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## Potluck

Robert J. Zajkowski  
rjzajkow@gmail.com

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Potluck

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts  
in  
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts  
Creative Writing

by

Robert Zajkowski-Fontella

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## Introduction

Before there were any of these stories, I was in Cartagena, Colombia getting a tattoo by an exile from Trieste in his pizza parlor after hours. He told me his name but I forget that now. I remember more of his story, like how he couldn't go back to Italy.

“Once a convict,” he'd said, “you're always guilty.”

He had long, black stringy hair, was skinny as a rail, and his face was weathered like an old rocker savaged by the years. His girlfriend, he'd explained, could return anytime, but stays. A large red flag of Trieste was nailed to the white wall over the empty tables.

The windows of the pizza/tattoo parlor were open to the warm evening air over narrow the street. I sipped on a cold beer from the bottle and the Triestine blared Ike and Tina Turner because, he'd said, I was from Detroit. Across from us, a quiet guy from Cali, wearing a dirty woven poncho, sat on a chair, grinning at us as the ink gun whined and blood dribbled out my forearm. The Colombian's legs dangled in the air,

too short to touch the ground. I found his maniacal, glassy eyed expression, unnerving. And occasionally, he giggled as I tried to make small talk with the exiled Italian.

Before we'd begun, I brought him a picture of what I wanted: a heart with wings. He transferred the image to a piece of paper that left a blue outline on my skin. Along the tracing, he started working the high-pitched needle.

I wanted to put a mark on myself—a permanent one. Something I would see and be reminded of what I thought was good to tell myself, at the time: that everyone, good or bad, could teach me something. A shift to correct years of the Army—always poised for action, ready for the next crisis. My reaction to people had become: Who are they? What are their strengths? Do they have to be carried or will they pull their own weight?

The Triestine finished a wing. Little beads of blood sat on top of my skin. It wasn't looking exactly like the picture I'd given him, but I was still telling myself that it would probably snap into place once the ink set. What did I know about tattoos? He took a drag of his cigarette and pulled my skin taut with his thumb.

At some point he asked if I wanted another beer and sent the runt to get it. His coarse woven poncho hung nearly to his knees. Something went wrong with the Cali cartel, the Italian told me, and the Colombian could never go home either.

The other wing and the heart... Well, both sides were shaping up to be different. Seen together, it was clearly lopsided and the heart looked like something drawn by a child with a crayon on a wall. I mentioned how it wasn't looking like the image I'd given him.

"That's what everyone says," he moaned, exasperated. "People expect it to look like the picture. It never does." He said it as if it was an irrational expectation, one he had to explain time and again. I didn't know what to think.

He continued, dashing in the lines that were to encircle the heart and wings as if they glowed in radiant illumination. It wasn't at all round or symmetric and none of the dashes were the same length.

I think he could tell I wasn't pleased, because he said he could fix it with shading, which actually meant blurring the lines. Eventually, I told him, "Enough," just to stop, and I quickly resigned myself that something

had just happened that would have to be dealt with later—that for the present, there was nothing I could do.

After the procedure, we chatted politely. As it got dark, the three of us smoked a joint: the worn Triestine convict, the bug-eyed Caleño, and me. We got stoned and I asked what they thought about truth.

“I fucking hate these conversations!” the Triestine blasted and jumped to his feet. “A fucking buzz kill is what it is!”

I apologized, but pressed on. I said, “But we take it for granted, right? So it’s funny if we can’t say what it is?”

“You know what the truth is?” he snarled and clasped his fingers together shaking them to his words. “The truth is the opposite of a lie. And I hate a lie!” The Colombian nodded.

I left there marked. A prison tattoo, really. I hadn’t gotten what I’d expected. The lines were slurred on the inside of my arm. From the start, it looked prematurely aged. The wing tips were faded and uneven, the heart misshapen, and the radiant lines barely suggestive of any light. It made me feel strange, like my shadow had changed its shape. But now,

today, I can't imagine being without it in all of its evocative, accidental glory. What happened could not be undone, just like the experiences that led me to that place.

