I stepped inside and saw it instantly—a skinny pine branch covered in more paperclips than needles laying flush on our dining room table between my parents. My dad had actually come home early from work for this.

I began balling immediately.

I told them I was sorry and promised that I would never do it again. I apologized for doing what I was sure had shamed Pop Pop's memory and allowing "Hitler to win another ballgame" as my Sunday School teacher had told me would happen when Jewish children strayed from their faith—he had some issues. I tried to explain that I didn't know why, but this tree just made me feel normal and happy, but every point spilled out as an indistinguishable sob.

Years later as a senior in college, I would convince my roommates to let me decorate our house for Christmas. I would spare no expense, throwing the entirety of my work-study pittance into creating the December scenes of my memory. I would fabricate a beautiful Christmas yardscape complete with icicle lights, plastic reindeer, and the crown jewel of any yuletide stage—a big, fat, light-up Santa, planted proudly in the front yard. But as I would stand back to behold my labors, marveling at how it would seamlessly blend into the backdrop of the central Indiana neighborhood, it would fail to satisfy me in the ways that I had thought possible in my childhood. It would feel good and ordinary, but it wouldn't achieve the feeling that I experienced that day when my Christmas branch was discovered.

"Did I ever tell you," my mom asked, scooping up my crumpled-ball body into her arms, "how my dad used to get a real Christmas tree for us every year?"

She smiled at me, rubbing my back in gentle circles.

My dad placed the tree, almost completely needle-free now, in our front window where it was hit by the glow of the Mega-norah's light. Together they created a blasphemous holiday sideshow in the front yard that was either the best dream or worst nightmare of every Jew-for-Jesus. It was hard to say which.

My dad tried to reposition the branch a few times, apparently unhappy with its placement before settling his hands on his hips.

"Get the tool bucket from downstairs," he told me. "This is going to need a shelf."

Fuck Painting - Oil on panel -8" x 10"

WOMAN EXITING THE FORTUNE TELLER'S

Who taught you to dance that way,
right in the path of the sun
without your skin?

While you were inside,
the future came & went
without us.

Each of us realized the life
he was leading was somebody else's
idea of her own life

come true.
Now we can kick our house lamps
like soccer balls through the empty highways.

Some folks have already filed
requests to have their palms read
by satellite,

& everyone's trading memories with each other.
So listen, I'll be you.
You can be whatever you'd like.

But let me be frank here, for God's sake,
be a small white flower,
so you can fit on a wooden spoon

& tell me all day long about
what it feels like to have nothing
to be forgiven for.

THE VITAL GESTURE

I sit on the gallery floor and sketch a Franz Kline, scrape great black swaths
of lead across my journal; I try to mimic a painted void.

A woman tries to teach Giacometti on the other side of the partition and I want to say
good, but to understand pain, learn Arabic; or so I've heard.

To dig this sculpture, slide your heart into bronze. When it comes out, dripping,
mold it oblong, nudge with your thumbs the contours, create ridges

& pocks. She tells them to sketch instead of the contour,
the inside. The essential shape. I pick my knee scab and darken

my journal pencil marks. In another room, steady beat of something echoes.
I can't quite get it right: this white, this black, this frenzied, careful

layering. The ticks and blowing air and silence. This yes: this unsayable.
The essential shape of it. The oiled black gulf into which I could vanish

if it were not for this brushstroke. It's the inside: it's what doesn't
exist. I can't quite get it right.

New Quixote - Oil on canvas -33” x 43”

INTERVIEW WITH RUSS NOTO

When did you start seriously pursuing the visual arts and how was your experience at Savannah College of Art and Design?

I had taken a semester as an art student when I decided to take a year off to figure out what I really wanted to do with my life. I had a valet job at one of the local hotels and saw a past drawing professor show up for some event at the hotel. He asked me why the hell I was parking cars and not making art anymore. That had a huge impact on me because I was at that point of feeling completely unfulfilled at my job and questioning why I wasn't pursuing what I loved to do.

What made you decide to pursue your MFA?

I finished my BA and wasn't done digging, so I decided to pursue an MFA.

Your work often juxtaposes bright, vibrant colors against more melancholic, gloomy backgrounds. What was your thought process behind these contrasting elements when you were putting these pieces together?

It depends on what pieces you are talking about specifically, but generally speaking I wanted to see a sort of hallucinogenic quality come out in my art, while avoiding any cliché reference to hippie culture. My intentions are to create images that address a sensory-overload existence, hence the super saturate colors/grey and brown didactic.

By the same token, you also use hard horizontal and vertical lines, either interrupting the subjects in your paintings, or framing them. How do you find these lines to be working with the holistic composition of your paintings?

Painted Space - Oil on canvas -33” x 43”

The blatantly artificial elements interrupting the natural in my work is another way for me to uphold a conversation between reality and illusion.

More thematically, the paintings in this collection (2012) also seem to be dealing with oppositional elements: Beauty and Violence; Exile and Venus i.e. Love/Prosperity; Pushing and Pulling. What attracted you to depicting these kinds of binary oppositions in your work, and are these themes something you're interested in working on in future paintings?

Again, it's really there to create a dialogue in the work. It allows for a drama to unfold upon the subject where it has this element leaning on it to shape the emotionality of a piece. Yes. I am always looking to push it even further.

A number of your works utilize written text, sometimes against a solid canvas, other times incorporated into the paintings themselves. How do you think these text pieces affect the viewer differently than more "traditional" pieces?

I'm going to pat myself on the back and say these pieces are my generous offering to the viewer. It puts author and audience on an even plain. First, it debunks the artist as this sort-of cultural magician that makes these things behind closed doors and triumphantly reveals them to the public when they are "finished." Secondly and most importantly, they allow the viewer to participate in the creation of the image. To allow the word "magenta," for example, to be read is a really excited thing to me, and an empowering tool for the audience. It's really poetic to write a color and paint words in my opinion.

In your artist statement you say you would like the viewer to bring their own information to the painting in order to complete the experience. Could you expand on this idea a little more? Most artists are reluctant to give the audience such power and autonomy – choosing rather to control or manipulate the audience's gaze.

Yeah, I really like toying with the hierarchy of art. I am traditionally practiced as a painter, which means an intellectually alienating situation a lot of the time. So, to offer a more democratic art experience seems to be a productive way of contributing to culture and relating to a wider audience.

You also discuss in your statement that you are interested in the "memory bank of history" and "contemporary aesthetics." For me, the painting that most aptly demonstrates this idea is *New Quixote*. How do you see the memory of *Don Quixote* – often representing chivalric romance, innate idealism, and the useless of those ideals within a realistic world – interacting with, or reacting to more contemporary aesthetics?

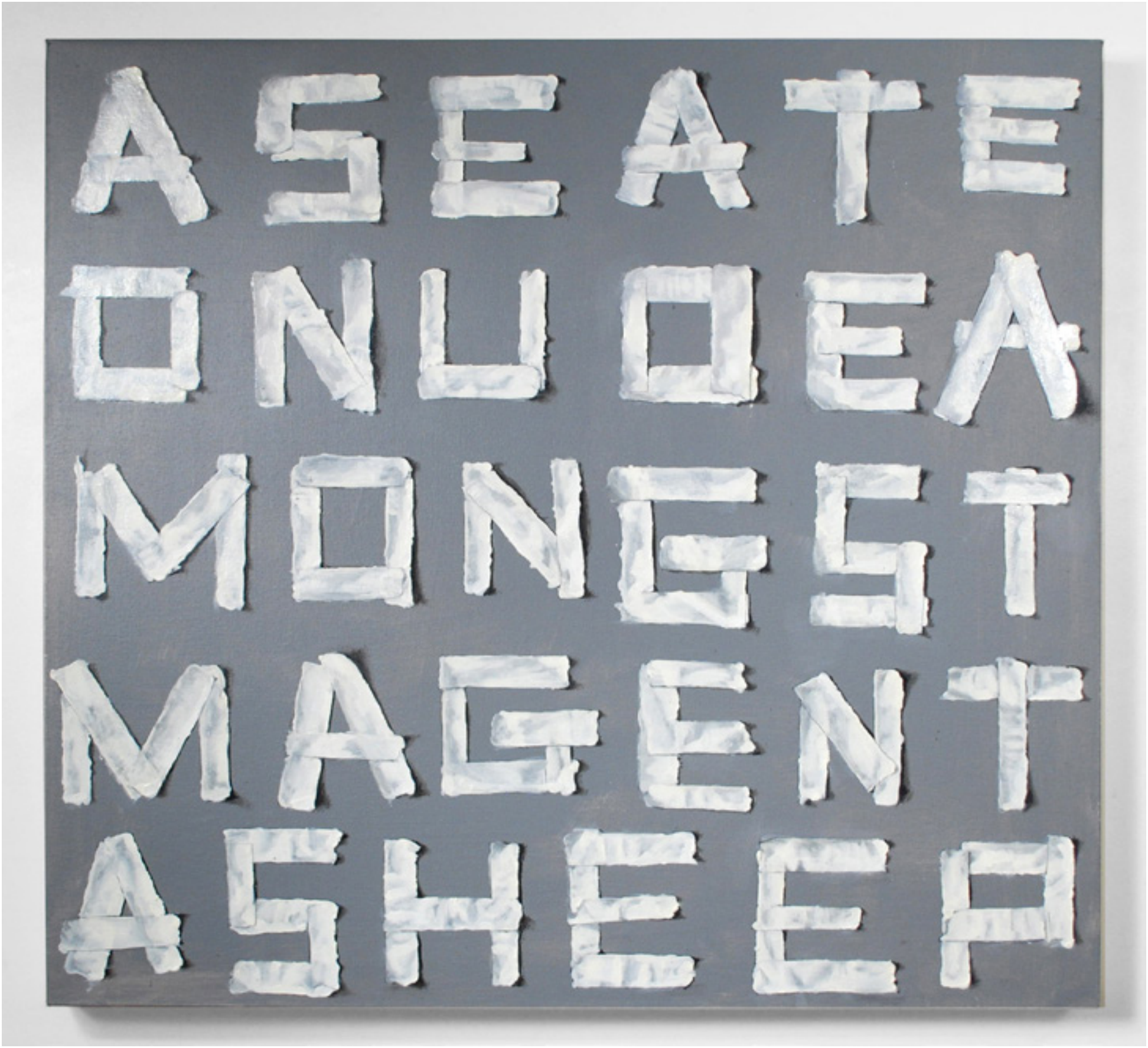
That book really related to me as an artist, because I conjure up these images in my head based on this bank of traditional figuration. The thing is that it takes on this new form when you subscribe to these practices in the 21st century, which seems to be a delusional or hallucinatory one at times. My paintings demand a level of humor and the sublime because of this.

Going along with some of the themes of Don Quixote, your paintings also express a kind of absurdity, but contrast that absurdity with beauty and compassion for the subjects of your paintings. This active contrasting of emotions would seem to be breaking a number of "rules" when it comes to visual art. Could you say a little more about rules you are interested in breaking, bending, distorting, or simply obliterating.

Lately I've been interested in breaking spatial rules in panting. When you're dealing with realism it is a really successful thing to render a form that appears to firmly occupy a space. I go through great lengths to achieve this then I obliterate it for example in the duct tape pieces. This elevates those works through this absurd action.

Finally, is there anything you're working that you'd like to discuss? This is your one chance for shameless self-promotion.

All I can say is that there will be more duct tape. Thanks.



Titled Painting No.1 - Oil on canvas - 33" x 34"

NEVER LET ME GO

I finished spreading Mary under the pier and now I'm walking down the coast so Bo can dissolve into seafoam off the jetty, wash in and out with the tide like I guess he wanted to.

At first, International Scattering Services was easy enough: each week a few dozen packets of ash would arrive in my mother's mailbox, names and small photos paper-clipped to each, and a description of how their loved ones want them placed around the lighthouse. Most ask the ash be released from outside the watch room, the spinning beam of its concentrated light, which is what's advertised on the site. So every Monday evening from June until September, after the tourists have folded their umbrellas and the tide ebbs, exposing a muddy lip of estuary, I cast them out, shake them loose from their bags. Sometimes the ash rushes back with a quick turn of the wind, like a flock of tiny birds: wild and purposeful.

Late July, Mariel started watching. She called me young man and wanted to know why this beach and how long I'd been doing this and was it even legal? *It's legal*, I told her, *I get paid to do this. It's just for the summer and it's legal*.

Mariel, I learned, is a sixty-something widow who lives nearby and wants answers. She calls ISS a few times a week pretending to be someone else, pretending she's dissatisfied with the way I'm releasing the ashes. I know because Alex, the woman who sends me the packages, includes notes: *Four times this week. You're fine. Keep it up*.

But I don't know. Initially I thought I was doing something right by this. People want to end up somewhere, and I guessed Biddeford was as good a place as any. My mom thinks it's teen angst, but I stopped wearing baggy black pants and eyeliner a few years ago.

So I'm not expecting the police, at least not at first, not until I realize it's maybe something I should have anticipated. After Bo is in the water, crashing lightly with the surf against the rocks, when I turn around, I see the car, and I know he's watching me.

***

Tasos is burning himself again. I can tell from the way he's sitting; the jeans hurt. He tells

me he doesn't want to have sex. He tells me he misses Greece. These are lies. The Chemistry department forgot to lock up again, and after lab, he stole a vial of acid. He keeps it in his sock drawer, light green. Something bad is happening back home; my friend Lia thinks his family has ties to the mafia, which I believe.

When I talk about my job, he says: "The people, I hope they rest well." His speech is fractured—always communicating everything he means to, if only in pieces at a time.

"Me too," I say, and it takes me a second to realize I mean it.

It's halfway through August, and I'm exhausted. The heat in his dorm room is intolerable, suffused with sweat from the time he spends working out in it. He doesn't like to use the gym, not anymore, since the lady at the front desk was short with him. Now he won't go back.

We talk about the new pride flag he put on his wall. He'll take it down when his mother visits. We talk about his research project and how to properly mix chemicals, but not for long, because he knows what I know.

"Two more weeks," I say. "Then we'll be neighbors." Junior year, and we managed to get 207 and 208, which is more testament to my ability to lie to Housing about needing to be close to the bathroom for medical reasons and less about luck, something both of us could use.

We lay on his bed, and he rests an arm behind me. We can't fall asleep, but we also can't discuss much. We found each other like this: broken, sort of, aloof not because we wanted to be but because of who and where we were. Neither of us have met each other's parents, and I don't know anything about his past, really, except his sister passed away young and his mom works for Photoshop and retouches his photos and makes him online profiles on straight dating websites, but I don't know why. And I don't want to know. Tasos converts sadness into anger so easily, a kind of organic reaction. Which is one of the reasons I know: he's burning himself again.

***

Mom says I smell awful again, which is another way of saying she already doesn't like Tasos. "You just think it's love," she says. She's been reduced to pretending to know how love works, and I've been reduced to letting her tell me. I don't think it's love, but that's probably the contrary English major in me. I think I hope it is.

Since I came back home, she's been staying up late on the phone with Jack, her third ex-husband, talking about money and placing/lifting/reassigning blame. At this point, I take none of her boyfriends seriously. She works in financial planning from our basement. Every few years her desk is a mess of divorce paperwork: dog-eared and ripped papers with perforated edges and mail-to addresses ringed with stains from coffee mugs. She isn't sleeping well.

I've been getting the mail because she doesn't like to have anything to do with the ashes. She says it's a great business model, though. *About the cost of a headstone, not bad*, she said. *ISS knows what they're doing*. Ten came today. I guess as people realize the summer's ending they rush to send them to Maine, before the site closes down the blinking cursor of the lighthouse option until next June and someone else gets the job. *Three times*, Alex's note reads. *You're good. Think she's getting tired.*

During dinner, mom reminds me she'll be flying out tomorrow morning to meet Dave, a truck driver she met on the Internet, who lives in Nebraska and wears the same jacket in all his photos—brown and bulky. I tell her that's fine, that I'll be fine, and I hope he's the one.

"I've got a good feeling," she says, biting the tip of a steamed asparagus sprig.

I believe her, that she has this feeling, but this is how it always happens: first the feeling, then the wedding, then a period of ennui preceding the inevitable split, then this.

"Me too," I say, and it takes me a second to realize: it couldn't be further from the truth.

***

The policeman doesn't even get out of his car. He just watches me. I pull into the lot and then he's there. It's Mariel. I just know it.

Today I'm starting early, just after sunrise. There's a new request: George is to be buried in a sandcastle before the tide comes in. Specific, labor-intensive requests like this aren't supposed to be processed, let alone honored, but I cup together wet sand, scatter the ashes over it like pepper over eggs. Not what he had in mind, I bet. But the tide is coming in, and soon it won't matter.

As I walk toward my car, the officer drives away. I grab a bagel from the backseat and sit on a slab of cement jutting from the sand.

Far away, gulls snap at something on the sandbar, worrying it with their beaks. I'm eager to visit Tasos, who finally has a day off, but feel strange leaving George exposed. I've never left ashes in plain view. I always try to mix them in water or let the air spread them so thin as to be unnoticeable to anyone else, their presence a kind of secret only I keep.

So I wait. A half hour later, the water has risen. The gulls are gone, and an eerie quiet sets in, that period before families arrive to tour the lighthouse and collect shells, lay down towels and watch their kids play in the water. I walk to the shoreline. I see a raised bump of sand, smoothing with the slide of each wave. George is out to sea.

***

I knock on his door, and he lets me in. Tasos is drinking wine before noon, which I guess is

normal back home. He gives me a hug, lets it linger. He smells like grape leaves, a gross Greek meat-thing he can't get enough of.

"You seem happy," I say. He gives me an incredulous look, as if I've figured something out. My first thought is that maybe he finally flushed the acid. Maybe he has good news.

"Happy? Yes," he says, "I am very."

I almost ask him why, but I notice he took the flag down.

"Have you done rock climbing?" he asks. "Amazing!"

He tells me he's been watching videos all morning of men scaling mountains in minutes, no safety net. Someplace in Colorado. He says he wants to go, and do I want to go?

I tell him it would take days to get to Colorado. He thinks about it and says maybe in a few years. I agree, though what I'm really saying is no.

I drive him to a diner, where he orders too much food he invariably won't like. He thinks pancakes don't taste like cake at all. The meal is just what I need. I'm paranoid the police are taking notes, preparing for some interrogation in which I am the criminal, biding their time, waiting to unleash a lawsuit on the twenty-year-old English major who couldn't find any other job and can't afford to buy new clothes.

He looks up at me after a bite of scrambled egg. "Like poison!"

I pay the bill and tip the waiter. We leave four plates of food behind, all sorts of things he insists weren't "made well."

On the drive back to his room, Tasos finds two packets of ash that have somehow slid between the crease of the passenger's seat and the flip-open compartment. "Joseph Lin," he reads. He realizes what he's holding and places the ashes on the dash. He looks terrified. He wants to wash his hands.

"It's just ashes," I say. I laugh a little to lighten the mood and realize this seems insensitive. "I'll spread those tonight."

Alex won't mind that I haven't spread them yet, because she deals with employees all over the world, and not just in summer but year-round. ISS gives their clients options. During the phone interview, she said the Maine lighthouse package was one of the cheapest. The most expensive were the Taj Mahal and some active volcano in Hawai'i, but those offer commemorative photos of the spreading, so that's probably why, she said.

He asks to come along. He says he wants to see what I do for work. I tell him I'll pick him up tomorrow afternoon and we can send off Joseph together. He considers it. "Joseph," he says. "I hope he rests well."

***

I'm watching an old romantic comedy, some rip-off of Singing in the Rain, when mom calls me from the airport.

"Ryan," she says, "You're not going to believe this. I was bumped to first class. Bug the attendants enough and they'll always bump you."

There is a pause, during which I'm guessing she expects me to be excited for her.

"That's great."

On the television, a man leans in to kiss his woman, and she slaps him. She runs away and it starts raining: choppy gales in the city streets. "Heavy-handed much?" I say aloud, and mom asks "What?"

"When are you meeting him?"

"Tonight," she says. "He's taking me to a nice Italian place his brother owns."

The man walks up his steps and into his apartment. He looks at himself in the mirror and says something—one of those obvious, important moments, but I've muted the sound.

***

Tasos hates the beach. He says the water is so dark. Granted, it's crowded and the ice cream truck gives it the cheap feel of a trailer park, but I tell him to wait. In an hour, it'll clear out. The sun is setting earlier these days, and the water isn't as warm.