I've come to feel that way about the people in these stories, too, as they live in the unexpected echo of previous events. A man hunting squirrels from his upstairs window. A pier, a wide river at night, and drunk people who think they can swim. Streets, a landscape across a table delicately constructed by big hands. A boy making friends with a stray dog. Geese on a hospital lawn. What often began with a simple image became stubborn characters that wouldn't let go, fixing their marks on these pages.

I added some of their recipes the way I might wear a long sleeve shirt to a job interview, hoping one might think there could be more to some of these people than the stories that otherwise define them. Hoping too, I imagine, they might be able to escape their stories and gather together, like at a family or some kind of reunion where they could revel luxury of being able to lie about their lives.



## Small Game

Eugene was in his second story window, again, peering down into his small, Detroit backyard waiting for trespassing squirrels. He wore a shiny, blue track suit that he'd first put on nine months ago, in March, when went on disability just after his wife and son left. First, he wore it for comfort. Now, it was all that fit. His faded brown slippers matched the color of his eyes. Overhead, the sun had beaten back the dull clouds of November. The afternoon sky was a bright empty blue. A warm breeze twisted through the yards smelling like freshly lit briquettes burning off lighter fluid.

Eugene sat on a folding chair peering out the window. The police scanner, the only talk radio he trusted, was plugged-in on the floor by the outlet. For the morning, the warm static hush was only occasionally interrupted by a dispatcher calling out the names of streets and addresses where people were hurting each other. Eugene wondered, often, during his dull vigil waiting for game, if there was any spot in the city where nothing bad had happened.

By the afternoon, with the clouds gone and the temperature cracking sixty,

the scanner became a non-stop rush of robberies, shootings, prowlers, assaults, domestic violence, and shots fired. A child in diapers was seen wandering near the entrance of the freeway ramp. Officers were curtly told, “thanks,” after being asked to, “please,” wait on taking lunch.

A red squirrel peaked around the edge of the garage below and cautiously stepped forward. “Get out of here!” Eugene yelled. The squirrel squeezed under the gate and into the yard.

Eugene pointed his twenty-two caliber rifle out the window. The scope magnified the creature, which had started digging. The tail curled up like a furry question mark. Eugene steadied the cross-hairs.

At first, he’d hunted from the window to get even. His wife had called his work one night after hearing some, “sounds,” in the house. She wanted him to come home.

“I’m scared,” she said.

“First it’s calls about break-ins. Then it’s some carjacking at the end of the block. Why don’t you get a job and I’ll stay home. People sitting in front of the house in a car you don’t know? What is it this time?”

When he got home from work in the morning, Cindy and Mike, his son, weren’t home. Their clothes were gone. She took her alarm clock and his favorite pillow. Downstairs, he found a squirrel hiding under the radiator.

“Something’s in the house,” his wife had said. He got a shovel and killed it. Then he held it up in divorce court, frozen, in a zip-lock bag. “See, “he said to her, “nothing but a squirrel. She scares easy, your honor.” His wife got custody of their son.

In the meantime, he decided to stop ignoring the terrible pain in his knees from standing at work and went to the doctor. Eugene qualified for disability. At home, with not much to do, he saw squirrels traipsing all over his yard, like they owned it. It drove him crazy. He took the rifle he was saving for his son and began to hunt—always yelling a warning first, to give them a chance.

As the months went by, watching from dawn to dusk became a habit. Sitting in the bedroom window, hunting, eating Pepperidge Farm Raspberry Milano cookies, with the police scanner crackling in the background, became his steady routine. And every day he bagged more squirrels.

“You’d think they’d learn,” he’d thought, “how to share information, how to communicate.” This line of reasoning, over the many still hours, led him to think that an animal living in a city, like Detroit, without any threats is stuck, evolutionarily. He had come to believe that, in some small way, their advancement could only be improved by danger and he pondered a future where they might even be as advanced as human beings.

Eugene had a perfect profile of the red squirrel, below. He squeezed the

trigger. The rifle shot cracked, which it wasn't supposed to. The rubber baby-bottle nipple, that would have silenced the report, was still on the window sill among pleated, empty paper cups of the cookies.

Eugene sat completely still, listening. What would someone do? he wondered. Yell? Like, 'Hey, stop that shooting!' No, he thought. They would be listening for another and when it didn't come, think, 'maybe that was a firecracker,' and go about their business. Assured, Eugene got the rifle ready for the next squirrel.