We sit on the sand, Joseph and Abigail next to me. He admires the lighthouse, the red stripes, and asks what it does.

"It used to guide ships safely back to shore," I say. "But we don't really need them anymore."

"I see why they are kept," he says.

A little girl in flippers runs clumsily by, and I put my hands over the ashes, protecting them out of some instinct I didn't know I had. I move them to my lap. I tell Tasos more about the lighthouse, that long ago when they were first built wives of sailors would stay outside the watch room, waiting for their husbands to return. And it was rumored that even if they didn't come back, even if they were lost at sea or their ships capsized, the ghosts of those women would haunt the lighthouse, still waiting for their loved ones. He asks me how I know this, and I tell him I took the tour when we first moved here, when my mom was with Charlie, who kept asking questions during the tour to seem smarter than the guide, or at least that's what mom says whenever I bring it up.

"Wow," he says. "Are they still there?"

“I haven’t seen them,” I say.

We wait, drawing stick figures in the sand and narrating other people’s movements. Finally, the beach is clear. The sky is grey, darkening, and the tide pulls back. We walk to the shore, Tasos insisting he doesn’t want to touch the ashes, just watch.

“I wonder what Joe would say about this,” I say. I think these sorts of things often: what these people’s final words might be to me, whether they’d want me to be careful or heedless, fast or slow. I tear open the tip of the packet.

“Don’t! I am not ready!” Tasos says, assuming Joseph’s voice like a ventriloquist. “Never let me go!”

We laugh. I like him, I have to admit, a lot right now.

“You should give it a shot,” I tell him. “I bet you’re a natural.”

“I’m natural?”

“I bet you’re good at it.”

He rests Abigail’s ashes in his palm, reading the label. “Seventy-three. Is this her age?”

“That’s how old she was, yes.”

He seems to feel a sense of duty. I tell him out on the far end of the jetty, that’s my favorite place. Seems like it was made for this sort of thing, which even as I say it sounds ridiculous.

I lead, stepping over barnacle-encrusted rocks slick with seaweed. I look back and see Tasos looking at the ashes, and stepping, and slipping, his knee hitting a jagged edge hard and his shoulder breaking his fall. He isn’t bleeding, which is the first thing I notice. The next is that he can’t get up.

I call my mom. Tasos is swearing rapidly in Greek. The lighthouse beam looks like a police light: dramatic and searching.

She picks up.

“Jesus, Ryan,” she whispers. “I’m on a date.”

“He hurt his leg,” I say. I feel manic. The police aren’t in the lot, at least not yet.

“Don’t call me. Take him to the hospital.”

More wine? I hear in the background. And I know what she’s doing. She’s cupping the receiver and saying Yes.

I hang up and ask Tasos if he can get off the rocks if I help him. He keeps swearing and finally says “I think yes.”

It isn’t until I’m his crutch that I realize he hasn’t let go of the ashes. I take them from his hand and throw them in the ocean, the whole thing unopened, an Abigail-message-in-a-bottle.

We're careful until we get off the rocks, then hurry through the sand. Every other step, he winces. We get in the car, and he breathes deeply. I place a hand on his chest and say "You're going to be fine. It's probably nothing." The worst advice I ever received.

***

I wait with him in the emergency room, which is mostly vacant this late. The pain seems to have subsided a bit, replaced by swelling in his left ankle. A nurse calls him in.

Twenty, thirty minutes pass. An hour. I've solved all the puzzles in the children's magazines by the time Tasos comes out of the grey door, and he's upset, asks me to sit farther away from the receptionist because he has to tell me something.

"They found them," he says, and immediately I understand. They found the burns, the two bright red streaks on his inner thighs that may by now be scabbed over or infected, I don't know. He says he agrees he needs help.

"Do you?" I ask.

I can't believe I question it, but I do. My mom needs help. I probably need help.

"I think yes."

So we sit for a while, just calming down, and he signs some papers to be sent to University Health Services. They give him crutches and an ice pack. The diagnosis is a fracture in the ankle and a badly-sprained shoulder. On the drive back to his dorm, I ask him why he didn't let go of the ashes. He calculates the words, weighs them against others he knows. "There was a person in my hand."

***

My mom calls the next morning, but I don't answer.

The voicemail says something about how fat Dave is in real life, how he didn't look anything like his profile and the Italian place was a glorified pizza joint. How he wasn't ambitious, *even for a truck driver*. "People," she says, "aren't always what they seem." She's a moron when it comes to a lot of things, and trite as it is, I guess it's true enough. If only she'd look into that mirror herself.

I call Tasos, but he doesn't respond. He checked into the psychiatric ward before noon, and I don't know their cell phone policy. I don't know what he's told them. The next two weeks carry on, monotonous and draining. Mom says she'll be coming back in a few days, then a week. She says Dave is OK she guesses, and it's summer so she's just having some fun and hopes I do too.

I go to the beach late August, the day before I go back to school. I mix twenty-three pack-

ets of ashes I've been saving in a pan and tip them into the wind from outside the watch room—a dark ribbon that lands on the sand and moves into the water, a trail that leads farther than I can see.

As I walk down through the lighthouse, pan at my side, I see the police car backing out of the lot, headlights stretching across the hot cement. The crickets are dying down, and its beam clicks on, its revolutions steady, like a pulse. I walk to the shoreline and search briefly for Abigail. The light is dim on rocks and reeds, the standing pools of warm and lifeless water, and I never do find her.

Equine Variation No. 3 (Dear John) - Oil on canvas - 60” x 60”

HEAVEN

I see the sideways looks—
think men or women
in love

The world has been revving us up
for years and we need
these nights with the highway

easing out before us

into
whatever future we want
and we don't want one:
addicts for potential
we want them all,
want interchanges &

tic

think two lions one wildebeest

someone passing
too close
in a crowded bar.

lane reflectors like
thumbtacks in a blackboard

stars trailing
footprints of january
salt across our windshield

*just

Eisenhower's big swinger
splitting like a birch out over the Atlan-

skyway
over the Mediterranean
never beaching

we need to know it doesn't end

we want progress
and lights
and gas stations shining
like an afterlife
every few miles.

a crust of glass

but exits for everywhere
Malaga
Benghazi
Palermo
Tel Aviv

YO NACI JUNTO A UN RIO

Yo nací junto a un río
no parecían hijas de Heráclito sus aguas
tan idénticas siempre a los retratos viejos
tan con los mismos ocres
y una bruma de sueños

Papá en las madrugadas convocaba a sus muertos
Entraban silenciosos
los capotes colgantes de los huesos vacíos
Desde mi cuarto oía las voces apagadas
Qué querrían sus muertos?
Qué dolores narraban a la orilla del río?

A mi casa de niña
le cortaron las alas
la abrieron en canal
exhibieron sus vísceras
sobre un mantel en el mercado
Era una casa antigua
sencilla e inocente dentro de lo que cabe

Disimularon el frágil aplomo de sus muros
echaron al olvido las canciones
y mi pie ligerísimo abandonó
el secreto calor de las baldosas
saliéndose del cuadro poco a poco

Papá desde el umbral
de un espacio sin puerta
nos decía
                marchemos
sólo el camino es nuestro

Así fue amigos míos
el decursar de todo

        Una patria llorada
        Una casa perdida
        Un eco de palabras
        Los muertos
        tantos muertos

y en el camino solo
a veces la alegría

I WAS BORN BY A RIVER

I was born by a river
its waters didn't look like Heraclitus's daughters
who looked so much like old portraits
with the same ochers
and a mist of dreams

At dawn Papa summoned his dead
They came in silence
draped in cloaks of empty bones
From my room I heard their muted voices
What did his dead want?
What pains did they describe by the river's bank?

They clipped the wings
of the house I grew up in
slit it open
and exposed its guts
on a cloth in the market
It was an old house
simple and innocent all things considered

They disguised the fragile force of its walls
cast the songs into oblivion
and my airy foot abandoned
the secret heat of the tiled floor
leaving gradually

Papa on the threshold
of a doorless room
told us
            let's go
only the path is ours

That's how it was my friends
the passing of everything

            A lamented homeland
            A lost house
            An echo of words
            The dead
             so many dead

and on the lonely path

SPEED OFF THE EDGES

In the first round of the 2012 NFL Draft the Seattle Seahawks select Bruce Irvin, a pass rushing defensive end/outside linebacker from West Virginia University.

Experts believe this selection to be a stretch due to his personal background: a high school dropout from Atlanta who earned his GED but was then arrested for burglary for breaking into a confirmed drug dealer's domicile while armed, he spent two weeks in juvenile jail before playing JuCo football at one east coast and one west coast college. He was recruited by Pete Carroll at USC but was found academically ineligible so he went to WVU and a month before the draft was arrested for disorderly conduct after slapping the sign off a Pita Pit delivery car. The misdemeanor was ultimately dismissed.

Then there is his on-field performance: a fierce third down pass rusher, he recorded 22.5 sacks in two years at WVU but wasn't on the field for first and second downs, wasn't interested in engaging run blockers, would avoid tackles.

I know all this about Bruce Irvin because I watched the draft after my wife fell asleep.

Now I fear I must have sacrificed some memory for this history of Bruce Irvin and the image of all 6'3", 245 lbs. of him quickly dipping around the left tackle, collapsing the right handed quarterbacks of Louisville and Connecticut.

Are memories like a tent in a Marx Brothers film where each time a new one enters an old one is spit out the other side to make room?

Is Bruce Irvin the reason I can't remember why I walked into the kitchen?

Is Bruce Irvin to blame for my not calling my mom back after I said I would?

Is it because of Bruce Irvin that I forget my home phone number or is it because I never call myself at home?

Bruce Irvin has not replaced the headstones of my grandfathers, the date of my wedding anniversary that approaches again like a carousel horse, the recurring nightmare where I'm

locked in a car that backs into a ravine and slowly fills with cold water the consistency and color of midnight gasoline.

Without maps or GPS, I can drive from DC to Rehoboth Beach to Baltimore, Boca Raton to Olando to Coral Gables, Cleveland and Pittsburgh to Ashtabula, Ann Arbor to Detroit, Detroit to Toronto.

I can identify my daughter's teacher and my daughter's friends but the names of her friends' parents are gone like steam from a mirror after a window is pushed open.