He put the butt of the rifle on the chair and stretched the rubber baby bottle nipple over the barrel. But the gun slipped, slamming against the floor—and bang! A dusting of plaster fluttered down. The way the rifle landed between his legs, Eugene could see into barrel's maw and gulped. He pawed at his neck and face. No blood. He took a deep breath, then another. He got up because he felt he had to move and staggered around the chair. There was a hole in the ceiling above him. He shook his head in disbelief then ate a Raspberry Milano, then another, and then the last two to finish a bag.

Suddenly, he caught a twitch of movement down on the lawn. He jerked the rifle up against his shoulder to peer through the scope. The squirrel was pushing itself forward with its back legs. Eugene wondered, again, how it might be better to only wound them. Let them live, or limp off, to spread the news. Now, like

every other time, he couldn't stand to see them try to move, like they couldn't understand what it meant to have a big hole in them.

Another loud crack split the November air. The red squirrel was driven, dead, into the ground. Fireworks, he reassured himself. No one wants to hear gunshots where they live. They'll make excuses. Maybe people will wonder, he thought, what someone is celebrating. The thought of a party distracted him and made him smile. He recalled how he'd programmed his doorbell to play Cool and the Gang's, "Celebration," and any day now, Marcia, from across the street, would finally get up the courage, come over, and confess her feelings for him.

Below, there were two dead squirrels in the yard—the latest and one that had been dropped in silence, earlier. Eugene looked up at the hole in the ceiling and hoped the roof wouldn't leak. His brief hope of Marcia and the doorbell drained away, replaced by the notion that his ex-wife might be the first to ring the bell that night, when she brought his son over his fourteenth birthday.

He lobbed the empty bag of Raspberry Milanos back towards the open black trash bag in the center of the room. Once full, he'd put it into the closet with the others, ready for the class-action lawsuit that he was sure would start against Pepperidge Farms for making an addictive cookie. With the money, he'd hire a private detective to find out where his ex-wife and son lived, send Mike to a good college when the time came, and surprise Marcia, across the street, with

tickets to Hawaii. He'd do lots of things. Buy a TV. Buy clothes that fit.

Eugene carefully began to unfold the top of another bag of Milanos, enjoying the weight in his hands. Compared to a single cookie, the bag felt bottomless. A few trash bags ago, he'd decided to open the bags carefully because they could always be torn later to show a lack of self-control. As he crunched the first, fresh cookie, he heard his own street, Kempa, called out on the scanner: report of shots fired. 7 Motor 2 took the run. When he heard his street repeated in the same voice as every other crime, he got scared. His first thought was where to hide the gun.

The more he tried to think the louder and more distracting the police scanner seemed, hissing and crackling with calls. He yanked the cord out of the wall but battery power took over. He wound up to kick-in the face of the chattering radio. As much as he wanted to stomp it, he restrained himself and gave a quick tap at the power button with his toe, telling himself that he couldn't afford another one. As a plan, Eugene decided it would be better to get the dead squirrels up from the lawn.

He picked up each one by the tail and dropped them into Ziploc bags. They went into the freezer chest in the basement with all of the others. Over the months, they'd piled up, and now, finally, to get the lid down, he had to jump up and sit on top to get the key to latch, like an overstuffed suitcase. He shimmied

off the freezer and looked back. He would have to do something soon. Donate them to a shelter, or something, he thought. He liked the idea. Why not?

Thanksgiving's right around the corner and the Capuchin Kitchen could do a real feast. On his way back up the stairs, he thought how that would be good for his son to see. Teach him something about charity.

While watching through the front drapes for the cops, he saw Marcia out across the street. He considered going back upstairs to hide the rifle but watched her rake instead.

Her snug jeans clung to her ample curves. Her tight black v-neck was like a second skin. The sun sparkled off the gold, metal loops of her belt, as she pulled the rake. All summer she'd been out working on the yard—after dandelions, weeding, bending down, on her knees, moving around, twisting her body. She was a meticulous edger, and even scrapped out the cracks in the concrete sidewalk. Though her face was hidden now in the shadow, under the brim of her Tiger's hat, Eugene pictured it from memory. He saw that slow, sensuous way her eyes moved. He saw her dusky, full lips, the caramel glow of her skin. I should go outside, he thought—check the mail, say hello.

As he pushed open the door a pulpy heap of super market circulars caught on the bottom edge. Their cheap ink had run after the last rain, staining the porch with dribbles of pink, blue, and green. If I do see a cop, Eugene thought, like

they ever even come, I'll file a complaint, sue for damages. Get the stores to pay for power-washing or if it can't be washed, have them pay for a whole new porch. If they don't like that, I'll break off a chunk of concrete and take that to the store as my coupon. When he tried to pick up one of the papers to get an address, it came apart as a pulpy mash between his fingers.

Dex was out, two doors down, pacing back and forth in front of the group home. His head was shaved clean and, as usual, his Army jacket flapped open as he turned. The sun fluttered down through the tree limbs like golden coins. By the snap of Dex's stride, Eugene thought, that in his own way, he was probably enjoying the weather too.

Eugene considered how peaceful his block was and how if the police did come, they would smile, wave at the citizens, and keep driving. If they did stop, it would just be to copy down the address of one of the empty houses. Who wouldn't want to live here, he thought.

Suddenly, a grey squirrel darted across his front lawn, under the Obama sign, and leapt onto the birch tree.

"Hey!" he yelled as it scampered up the branches. Eugene smiled and waved at Marcia, when she stopped to look at him. She shook her head and went back to work.

Shy, that was her problem, he thought. The campaign sign he'd put back up



was there to let her know, that as far as he was concerned, the black/white thing didn't matter. Eugene, lifted by the cold's reprieve, decided maybe it was time to be more direct with her. He crossed the street and from the edge of her driveway called out, "Hello," then added after she gave a quick nod, "If some night you just have to see me, you know. Want to visit. Trust me, I understand. But ring the bell. It's special." She didn't respond. "Want to know how it's special?" he asked. When she still didn't respond, he added, "I like surprises too," before recrossing the street.

Dex snapped to attention and crisply executed a salute at the patrol car that eased by. The officer drove slowly up the block and kept going—never stopped.

Eugene imagined what a cop would say to him: 'Listen to me Elmer Fud, people are out there are killing each other. In the hour or so it will take me to get your ass in a cell, I might be able to stop someone from dying. Get me? If I hear about you hunting in my city again...' Eugene imagined the cop, in front of Marcia, would accuse him of not respecting her and he would have to humiliatingly plead that he did.

He wondered if she might have been the one to call the police, as if that was the only way she could reach out to him. Misguided, he thought. He considered saying something, but that would just make her feel bad and he wasn't that kind of person. Eugene wondered instead about how to let her know that he wasn't

upset and considered what he could get her for Christmas. Pajamas came to mind. The satin kind, pink, maybe.

Eugene stood on the folding chair squeezing Colgate into the bullet hole in the ceiling. He had a hard time getting it smooth. He chain-ate Raspberry Milanos then decided to run up to the convenience store to see if they had anything to patch holes. When his son came later he didn't want to have to explain the mistake.

As he pattered away in his battered, red Geo Metro, neither Marcia not Dex seemed to look up from their raking and pacing. At the store, a handwritten sign was taped to the door: "Back in 5 Min." The bearded clerk, who Eugene called Al, was inside praying; in turns, bowing, then disappearing behind the counter, and coming back up, his cupped hands almost touching his beard.

A man walked past Eugene and yanked on the door. "That motherfucker praying and shit, again?" he said. "Damn!"

Eugene liked the clerk because he kept extra Milanos behind the counter in case they ran-out on the shelf. He told the other customer, "I think he works too much to go to church, so he has to split it up. A little here and there."

"Fuck you fat man," the guy said. "Got a cigarette?"

Once they were let inside and Al was back behind his bullet-proof glass,

Eugene asked if he sold spackle. He didn't seem to understand what that was.

The waiting man blurted, "Shit to fix your walls with! They aint got that here. Hurry the fuck up!"

Eugene didn't want to give up his spot at the counter—at this point, out of principle. He had plenty of cookies at home. When he saw the pornography behind the counter, he immediately thought of his son's birthday.

"Maybe one of those," he said, pointing. Al asked him which one he meant.

"Fuck, dude!" the waiting man said. "Pick out some titties and let's go!"