There are better metaphors but if I don't write them down they get sucked back under like a man drowning and me the day-dreaming lifeguard.

Not everything is Google-able.

Is Bruce Irvin the reason I can't think of the name of the Dylan song with the chorus "I was so much older then; I'm younger than that now," or which Arquette was in *Lost Highway*, or the name of last year's Oscar winner for supporting actor, or the Speaker of the House after Newt Gingrich, or the capital of Czechoslovakia?

Does Czechoslovakia even exist anymore or has it too been erased or subjugated to abstraction?

Was it Bernini's *David* I preferred or Donatello's?

Which was on the side of the abolitionists: Missouri or Kansas?

What was the name of the girl in Baltimore whom I dated for a month circa 1993 before learning she was bi-racial? When her father answered the door, I thought I was at the wrong house.

All this shifts across the shelf for Bruce Irvin; the number eleven on his jersey pointing like twin barrels of a shotgun; the yellow stitching of his uniform a shock into the backfield; the offensive lineman reaching to block him but missing; the quarterback looking dow field, going through his receiver progression, about to lose his helmet, not expecting the hit.

An Interview With Malena Morling

Kallie Falandays: Can you describe your progression as an artist?

Malena Morling: That's a tricky question, but I can just say that when I started writing I wrote a lot, like many poems a day. And I actually write much less now. That's mostly due to teaching, being a parent, and not having as much time. But, initially, there was this incredible intensity.

And when did you start writing? How old were you?

I was 16. I was in high school.

Do you remember the first poem you ever wrote?

Vaguely. It had to do with balancing on a line or something like that. It was kind of infantile, but I liked it at the time.

So do you save all of the poems you've ever written?

I don't, no. Those first poems were really terrible. But I remember I was very inspired initially when I realized that this is what I was going to do. I had no inhibitions because I had no idea what I was doing. I still don't know what I am doing, but I felt freer back then.

So when did you know that you wanted to take poetry seriously, or were you always serious about it?

It was in high school. I was in New York for two years in high school – the first time I came to this country – and my English teacher loved poetry. One day he read "The Love Song of J.

Alfred Prufrock" to us, and, as he was reading that poem out loud to the class, I realized that that's what I was going to do with my life. So it was instantaneous.

So you can remember the moment? That's interesting.

Yes. Before then I had written a few poems for another English class — I had to take double English classes because, I don't know, my mom decided I needed to graduate before we left — so I had been reading Hart Crane in another class. I had written some imitation Hart Crane poems or something and after I heard "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" — that was it! I knew what I was going to do for the rest of my life.

So do you find yourself going back to Eliot as a source of inspiration?

Not really. It's been a long time since I've read Eliot. I read Eliot after that day for about a year and a half — every day — so I kind of burned out on him, too. He's still an extraordinary poet, but I can't really read him anymore.

So regarding your first book, *Ocean Avenue*, Phillip Levine wrote that "It's a book of motion and of enormous calm." How do you, as a person and as a poet, balance those two things?

That's a great question. I don't know if I balance those two things. Maybe I'm aware of the contrast between the two. I mean, one can't exist without the other. I mean, maybe calm and motion can, because they're not direct opposites. But motion and stillness, let's say, they are dependent on each other. Maybe, kind of, being witness to a lot of motion living in New York City, for instance, where a lot of this book was written – I think one of the reasons, perhaps, that I was so struck by motion is some kind of regard for stillness. But I don't know if I balance them.

How long did it take you to write each book, so *Ocean Avenue* and then *Astoria*?

About seven years each.

Was there a moment when you knew you were finished?

With my first book, I never really knew that I was done, I don't think. And I remember revising it a lot. I remember sending it out. This was after graduate school. I finished it at Iowa and started sending it out for probably two or three years, and I had revised it a lot during that period. And, I guess, even when it won the prize and it was going to be published, it didn't feel exactly finished, and I kept working on it. I really had no idea what I was doing. I didn't have a sense of what it felt like. It wasn't like a concluding moment, like "Oh, now everything is falling
together. It's done."

Yeah I wonder if you can ever feel that way about a manuscript.

Yeah, I don't know. I think it can happen. I think it happens to some people. With *Astoria* I felt the process was easier. With *Ocean Avenue*, I did sort of extensive editing with my editor. With *Astoria*, I sort of wrote the poems, and I arranged the order of it in an afternoon, and that was it. It really sort of came out much more finished.

So what are you working on now?

I'm writing more poems, and I hope it might be a manuscript soon.

Is there a central focus or a theme throughout the new work?

I don't like to think about a particular theme so, no, not exactly. Sometimes I don't know really what's happening with my new manuscript. I feel like I can't really say. But I would love to work with humor. I think it's very difficult, but it bothers me how serious poetry is. And so that's something that I'm interested in. Sometimes I hope that I can be, if only a little, funny.

So I heard that poems are actually only about two things.

Who said that?

A poet who I used to work with. Someone told her that, so she told me, and so I was thinking about that for a while, and I'm wondering, if your poems were actually only about two things (or if you could only write about two things) what would they be?

That's another great question. Well, death would be one because if we don't have a regard for death in our work… I mean hopefully the presence of our mortality is in our work because that's what gives it an edge to begin with. Otherwise the pressure would be off. So mortality would be one thing, and the other thing would be beauty.

So you have a book of translations: What do you consider to be the greatest challenge when translating?

I guess, for one, you want to honor the poet you're translating, so that's a challenge. I just finished translations of Edith Södergran, a Finnish-Swedish poet who lived at the turn of the twentieth century, and I admired her work so much that I wanted to make sure that it was presented on the right level. I think that's the most daunting thing.

And how do you negotiate that? How do you deal with that?

Well, for one, I only translate poems that really speak to me, that I love the most, that I don't foresee any sort of great difficulties with comprehending. So that's how I negotiate that: I only translate the poems I connect with strongly.

Yeah, I think that's a good idea. So for your books, not your translations, but your other books, you create a sense of estrangement by suggesting the existence of another world or unreal characters, such as "the boy who can't stop counting," but you balance those things with vivid, simple imagery. How do you see these two aspects of your work coming together?

Yes, it's interesting, "the boy who can't stop counting," he was real. He passed me by on the street. It actually happened. Some boy was counting. I didn't really hear the numbers, but my imagination took over as that happened. That was in New York City. And so he was actually, in my mind, always real. But, yeah, what was the question? I forgot. (laughter)

I guess it was about how you view the unreal coming together with vivid imagery.

Ah yes, yes. In poets that I love, the idea of grounding something unreal, something imaginary

in a very concrete physical detail is a nice way to create a hook. Of course the question "What is real?" is kind of huge. There is a bumper sticker that I like that says, "Reality, what a concept." So it's kind of a very complex paradigm for me. I feel that reality involves so many layers of consciousness — dream and reality being one — and then you also have the reality of the imagination. I feel that it's really, in a way, impossible to control our writing in any kind of logical quote-unquote "intelligent way," when it's not really us, it's our imagination that is working and so that has to be, in a way, respected. But, of course, we live as these physical bodies in this physical world, so, yes, we have the amazing capability of combining the fantastic with what we call "real." I like to ask the question "What is the scenario of a poem?" You know? I imagine it's just how a fiction writer thinks about the plot of a short story or a novel.

That's interesting. I've never thought about it that way.

In workshops we often spend a lot of time looking at syntax, the line, line breaks, images, but maybe it is time to take a break from that for a moment and just think about the scenario of our poems. What is it that makes a few words a poem? What is that poetic scenario?

If you had to fill a poem with any type of furniture, what type of furniture would you fill it with?

That's a fun question. I don't know — maybe a church organ. But that is an instrument not a piece of furniture. Maybe a sofa. A purple velvet sofa. Gothic? No, not exactly but with sort of rounded and flowing lines.

Yeah, I know what you are talking about. So it'd be a giant couch and a giant organ?

Yeah. I don't know what else — maybe some kind of coffee table to rest our feet on and a red shag rug too.

If you weren't a poet what would you spend your time doing?

I would want to be a musician.

What kind of music would you play?

There was a time when I wanted to be an organist but not any more. I would play the ukulele. I have a ukulele. I'm trying to learn. I'm very bad.

So you're musically inclined?

In my imagination I am, yes, but not so much in the physical world, yet. I'm really a beginner, but that's something that I'm always thinking about. Playing music must be even more fun than writing.

So, then, this question is kind of odd, but what's the best question you've ever been asked in an interview?

Maybe the furniture question. That was a good one.

And have you had any really bad interviews where it just kind of fell flat or the questions were boring?

This interview is good because you're going to edit half of the nonsense I have just said, but, yes, sometimes people say they will cut or edit but they don't.

And it might end up badly.

Yeah, but I don't know… there are some bad questions. And, usually, they come from people who don't really read the poems or don't get it, so they ask boring, impossible questions. I can't think of anything in particular right now though. You know — describe your poems or something. That's a bad question. Or another question that's hard – I mean, it's not a bad question — but people ask you how or where does you work fit into the canon or something. I feel like that's outrageous for any human being to say. You know, it's ridiculous. It just begs for an extraordinarily pompous answer that nobody should ever have to give. But that's all I can think of.

Well this was great. Thank you for sitting down to talk with us

You're so welcome, my pleasure. Thank you.

NOWHERE

I left work
and walked down Prospect
past the Long John Silver's,
the Mexican place, the Jiffy
Lube, the gas station, the liquor store
where, in the parking lot, a man
held his woman by the wrist
and steered her into the frigid
bounty of the shop. She could
barely stand. She sprawled,
belly down on the counter, laughing.
At the light a man rode up
on a bike and looked me up
then down. *Baby my car's*
in the shop, but if it wasn't
I would take you anywhere
you wanted to go. I thought
of the gas station, the cold
of it, the fluorescent donuts
in their case, the rows
of colorful flavored gums
with heavenly names.
I once walked in there
to buy a pack of gum

and stayed for an hour.
The impossible choice.
The mango pineapple oasis,
the waterberry splash.
The cool mint melondream
breeze. So I jumped on the handlebars.
Down Prospect, the fast food
joints just fast rainbows now,
I could see the way cumulus
clouds of fry grease hung above
the places like the threat of a storm.
Faster and faster now the trees whipping
by in a fury of green. The city,
the highway, the exhale of farms.
Orange sun setting like a sick egg.
And into another state altogether.
No one knows us here he said,
and I held him tighter (I was on
the pegs now), while we ghosted
slowly through humid neighborhoods,
warped houses that teemed
with dead cars, with guinea pig
colonies, with wan families
and their mashed potato dinners.