Eugene calmly turned towards him and said, "It's for my son. For his birthday. Might be his first, so I want it to be right."

"All's I want's a pack of squares," the man plead. Al shrugged. Eugene let him go ahead.

When they were finally alone in the store, Al slapped one magazine after another against the glass.

"I'm looking for one of the ones, you know," Eugene said, "with good eyes. Not the come-and, you know, the come-and-do-me eyes." He asked to see the *Barely Legal* again and added, "You know, the just-happy-to-be-in-a-room-with-you eyes." Al shrugged.

Eugene scrutinized the woman on the cover through the glass. She had on a white cowboy hat, was smiling and it didn't look fake. She had little blue eyes

bright red lips, and a delicate neck peeking out over the paper privacy band. He went with that one. “Her,” he said.

Eugene stared at her face through the plastic wrapper during the short drive home, keeping the magazine on the steering wheel. He wasn't completely sure about her eyes. It was getting dark and he wanted to get her under better light.

When he pulled up, Marcia wasn't out but Dex was in steady stride, pacing between the driveways in front of the group home.

Eugene waved him over and called out, “I want to ask you something.” He was curious what he would say about her. “Crazy people aren't good at hiding the truth,” he thought. Dex acted like he hadn't heard him and kept pacing.

Eugene put the magazine, still in the wrapper, on the table by the front window and sat down with a fresh bag of Raspberry Milanos. He wanted to catch his ex-wife before she rang the bell.

The streetlights came on. Blue from Marcia's TV flickered behind her curtains. The sky was dark orange, like a bumper rusting under dirty water.

She must be so lonely, he thought, watching TV all by herself. He remembered how his wife and son would talk about the shows that he had to miss, working nights. They took the TV when they left. I should get another, he thought. Marcia and I could watch together. He wondered how if he got a cheap

one, soon, he could sink it up to her flickering lights and they could have the same shows to talk about.

He finished the bag of Milanos then left a message on his ex-wife's phone, wondering where they were. He'd avoided looking at the clock in the kitchen when he'd called but felt it was getting late. His hopes would momentarily rise with every pair of headlights that approached. After opening a second bag of Milanos, he saw Marcia's shadow bounce across the curtain and then disappear when her TV blinked off. Because of the streetlights, the dry leaves tangled in his bent grass looked like they were covered in silver powder. Almost like frost, he thought, and held his hand out against the window. It felt as cold as a long dead squirrel. Another car came and went. He looked down at the woman's eyes on the magazine and drew his finger across the rippling plastic wrap.

"I want to make my mind up about you," he said to her. He would have opened the magazine to be sure, but didn't want to ruin the gift.

## Two of a Kind

Lauren's home care-giver training was a morning of sitting around a folding table on metal chairs in a small conference room with the three other new-hires—two men and one woman. They watched videos from a laptop about the Adesco story, the danger of blood borne pathogens, and how to read cleaning product and medication labels. After lunch, they were shown how to properly lift boxes and move people with a strap. They signed papers, were fingerprinted then drug testing was announced. The receptionist hovered just outside the open stall while Lauren peed.

Later, in a cubical with a placement specialist, she was asked if she was at all squeamish about the job. "Because you'll see things," he said. "You'll have to do things, like cleaning people after an accident—."

"I choose the job to help people," Lauren said, knowing what to say.

“Good,” he said and nodded then wanted to go over what happens if she is with a customer when they die. “First,” he said. “No one is ever dead. Treat them as if they are alive and call an ambulance. You are not qualified to determine someone’s health. Is that clear?” he asked.

The next day, in the training room around the folding table, the group of new hires signed more papers and were given vouchers to pick up blue scrubs at Harbor Supply, where they could also drop them off for cleaning. The placement specialist came in and told them they were entering a life of service, adding, if they quit they will lose their license. In an envelope, Lauren received her certificate of training and a paper with her first assignment: Mitch Bonbright, 91.