We set up home. We made Wednesday
night spaghetti night. He rode
his bike for pay and in the mornings
out back I tended to the guinea pigs,
their bodies moved through
the high grass like tiny housecats
stalking their prey. They were untame,
majestic. They were a horde of mouths
under the house. At dawn I saw them
teeming the ceiling. They'd scatter
like bugs when I got a glass of water
in the kitchen. They were dear to me.
And then one day the wind came
in the house. Nothing stayed put.
The papers, the pigs, the furniture began
to beat at me. Tornadoes in the kitchen,
tornadoes of fur and plates.
We have to leave I said. *The wind*
is in the house. The wind is
the house. Everything is wild
and cruel. So he got his bike.
Past the grey houses, the cold lawns,
the dead cars, the wan little girls chalking
up the street. The pigs fanned out

behind us, a furry retinue. But in the end
they flagged. Short legs.
Past the city limits, the moneyed suburbs,
the miles and miles of inedible corn.
Where are we going now he said. *Nowhere*
I said. *They're still behind us* I said.
Keep going I said *Faster, faster*
It's going to be great. It's going to be
like nothing you've ever seen.

Venus in Exile - Oil on canvas - 33” x 43”

L.A.M.E.

Upon arriving, the reporter wondered how long this was going to take. He didn't voice this concern out loud to his subject, the scientist, simply because the scientist had, upon escorting the reporter to the back patio, launched into his discussion of the machine that had brought them together that day. It was probably the best machine he'd ever made. Either that, or a complete rip-off. Well, it had definitely been the hardest thing he'd ever done. The thing he tried the hardest to perfect. The moving target he most constantly missed. He tried to tell the reporter: though machines such as this had been around since seventeenth century Spain, his was something new. The reporter did not busy his pen with descriptions of the way the scientist's backyard green-tongued from the deck into thin woods where something like a rollercoaster stood in a clearing. He did not note the scientist's brief history lesson or even his deep admiration for the gargantuan thing hulking down the hill in nobody's forest. He hadn't even untensed his notebook's tight elastic strap, nor finished cleaning his glasses with his shirt.

To be honest, our young reporter only kinda understands the first fake rule of newspaper reporting: be objective. It's different from being humble, which doesn't help him differentiate between the two, really, just clogs his already clogged head with more words. He pretends to know. His editor had given him the weekly task of cataloging the town's stranger characters. These soft pieces were meant to introduce him to the intriguing world of local news reporting. Really, to introduce him to objectivity. And since the scientist had spent almost every day of his "retirement" calling the newspaper about some invention that would change the world, the editor told the reporter to start here. *It would be a breeze. A piece of cake. Just get the quotes, find a lead-in, and type. Bing bang boom. You can call me if you have problems, kid. I may not answer, but you can call me, definitely, and maybe I'll answer. Just get out there and watch and listen and smell and taste. Heighten your senses to god-like status and then forget anything about god. Take it all in. Objectively. Objectify it all. Be an object yourself. A rock, a grain of sand, a padded seat cover. Be*

a reporting object. A well-greased cog in the news machine. That's your only goal kid, out there. Objectivity. Then, when you're back here in the office, just let your fingers breathe it onto the keyboard. That's all. Go. Be. Report. Everyone wins. Everyone's an object. Even your subject.

"I mean, look at it," said the scientist. "Isn't it an amazing machine? It's taken me years to build. Seven, exactly. It's gone through all sorts of stages. Schematics out the wazoo. You'd think I was building a W.M.D. or something."

The reporter's glasses went on, and he saw the machine. Tangles upon tangles upon spindly steel legs three stories tall.

The door slid open behind them. There were bare feet, pale legs, ripped jean shorts, a tray of lemonade, and the hefted circles of man boobs. He wore a pink bicycle helmet that leaned left. The fastened chinstrap dug into his splotchy beard. Must have been around the reporter's age.

"This is my son," the scientist said.

The son proceeded to offer a sweating glass of what looked like lemonade. The reporter nodded and took a sniff of the stuff. What smelled like paint-thinner was in fact another of the scientist's inventions, made in the very same bathtub where he and his son sometimes bathed.

"Isn't it a bit early?" the reporter asked.

The scientist gulped down the whole glass and exhaled his grainy, saccharine appreciation. He stomped down the hill, and his son skipped down the hill after him. The short-legged reporter set his drink down and straggled behind them.

Imagine, if you can, a rollercoaster-type machine that stretches forty feet tall. About twenty or so steel cage balls have been placed at various points of a track, which itself resembles little strips of paper you bend and twist and try to reconnect, except, the multiplicity of the metal ribbons was only visual, and even then, only visual if you only glanced at it. Conceptualize this. The closer you look, the harder it becomes to differentiate the track's beginning and end. This is what the reporter found in the clearing.

Meanwhile, the scientist had busied himself with a tin can full of beige goop. He was almost finished greasing the thing up. A tune slipped from his lips through the warps of metal as he dug his first four fingers into the can and spanked the nearest piece of metal.

The son nodded toward a row of chairs placed by the foot of the great machine.

"You'll have to forgive the wait," the scientist's voice echoed. "We need everything to be perfect."

The son added, "These things are never perfect in the beginning, you know."

The reporter slapped back the elastic and scrawled down the quotation verbatim.

The man-boy turned to his father, who had somehow already descended and was now in front of them, ambling. Musing.

"In the old days," the scientist started, "These things were much different. Hell, they were made of brass and copper back then. The first one from Spain, it was golden – or so goes the legend. But in today's time, our usable materials are so different. Brass and copper and even steel is difficult to procure, even if you get some local grant money, which we haven't. Or steal it, which I'm not at liberty to discuss. Needless to say, the pickings are slim. Anyway, that's why you see the scrap metal contraption right here before you. But we have found ways to soup it up." He walked to an end of the machine and pointed at the bulky shape of a large computer, "You see this here? It's my major innovation. I call it the Writer."

The reporter did not rise from his seat.

"There are other additions, too," the scientist added in a rush. "In fact, the whole design is a ginormous modification. A complete revision, really, of the basic idea, using old parts."

"And what's the basic idea?"

"Ah, forgive me. I'm really more of a feeler, less of an explainer, I guess." The scientist smiled and pushed a hand into his back pocket. He pulled out a folded wad of papers. He shoved the schematics into the reporter's face. They were thick-leaded, on graph paper that had grown smudgy, and it all smelled like stale bacon. None of the lines connected. Whatever script was used, it was indecipherable. This was some sort of explanation, but of what couldn't be known. The reporter investigated the schematics more, going back and forth between pages. Maybe it all worked like a flip book. No, it didn't. The only comprehensible bit were two letters at the bottom of the final page, but even this took concentration. B.L.

"Do you get the basic idea now?" the scientist asked just before he snatched the paper and crammed it into his front pocket. Soon, the old man was already on the other end of the machine, waving his son and the reporter over.

Before they got up, the man-boy's voice cracked the humid air. "I don't really read the news," he said. "The paper doesn't let you hold onto anything else when you read." He paused, smiled. "But the funny thing is, when I watch the news and I'm holding my cereal bowl and sitting on the couch, I don't actually eat till I turn the TV off. Then it's just soggy and awful."

"The cereal or the TV?" the reporter said as they walked.

The comment made the son pause, though the scientist had begun a more tedious explanation of the machine's mechanics.

"You see, at first these machines were meant only for the upper classes. They were used

as a kind of punishment for children of rich folk. These children were pretty damn terrible, always running around in the gardens, picking the rosebuds and eating them like grapes. Spoiled many a state dinner that way, not to mention acres of hand-nurtured p-rime rosebuds. And the rich people tried everything to fix the problem – spanking, timeouts, and even reverse psychology. Nothing worked on these greedy little shits. So anyway, a rich man, an industrialist of sorts, built a machine to end his garden's suffering. It was a nifty little thing, gobs of gears and rods and plates and needles all made of gold, all propelled by a single cranking gloved hand. He'd sit his little vermin of a child down, strap the thing in by its hands and ankles, then he'd blindfold the little shit and start to place the needles, which were gathered into something like tubes, just like so around the arms of the child. Then the guy would put a fresh rose right at the entrance of the kid's nostrils. The front door of his ole factory. There'd be a little holder for the rose to achieve this perpetual tantalizing effect. Then, the rich man would start cranking with his back turned to the child. And as he cranked, the little shit would start to scream and squeal. But the man cranked harder and faster and got a hell of a workout from it. Then the kid would start to beg for mercy in all the languages it had been taught – Spanish, French, English, hell, even Latin. You see, the needles pricked the child's skin, sixty times a second."

"So this machine is based in punishment?" the reporter asked.

"Discipline is a better word. But, I've only just started the history of these fine machines, sonny. My machine doesn't come in till the end of the line. We're talking hundreds of years of evolution.

"Anyway, as I was saying, the father would crank the thing and the needles would prick the skin ever so slightly so that the child would fear being impaled. Yes there was blood, but just as much as you'd get from a rose thorn. But still the child would blot its blindfold with tears. It would wiggle and flail and fail to budge from the suspense and pain. It was beautiful in a psychic way. Then the punishment would be over, and the father would release the child, who wouldn't notice until a bit after all the crying and the pain that the father had tattooed a message into its arm. Do you want to know what that message was?"

The reporter cleaned his glasses and inspected them with bored disinterest. "You mean psychotic."

"The tattoo was in Latin, and it said, 'IF YOU CAN READ THIS, STAY THE HELL AWAY FROM MY ROSES.' My translation may be a little shoddy, but you get the point."

With his glasses back on, the reporter blinked at him.

"Well from there, it's pretty simple. The rich man showed his idea to other rich men he

knew. At first he used his children, who had by then already become very afraid of their father's hand dragging them out to the clearing in the garden and, thus, pretty timid and overwhelmingly indoorsy. The rich men loved the idea and asked how many they could order at one time and if new messages could be engraved in the skin, like for wives or mistresses or something. The rich man said sure and went back into his study and started drawing up one of the first and most famous business plans the world has ever known. And in only a decade's time – a short span to wait for new machinery in those days – each of the rich men had various sets of these machines with their own sets of messaging needles. If you're wondering for your story, the needles wrote in specialized fonts all kinds of things. 'PROPERTY OF SO-AND-SO,' became a popular one, as did the Ten Commandments. The machines improved to allow for interchangeable branches of needles, so they could write pretty much anything pretty much anywhere. Moveable inscription became all the rage in Paris. One woman – I think she was connected to royalty – was even reported to have scandalously put on her eyelids the absurd line, 'IF YOU ARE READING THIS, YOU'RE NOT CLOSE ENOUGH.' And, after some time, these people would gather around and show their cursive and all caps and foreign languaged scars. The shit became an art form, sonny. The subjects or victims or whatever you call them in your story, they were treated like walking art exhibits. Isn't that just nuts?"

The machine's beams had been bolted somewhat shoddily. Only every third or fourth one wasn't tightened in at an obtuse angle. The pillars themselves, which must have towered about 30 feet, were only two feet thick or so, and they leaned this way and that. The rails had petrified sleepers willing to crack whenever they got up the gumption.

"So this roller coaster is a piece of art?" the reporter inquired. He started to scribble his quote down.

The scientist's face reddened.

"I was on my way to that. As I was saying, after the rich man's great grandson started a branch of the machine making business here in the states, 'art' never really sold. At least not when it was billed as art. So they billed it as entertainment, an amusement, and followed the corporate model of turn-of-the-century American industrialism and set up factories and distribution points that sent out bunches of the things. You know, vertical and horizontal integration. And they made small ones and big ones and medium ones to fit all sizes of budget, and all of them were boxed and labeled as some variation of a superlative adjective, amusement, and machine. A.M.'s, they called them. It made marketing much much easier for the business, because, as you know, acronyms pacify people. Plus, they sell. There was only one other machine of this size – the model

I, which could have stood for anything. The I.A.M.'s, because of their scale and expense, didn't sell too well. But this baby right here is in that vein, so I'm calling it the I.A.M. 2. Do you see why it's tricky to call this thing a piece of art?"

"The acronyms?" the reporter tried.

"Marketability?" the son offered.

"Both and something more. These babies aren't art themselves, but they make it. And money, too, at least a little, from people who want to pay for this indellible psychic experience."

"This is all a joke, right?" the reporter asked.

"Well, no," the scientist replied. His flush face persisted. "It's not a joke. I'm not just having a laugh, as they say in Europe. I'm dead serious about this machine."

"So, then, how does this work? What makes this more special than a tilt-a-whirl at Libertyland or something?"

The scientist smiled and blinked and licked his lips and smiled and blinked. He turned and walked toward the back of the machine, where he climbed up a service ladder to do more fine-tuning of the machine.

The son attempted an explanation. "You see the cages up there and the ones down below? Daddy calls them iBalls. They're supposed to kind of smash into each other, but not until after a really long time of spinning round and round each other. And even that's not until after they climb up to that platform up there – I think it's called the Press – and decide whether they want to go up or down. Then, they sit in the chair and buckle up and they get a special paintball on the forehead that has the message contained in it somehow. I never did figure out how daddy got the message to shoot out from a little ole marbley paintball and have it spray a whole sentence in a pretty straight line. Anyway, they pass each other on this same track while spinning in their chairs in their cages. Sometimes, they collide. Well, I guess most times they collide. It's kinda the point, you know. The hope is that the crashes don't knock them off the track but send them backward and forward and sideways on the track."

"Is the banging in the cage the reason for the helmet?"

"No. I wear it when I'm nervous. I used to wear a bandana and that was enough, but sometimes it's not. You probably think I'm a fool, don't you? Wearing a helmet like I'm a crash test dummy."

The reporter did not reply. Instead, he watched the scientist lumbering around the back of the machine. The old man's lips moved. He was muttering to himself, wringing a wifebeater around each finger.

“Do you want to know why I’m nervous?” the son whispered.

“Is it because there’s a reporter here? Because I’m only here to get a few quotes.” The reporter continued squinting for his subject.

“Well, partly,” the son replied. “But you wanna know the real reason?”

The scientist must have been making some hidden repairs.

“We’re not really sure, exactly, if this thing works,” the son said.

“That’s why we’re testing it, son,” the scientist said from behind them. His bulbous red nose and small blue eyes loomed above them. His face wreaked out a smile. “Son,” he said, “look at the reporter. Look at his eyes, boy. Tell me what you see.”

“I see a vein, pupil, more veins, white stuff. Do eyelashes count?”

“Really?” The scientist asked. His smile stilled the reporter. “I see boredom. Which means—?”

“Which means we should get this show on the road?”

“That’s my boy.”

The son put two fingers between his lips and blew.

From all angles children of varying ages came – some from the woods, some from across the street, some from just behind the flanking fences – all came running and huffing to the front of the machine. Their hands stood on their knees as they lurched for a few moments, but, before the reporter could even ask their names, let alone if they or their parents knew what they were getting into, they were already up the beams. Most of the kids buckled themselves up without any help from either the scientist or his son. The younger ones, of course, needed fastening. In the minutes it took for the scientist and his son to climb the back ladder and start helping with seat belts, the children grew impatient. They lurched back and forth in their cages and shouted “Are we there yet?!” The rocking beams creaked in front of the reporter, but he decided not to notify the scientist or his son.

Once the scientist and his son climbed back down the welded ladder in the back of the I.A.M., the children changed their cry. “Please please please we there yet! Please please please.” The reporter cleaned his glasses again. He, too, was growing impatient.

A fat finger rapped on his shoulder. Sweat jeweled on the son’s upper lip. He panted. His breath lingered in the air when he spoke.

“Daddy needs your assistance.”

“My assistance?”

“Yes.”

“With what?”

“He just needs a favor.”

“A favor?”

The scientist was hunched over the Writer. “I need you to get my wife,” he said. Cords leaked out of the computer and streamed down to power strips and video ports and hard drive docks on the ground. The strip was overloaded, the ports and docks choked.

“Your wife?”

“Fine, my ex-wife. You hot shot reporters really go to the back teeth with the research for your stories. Like taxidermists or something.”

“Where is your wife?”

“Next door,” the son interjected.

“Next door?”

“Yes,” the scientist said, still unblinking at the screen. “Can’t you see I’m trying to type the launch codes into the Writer here?”

“Can’t you see I’m just trying to get a half-page article here? Not a story. Just something to fill the pages that people out there are paying for. Don’t you get that? Can you get that? I’m just here to watch, you know, interview you. A few quotes. That’s it.”

The scientist stopped typing and turned to the reporter. “A half-page?” he asked. His eyes went wan and wide. “A half-page! I’ve given you pages and pages of good material, historical background, a working understanding of the I.A.M.’s mechanics, hell, even a brief introduction to that liquid invention of mine. Now you tell me you want to do a half-page? What the hell you gonna say in half a page? You believe this kid, son?”

“Yes,” the son said, then looked at the scientist. “I mean, no.”

“Get outta here, bub,” the scientist said to the reporter. “Go on now, go. Forget about your stupid little story. Or better yet, type it up all pretty and well-formatted and then stick it up your pretentious, liberal-arts-educated, brownie-hole. Pretty soon television reporters will be flocking here to get a load of this. Bloggers, even.”

“Fine,” the reporter said.

“Fine,” the scientist said. He went back to the Writer.

“I’ll get the ex-wife, but that’s my limit.”

The scientist turned again and looked the reporter up and down. He nodded and stared the reporter in the eye. “Okay then,” he said. “Son, you want to go with the nice reporter to get mommy?”

The son's head, however, had craned up a long time ago. His jaw slacked. The children's crying-chanting-screaming stopped. The rattling continued. They rocked back and forth jerking their giant chain-linked spheres, trying to make the thing move on their own. But without the orb-locks disengaged, the most they could do was wiggle.

"Son?" the scientist asked, still blank-staring the reporter blank-staring him back.

The bigger children unbuckled themselves. They kicked at their cages, but kicking proved no use. The cage doors became their next target. Their arms veined and their faces grimaced as they tried and tried and failed some more. So then, they just sat in the bottom of their respective iBalls and cried in silence. The younger ones had been crying long before.

"Son!" the scientist turned to the man-boy who was still turned up. He followed his son's eyes and saw what the children were doing. The reporter looked, too. All three gulped. The scientist turned to the Writer, typed in what had to be gibberish, and released the doors to the cages. Through the gapes, the kids leapt out and shimmied their way down. They left as quickly as they came.

"What are we going to do now?" the son asked.

"What do you mean? We're gonna move on as planned. I'm almost finished with the launch codes anyway. I can get in one of the i-Balls and see that everything works well on the inside. I just need you, son, to press Enter when I'm safe and snug in my seat up there."

"I don't think we should do that," the reporter said.

The scientist's eyes darted. "What did you say?"

"I'm just saying, not trying to intrude or anything, but I don't think we should do that."

"We? Since when did this become a we?"

The reporter did not reply. The scientist, smiling his brown and yellow tooth smile, stepped closer. The son moved in, too. Their shoulder lines formed the lengths of a triangle. The scientist directed his smile at the reporter. The son, confused again, shook his head back and forth between the two, closing his mouth sometimes to catch saliva.

"So are we gonna do this or not?" the son asked.

"How?" the reporter asked.

"It's pretty simple," the scientist said. "You and the boy go get B.L. while I finish the launch codes. Then, when you're finished convincing her, you come back here, press Enter and, bingo, all the balls start rolling. And from there, we can see how this baby works. And B.L., well maybe she'll see finally."

"See finally what?" the reporter asked.

“Man, you’re inquisitive,” the scientist replied.

“Daddy built the I.A.M. 2 for mommy,” the son said.

The scientist gazed off to the fence on the left side of the house. His breathing slowed. Sweat ran over his eyes and down his cheeks. He didn’t wipe them.