She couldn’t resist driving to see where she would be working. The houses in the neighborhood were huge—some mansions—and she remembered this was where people come at Christmas to see the ornate lights on the lawns. Her car chugged up a hill. At the top, big houses were built on the bluff, overlooking the Mississippi. Lauren double checked the address, confirming that it was a plain, but large, two-story colonial at the end of a tree lined drive. Beyond, puffy, white clouds drifted across pale blue sky. Seeing the house made her new job real to her and she was happy. Finally, she would be done with Pizza Hut and make enough money to move out of the house she shared with three filthy boys. After seeing Mr. Bonbrite’s she stopped by Ashley Furniture to dream about how she

would furnish her future apartment.

Salesmen in powder blue polos and khakis approached her every few minutes. With the first, she explained how she is just starting a new job and, for now, she was just looking. He promised free delivery and low monthly payments. She'd cut her story shorter with each new salesperson. In kitchens, she told the man there were a lot of things she liked but needed to find an apartment first. He said it was important to lock in today's sale prices and could always take delivery later. Finally, she browsed while pretending to be on the phone.

Bouncing slightly on the edge of a four-poster bed that she'd decided to buy once she had the money, Lauren called her mom to tell her about her new job.

“And what if they don't like you?” her mom asked. “Have you thought about that?” She made it out of the store before starting to cry.

The doorbell still seemed to echo through the house when Lauren was let in for her first day of work. Another home care-giver showed her around, stopping in the kitchen to show her the list of emergency numbers next to the phone. She explained how meal delivery worked.

“Oh, I forgot to smell you,” she said, leaning in.

“What are you doing?” Lauren asked, squirming back.



“Perfume or whatever sends him into fits. Asthma. Could die.” Lauren told her she wasn’t wearing anything. “Not everyone reads the care plan,” the woman said, mentioning how the client doesn’t like to see the same people and this was only her second time back. Lauren wondered how quickly she would be placed somewhere else, when that happened.

“When your relief comes. I’m just saying. Not everyone reads the care plan. Gotta cover yourself.”

Together, they climbed the wide, carpeted stairs. A TV was on somewhere.

The old man was sitting up in his adjustable bed. The TV was in a bureau against the wall. “Are you even old enough to buy alcohol?” were his first words to her.

“Almost,” she told him.

The man wiped his watery eyes with a tissue. The other care-giver said goodbye and they were left alone. From the bank of windows next to the bed, the river sparkled below. Lauren couldn’t help but to approach and marvel at the view. River Side Park with its rolling grounds, study maples, and pier jutting out into the water was on the opposite bank. Beyond, peaked roofs extended in rows between treetops.

“Not bad, huh?” Mr. Bonbright said. “Later,” he told her, “you’ll go to Burger King and get me a Double Whopper, no pickles, and large onion rings.

Money's in the desk drawer downstairs." Then he unmuted the TV.

Over the next nights of work, Mr. Bonbright sent Lauren out for fast food. She took the money from the drawer in the bedroom desk and come back with McDonald's, Taco Bell, or KFC.

On night he'd said, "Time for my sponge bath," and winked. But he was only kidding. All she had to do, as before, help him from one wheelchair to another that he could roll into the shower and help him dress when he was done.

At night, she could even rest, falling asleep on top of the covers in the adjoining bedroom with the same splendid river view he had. Only occasionally she would wake up in the dark, startled, because the TV news, constantly on, would work its way into her dreams.

One Sunday evening as the sun set and Lauren gazed out her window at the golden peaks bobbing across the wide river below, Mr. Bonbright muted the television and called her in. He accused her of taking money for herself from the desk. "There are only two kinds of people in this world," he said. "The stupid and those looking out for themselves."

She told him that she didn't take anything. She said she was sorry but that, "He must be mistaken."

"Pull up a chair," he told her and explained that he wanted people around him that he understood, which he explained meant people whose motives were

reasonable—self-interested. “You can’t trust people,” he said, “who’s motives are divided.” He asked how much she was getting paid by Adesco. “Don’t you despise middle-men?” he asked.

“They tell me where to go,” she said.

“And now you’re here,” he said. He would pay her what he paid Adesco and she would work six-nights a week. He’d spend one alone. “What’s there to think about!” he barked.

She kept the thought of a revoked license to herself. “Okay,” she said quietly. “Thank you.”

“Don’t ever,” he said, “let me here you say those words again!”

In addition to her increased pay, the next week, Lauren started keeping the change from the fast food runs and eating what she’d ordered in the car on the way back to the house. On Saturday, he called her in and again accused her of stealing his money.

“Well it’s my car,” she shoot back. “My gas. And I’ll have to fix it if it breaks.”

“Good,” he said. “You’re beginning to understand.” Later, as he sent her out for pizza, he told her to call him, “Mr. B.” She liked the familiarity—wasn’t sure if she liked him yet, but it made him seem more knowable.

On the way to the Pizza Hut where she used to work, she marveled at how far she'd come. Maybe, she wouldn't hurry into her own apartment, she thought. She spent six nights a week now at Mr. B's. Maybe she could just save her money and tried to imagine how long until she had enough to buy a house of her own, maybe a two-flat so she could rent half of it out—the downstairs, she thought, because heat rises. Yes, I'm learning, she thought.

Chet was working the counter when she came in. He glanced over his shoulder and apologized. Kathy, the manager, was around and he didn't think he could slip her a discount.

“Come on,” she whined, “Can't you at least hook me up with some cheese sticks?” He sighed and said that he'd try. She ate the bread sticks on the way back to Mr. B's and thought they were the best that she'd ever tasted.

One night at home on her day off, she heard someone in the kitchen through the sheet that was the door to her room. She peaked in and saw her roommate, Nate, reading the back of a box of rotini. He put it back in the cupboard and got a beer out of the fridge instead.

“Hey,” she called in. “You got another one of those?”

He seemed to fumble with the can, as if unsure whether he should open it for her or not, then just handed it over. “How's work?” he asked.

She stepped closer to him and ran her open hand up his thigh.

He took a startled breath but didn't step away.

“Let's drink these in my room,” she cooed.

A couple weeks later, in mid-September, while Lauren was asleep in the bedroom adjoining Mr.-B's, she was roused slightly by some noise. She thought it was news again, turned-up loud and finding its way into her dreams. But the sound was all around her. A helicopter shook though the air outside the window. The spotlight panned across the river below. Emergency boats bobbed on the dark surface. There was an ambulance pulled out onto the pier of Riverside Park. Patrol cars were strewn across the lawn. People passed in and out of bright lights.

Lauren looked in on Mr. B to see if he happened to be awake. The bed was raised and he was turned towards the window looking through binoculars.

“What did I tell you?” he said. “Two kinds of people.” He asked Lauren to go get him a whisky, neat.

The helicopter thumped through the air nearby and briefly flashed its spotlight across the house.

She came back with the drink. “Get one for yourself,” he said.

Mr. B announced a toast when she returned. “To one less waste in the gene-pool!”

Lauren couldn't help but turn to watch the commotion below and asked what had happened.

"Someone drowned," Mr. B said. "Happens... Well, not all the time but often. Once, twice a year. Enough to be rewarded if you watch for it."

Lauren drank standing. They each took gulps, quietly watching the flurry of activity over the river. His reflection floated in the glass—a thin old man in pajamas, smiling, with binoculars over his eyes.

September turned into October. Lauren began to hate where she lived with Nate and the others. When he would get drunk, he would come to her room on her only night off, waking her up. It was also getting cold too, and she wasn't looking forward to another winter in that drafty, filthy house. Buying something could wait.

At work, she was comfortable with the routine of running out for fast food and falling asleep to the news in the room next to Mr. B's. She had begun to think that if someone was dumb enough to jump in the water, their stupidity would have killed them sooner or later, anyway.

Lauren found a one bedroom not far from Mr. B's and moved in. She picked out what she wanted at the furniture store and planned to have her mom over for dinner after it was delivered.

Mr. B gave her a twenty-one dollar bonus on her birthday. “Yeah,” he said while smiling. “But now you have to give me 92 for mine.”

“Is that how it works?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said with a big grin.

She gave him the money back and he laughed.

Two nights later, Lauren woke up when Mr. B called for her. She rushed in.

“Look!” he said, handing her the binoculars. “Look for a dark spot in the light reflected by the pier.”

“He’s swimming,” she said while looking at the man in the water.

“Watch,” Mr. B said.

The man was beginning to move downstream. He was thrashing towards the pier. Nauseous, she handed back the binoculars.

The next morning, boats swarmed over the river.

“I don’t know why they look there,” Mr. B said. “It’s never where they end up.”