“I know you don’t have enough room for this in your story, and I know how hokey and old fashioned and traditional it sounds, and I know how much of your time I’ve wasted blabbing like this about stuff that’s probably gonna get cut from your story anyway, but I swear to whatever higher power looms over our and this machine’s proper operation that I love that woman. Have loved her since I met her all that time ago on the Ferris wheel, love her now, and will love her even when it just doesn’t make sense to. Hell,” he shrugged, “it probably doesn’t even make sense now. You know she hated me making the machines. Well, not at first. It was a good hobby, when it was small. Something to do with the boy on weeknights and weekends when I got home from the ‘musement park. But then it just got serious, you know? I thought somehow I’d make a name for myself. It got solitary. I became an artist-type, you know – lonely, brooding, ornery. She called me a mad scientist. I resented her for it. Pushed myself deeper into the designs for the machines I was building. I thought, honestly, that I would come out on the other side, you know, like the work was a hoola-hoop you could just hop through as you hold it. Well, it ain’t no hoola-hoop, making these machines. It’s a tunnel. Room for one and only one at a time. That’s what she told me when she moved out and next door. ‘Whatever you’re doing has room for one and one only. And it leaves me lonely.’ That’s what she said with that last box pressed to her chest. And me and my dumb ass thought she was talking about the machines. They were each made to seat one solitary soul. Do you see how dumb that is? So, what’s probably even dumber is that I get to trying to prove her wrong. That’s where this comes in. I.A.M. 2. The multiple iBalls, they’re an attempt at spiting what’s probably the truth. Doesn’t that seem like such a sorry, stupid thing?” He started to chuckle despite his watering eyes. “And look at the machine now. Look at it. It’s empty. I.A.M. 2, isn’t it funny? It’s just ideas, mindless ideas that used to be scrawled on a page of graph paper. It’s funny, right? Even worse is, I can’t even know if I’m actually spiting the truth. I can’t even know if I’m proving it wrong. Proving her wrong. I don’t even think I want to prove her wrong. I don’t know. But how lame is that? Humiliating. Isn’t it just the tits? All this work to make an amusement machine in the same classic vein of amusement machines before it, all this work to make it new, fun, and, most of all, inclusive, all this work and boom. I.A.M. 2. No one here to test it. Isn’t that just the mam glands?”

The reporter breathed. “I don’t know.”

“I knew you’d say something like that.” The scientist went back to the Writer and clacked the keyboard some more.

The reporter followed.

“How about I go in there with you?” he asked.

The scientist blinked at him.

“Forget about your ex-wife. She’ll see that it all worked in the paper tomorrow.”

“You mean that?” the son asked, standing and tip-toeing behind, trying to stay afloat in the ongoing conversation.

The reporter took his glasses off and threw them over his shoulder.

There were eighty-eight rungs on the back ladder up to the Press.

“Up or down?” the scientist asked.

“I think I’m already in over my head.”

So they parted ways at the Press, the scientist up and the reporter down, each of their ladders reaching out to a part of the track. There was a gap between the final rung and the foot landing on the track. Down below: more track, more curls of strips of rust-bearded steel. It was all a blur anyway to the reporter. But still, the gravity of it was there. He heaved a breath when he leapt. From there, the rest was easy. The door to his iBall was ajar, and he had only to follow his track, enter, and buckle himself in. The door shut, and its latch lock resounded closed. He looked up but all he could see through the diamond crosshatch of his cage was more of the blurry brown-grey of the track, years and years and years of rollercoaster-grade twists and turns mangled and recombined, now blurred, into what had to be the Last Amusement Machine Ever, if such things even ever existed outside of the imagination.

The reporter then looked forward. As should have happened, a paintball smashed on his forehead. The paint was cool and it soothed the pain of impact. A lock released and after a moment’s hesitation – just enough to gulp another breath and close the eyes – his orb hurled upward on the track. Molecules of wet air whizzed by and the sound of large spinning metal radared by. His eyes kept tight as his orb picked up speed.

Then, the first collision. It jolted him right. His orb hung a moment on one rail. He reached for the air in front of him. His eyes opened. It was just a momentary wobble. The iBall was still intact, on track. Behind his shoulder, just at the edge of the clearing, an iBall, empty, hollow, gashed, dented, rolled to the base of a tree where it finally stopped.

Empty collisions couldn’t have been part of the design.

At the front base of the machine, where the chairs had been unfolded and aligned, a crowd

of neighbors gathered and gazed. There were the children who had originally been in the iBalls and their parents. All their necks craned, eyes wobbled and widened with disbelief. Every voice was silent except for one.

"Wheeeeeee!"

"Wheeeeeee!"

It was the scientist. His orb, like the reporter's, hurtled along on its track, knocking away empty orbs at the intersection-overlaps, making them fly off the machine into the woods, into neighbors' yards, into the clearing.

The audience took to higher ground directly behind the scientist's house. On the crimson painted patio steps, a woman sat, raven-haired and droopy-bodied, unnoticed until the neighborhood trekked up the hill and she marched down, looking straight ahead as the two peopled iBalls continued knocking away all of the empty ones.

The audience watched from above.

"This is like Nascar," said one child, "only, better."

"This is like boxing," said a parent.

"No," another parent replied. "It's like chess!" He laughed alone.

Soon the reporter could feel that his and the scientist's iBalls were the only ones left. His hands held fast and tense to the seatbelt's slick fabric.

"All right!" he screamed. "We know it works! Now somebody turn this off!"

The metal and the air continued to screech and scratch.

"Is there no way to turn this off?!"

"Please!"

"Wheeeeeee!"

"Wheeeeeee!"

"Please!"

This was what the audience heard from the hilltop. Whee. Please? Whee, Please? We Please?

One parent in the audience, the one who made the chess comment just moments before and chuckled about it alone, decided the whole thing was an act, a happening. A performance. He thought they were asking for audience feedback. He thought he should participate. So he started a slow clap. Well, first he finished what was left of his beer then started a slow clap. Other parents and their children joined in, not necessarily because they thought that's what the guys in the cages wanted but because, well, who doesn't love joining in on a slow clap?

Who wouldn't feel the reason in that slow syncopation? Who couldn't feel that pressing need to speed it up, speed it up speeditup until it all swelled into the rain of a hundred unison hands and glazed eyes?

"Are they clapping?! Really?! Someone, please, anyone stop this!"

Down below, hunched over the Writer, the woman and the son worked on stopping the machine. But, since the Writer had fallen asleep since launch, they had to log in again. They looked at each other then back at the screen. They tried everything they could think of: the son's name, the woman's name, their birthdays, the scientist's birthday, the name of his favorite book, his favorite author, their names spelled backwards, backwards spelled backwards, forwards spelled backwards.

Nothing doing. The Writer didn't relent. Its programming, which the scientist designed and developed specifically for the machine, was sophisticated and cheeky. Each time they failed, a rectangle appeared on the screen with the text: ACCESS NOT GRANTED BUT NOT NECESSARILY DENIED.

"Wheeeeeee!"

"Please?!"

The woman looked up at the machine, shaking her head and thinning her lips, and the son stayed hunched over the writer, raking his fingers through his neckbeard. Thinking. He typed in a couple more tries (password, 12345). Neither worked for The Writer. So he backed away but still peered down at the Writer. His fingers lost themselves in his beard as he waited for an idea to occur.

Both the iBalls made their way to the upper part of the machine. The reporter's orb positioned him sitting straight up and the cage tracked the track above his head while the scientist, still wheee-screaming, sat upside down. Each cage was dented. They wobbled at certain turns in the track. The upper tier of track had such a turn, and it was at this turn that the reporter and the scientist were doomed to collide. It seemed imminent, necessary. One would have to topple to what very well could be his death, or at the very least, a miserable remaining lifespan.

About this time, the realization struck. The fun was over. It had to stop. Everything had to stop. The clapping, the crying, the screaming.

Well, some things kept happening.

Throats kept gulping.

Eyes shut. Then peeked. Then shut.

The son's fingers still knuckled deep in his neck fur.

Then, of course, these stopped too. An idea had him hard and took him fast to the back of the Writer. His hands, sweaty as they were, went frantic. He ripped at it all. Cords and cords and cords released, piled like a heap of dead snakes by the gape-faced sockets. And still he pulled. Pulled and pulled and pulled until there it was. The power cord, the thickest of them all, yanked and slanked in his hand.

With this, the Writer went dead. And with the Writer dead, the machine halted. The iBalls hung from the track, inches away from each other. One man sitting up, his every orifice leaking, the other sitting upside down, red-faced, grinning. Both had the painted forehead. Neither could make out the message.

"I think I just came," the scientist said, then passed out, still buckled-in.

The audience filtered out. The show was over. The woman and the son stayed beside the dead Writer, trying to decipher the stillness above from below.

The reporter unbuckled himself. He leapt onto the surface of his cage and crawled to his door. He rattled at it. Nothing opened. He crawled some more and tried kicking out a dimple in his iBall, but again, no use. His head spun with hopelessness. For a while he sat there, caught his breath. There was a body next to his, a body unresponsive, unmoving, probably pooling up inside. He watched, welling, and did not blink at the shut-eyed, downturned face. Nothing to be done but feel some kind of humiliation at the fact the there was nothing to be done except watch as the face so close to his turned pomegranate.

When the firefighters and paramedics came, news vans soon followed. From the vans came young female reporters of various shapes, tones, and sizes, fixing their hair and brushing on some more foundation. There was a cameraman for each one, wearing shorts and a windbreaker, a backwards ball cap, a camera, and a tripod. He set up while she pulled at her blouse to straighten it. There must have been half a dozen sets of them, blocking the small neighborhood road, perimetering the premises, drawing a crowd of the same neighborly gawkers. All for a clip, an angle, a slice of the whole view, a short story, breaking news.

And out of their vans, rodded cameras telescoped to capture better moment-by-moment images of what was happening. It was all very impressive. The ladies tried to stick their microphones in eyewitnesses' faces, but all of the neighbors just looked into the camera and said nothing. The young ladies gave up quickly. They knew from experience when it wasn't working. But, no worries, there were only a few moments of dreaded dead air time, because the TV reporters began reading from printed sheets of paper facts about the situation.

"The creator of the machine is a man named Robert Edgar Allen Davies," they read. "Sup-

posedly, another person is trapped as well, but this person's identity remains undisclosed."

"Mr. Davies was general manager of the now defunct Libertyland Amusement Park," they continued reading.

"Sources close to Davies say that he had been buying up parts for something called an amusement machine for the past seven years from various run-down amusement parks across the country, even stealing parts and supplies from his own amusement park."

"Sources also say Davies was just a regular guy, nothing really strange about him. He was gentle, kind, quiet, kept to himself. Never seemed like the type. Meaning, the type to build a giant amusement machine in his backyard."

"Different sources also would like to point out that he has been estranged from his wife, Be-Linda Davies, with whom he has a son, Lit, and that, though the couple is in fact estranged, they live right next door to each other, with the son staying at both the Davies' homes. Mrs. Davies would not answer our phone calls or her doorbell. So we have reason to believe she is tangled in this situation as well."

"Even more sources also commented on the overall weirdness of the whole situation, saying that it was, in fact, quote generally peculiar end-quote."

Soon enough the scientist emerged, supine. The paramedics, two of them, hairy-armed, bore his heft, carried him just below their hips like a heavy duffle bag. The scientist's eyes were closed, peaceful. One of those oxygen masks covered his mouth. It fogged up, and the fog receded, then it came back. The gawkers did not cheer, just gawked. His arm was outstretched. Beside him, the woman held the hand. The son followed close behind, one arm draping the back of the woman's neck and shoulders and the other dangling his helmet. The team of firemen proceeded next, a whole crew of them carrying their extrication tools – the jaws of life, the useless crowbars, and needless axes. One drove out a mechanized high reach platform.

The young reporter straggled behind the rest of the parade. The women and the cameramen flocked to him.

"Can you tell us what happened?" one reporter asked.

"What did you see?" another asked.

"Who are you?" yet another asked.

All the cameras caught the message on his forehead, as did all of the reporters when he finally looked up to them, still trying to make his way out.

IF YOU CANNOT READ THIS, YOU ARE CLOSE ENOUGH.

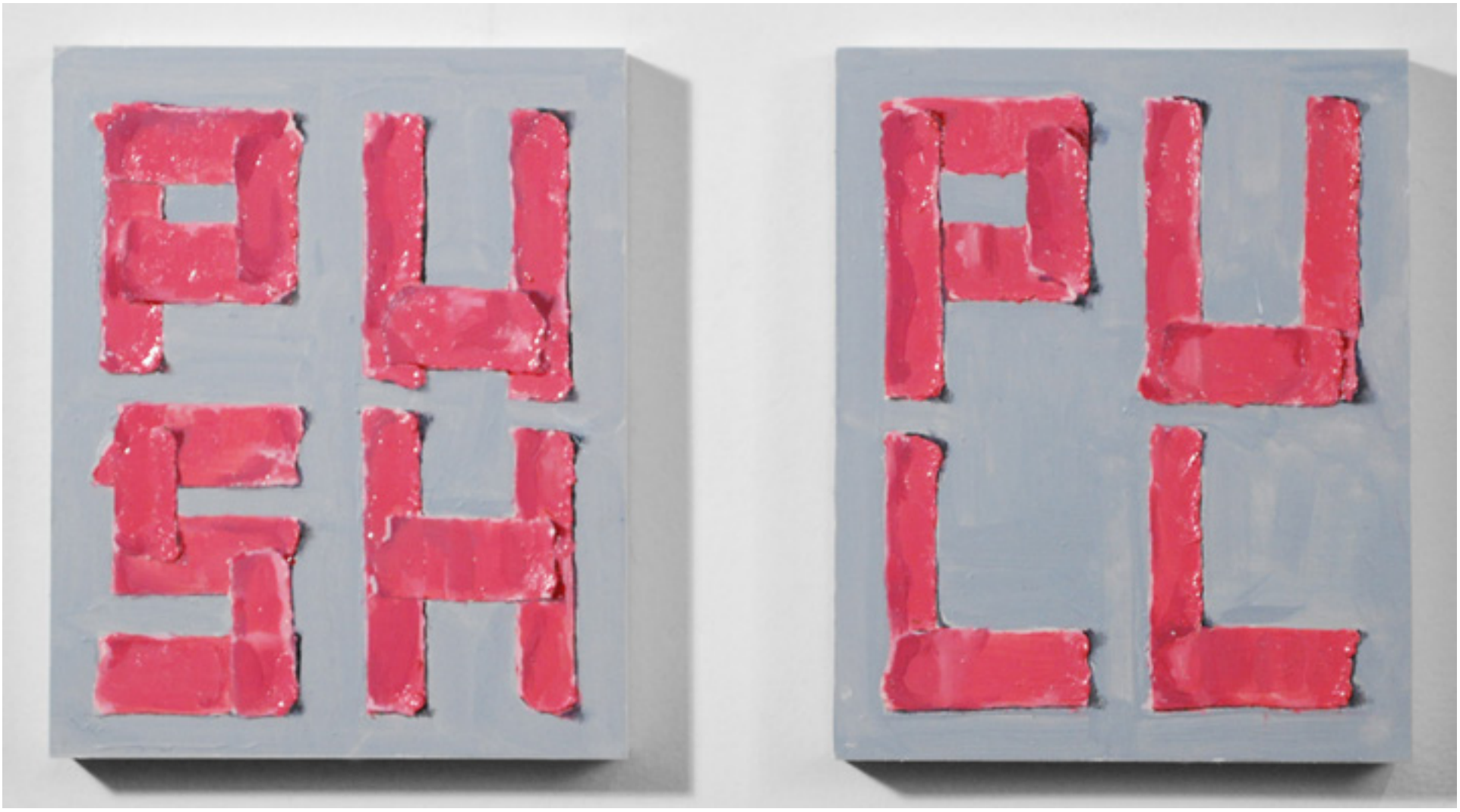
The horde stopped, stunned, as he broke through the bodies, got in his car, and attempted to

follow the ambulance.

And that was what everyone recalled from the nightly news that night, that one remark on his forehead. He never wrote the story. There was no need. No need to retrieve the notebook either. He got new glasses, the Coke-bottle kind that all the kids his age were wearing whether they could see or not. The editor moved him to book and movie reviews instead of just outright firing him because, well, the editor felt somehow complicit in whatever had happened to the boy. And something happened all right. He became lonely, brooding. Not quite ornery, but a bit crazy-eyed. Mostly quiet. He still does his job, though. He's learned to operate well within the genre. Now some bloggers consider him to be one of the city's foremost experts on what to watch and read. He's won awards for his reviews. But this is not because of the words, which are not scathing or polemical or intellectually charged. They are, in fact, quite boring. Quiet. Plain. Small. His sentences are short declaratives. Each paragraph no more than three lines. The reviews measure exactly 333 words every time. He prefers terseness and specificity and steely stricture because it limits the space between characters, makes it more intimate, for the words at least. He breaks other fake rules of reporting. Uses I a lot. You, too. It really blanches his editor who, of course, doesn't quite have the gall to fire the reporter. And that's not just because of the guilt, but because of the perceived sincerity of the reviews, which might be the only thing that keeps the paper circulating. Except, of course, anything goes in the writing the reporter does on his own. It's something like Fiction, though more tame. Hopefully more humble. Lamer, really. Few people see it, though that's not for lack of trying.

But you shouldn't know this reporter for his attempts at literature. Nor do you really want to know about his struggles with obscurity. You didn't come here to discover his new aesthetic self-consciousness. Nor did you stay here just to see how sincere his reviewing had become or how much his fiction flops. Hopefully, you got at least half a page of something you were looking for, something you wanted to spend good, hard-earned currency on. Hopefully, you weren't ripped off. That's all that matters. So, don't worry if you don't care about this reporter's various artistic apparatuses. He doesn't want anyone to know him for those. Not that it matters anyway. It's the letters on his forehead that have faded now but probably won't ever disappear. That's what they know him for. It's where the phones that take the pictures point. Some stare at the words, open-mouthed. Some mouth the words to themselves, like a chant or poetry or a pop song. Most forget and don't need a reminder. Everyone, for a span short or long, has wondered. And that's okay.

Wonder's a good first step.



Push-Pull - Oil on panel - 28” x 10”

BIOGRAPHIES

Aitana Alberti was born in Buenos Aires in 1941 to the Spanish poet Rafael Alberti and his wife María Teresa León. She has edited volumes of poems by Spain's Generation of '27, which includes Federico García Lorca, Pedro Salinas, and her father, among others. English translations of her poems have appeared in *Common Ground Review*

Emily Banks is currently pursuing her MFA in poetry at the University of Maryland, College Park. She was the 2012 recipient of the Robert B. House Memorial Prize in Poetry and her poems have appeared in *Crab Creek Review*, *The West Trade Review*, *Susquehanna Review,* and *The Cellar Door.*

Jeremy Brok is currently pursuing an M.A. in creative nonfiction at the University of Missouri and has received a B.A. from DePauw University majoring in English writing. He is a regular blogger for the *Missouri Review*. Previous to beginning his degree, Jeremy spent three years serving on an AmeriCorps Emergency Response Team where he was deployed throughout the country to such natural disasters as hurricanes, tornados, and wild fires.

Matthew Dexter lives in Cabo San Lucas, Mexico. Like the nomadic Pericú natives before him, he survives on a hunter-gatherer subsistence diet of shrimp tacos, smoked marlin, cold beer, and warm sunshine. He is the author of the novel, *The Ritalin Orgy*.

Kallie Falandays is a poet living in Wichita, Kansas. Her poems have been featured, or are forthcoming, in *PANK, Paper Darts*, and *The Dirty Napkin*. She is the editor of *Kenning Journal*.

Brad Johnson, winner of the 2012 Longleaf Press Chapbook Contest, has published four chapbooks of poetry. Work of his has also been accepted by *Nimrod, Permafrost, Poet Lore, The South Carolina Review, The Southeast Review, Southern Indiana Review, Wil-*

low Springs and others.

Peter K.'s stories have appeared in *Slice Magazine, PANK, The Emerson Review, Sou'wester,* and other journals. He works with *Mud Luscious Press, The Adirondack Review,* and *Electric Literature*'s Recommended Reading.

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tion in large works. His work has been acquired by the Savannah College of Art Design's Permanent Collection from 2010 – 2012. Noto was given the opportunity in 2011 to have his first solo show at The Richard Demato Gallery in Sag Harbor, NY entitled *Natural Artifice*. His work is now collected in Beijing, Bratislava, Florida, Georgia, New York and Pennsylvania. In 2012 Russ Noto received an M.F.A. from the Savannah College of Art and Design and remains as a working artist today.

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