Another night, Mr. B had an episode with his breathing. His gasping woke her up. His inhaler had been knocked off the nightstand. He clutched his throat. She paused for a moment, stunned, and considered letting him die, just watching. The thought frightened her and she grabbed the inhaler and pumped it into his

mouth.

His breathing became more regular. He patted her on the arm.

When he was able to sit up and talk, she asked if he wanted her to call an ambulance. He shook his head then asked if she needed a raise. Lauren shrugged. They stared awkwardly at each other in the space where someone might normally have said thank you.

He died a few days later while she was out on a food run. Lauren came back with Culvers—had eaten the cheese curds in the car, while they were hot and gooey.

Her first thought when she stepped in and saw him so still, was to mute the blaring TV. Then she thought about how she would have liked to have been there, to help or watch—to be able to make up her mind in that moment. Her thoughts suddenly turned to money. She shot through the house grabbing all she could find. While looking through the desk in the study, she thought, what if he's not dead. She dashed upstairs to make sure: checked his pulse, looked for the rise and fall of his chest, felt for his breath against her cheek, then made a last sweep of the house for valuables she could fit into her car—the least she thought he owed her for dying.



Eugene's BBQ Squirrel – If the homeless shelter wants to mix it up a bit.

Put all the ingredients, except for the squirrel, together in a bowl.

If you don't have squirrel, you can substitute ribs, about 2 ½ to 3 lbs.

Ingredientes:

1 squirrel

½ cup sugar

½ cup soy sauce

½ cup onion powder

¼ cup green onions

¼ cup roasted garlic

½ tablespoon black pepper

Rub the meat with the sticky mixture and leave refrigerated overnight. Grill over low to medium heat. The sauce caramelizes and crusts over perfectly, leaving the inside soft and moist. It's delicious and pretty easy if you have the right ingredients.

## Alderman Jim

Jim Peeler worked as the groundskeeper at St. Gertrude's on the north side of Chicago and lived in a cramped, attic apartment above the church garage. He was in his mid-thirties, a thin man, almost fragile looking inside his stiff, blue, work shirt and trousers. He had blond hair and small brown, somewhat bewildered looking eyes—like they could belong to a child. He ate poorly, drinking instant coffee and often buying soups and Hormel chili from the nearby convenience store and eating them out of the can, cold, with white bread.

His third day into the job, Father Don, the priest came and told him not to work so much. “No one expects you to work twenty-four seven,” he said. Jim had the electric hedge trimmer out late the night before, working by streetlight. The priest said how it was important that the church be seen a quiet, contemplative place.

Jim avoided idle time by keeping busy and the evening after being spoken to by the priest about the trimmer, he pulled down the garage doors and kept working anyway, trying to be quiet—cleaning and silently putting the place in order.

While sweeping, he tipped up a standing sheet of plywood in order to get underneath with the broom. The raised corner knocked against an overhead shelf. A can of paint fell over, pouring black paint down the plywood. He tried to wipe it off but only smeared the paint. Applying gasoline seemed to drive the paint further into the wood, turning it into a grainy, deep, purple stain. He decided to clean it, first by hand. The stain dimmed but didn't disappear. Both frustrated and encouraged, he put the sheet across a pair of sawhorses and plugged in an electric belt sander.

He didn't hear Father Don come in. The tap on the shoulder startled him and the machine skittered across the plywood, off the edge, unplugging itself and banging across the concrete floor.

The priest's eyebrows were furrowed menacingly, but he grunted, "Sorry to startle you."

Jim dropped his head, feeling ashamed. On the floor he saw jagged, black, plastic fragments broken from the sander's casing. "Oh God. Oh God," he said. "I'm so sorry. I'll pay for it. I'll work it off."

The priest stood there quietly as Jim vigorously swept up the shards. The longer he went without speaking, the more Jim was sure he would be fired.

Finally, Father Don, in a softened voice, asked what Jim was working on. He shrugged then began to wrap the cord tightly around the broken tool. "Some

paint spilled,” he eventually admitted. “And I was trying to clean it up. Put it back the way it was before.”

The priest said he didn't know where the wood had come from and he could just get rid of it. Jim grinned in relief at hearing he wasn't being fired.

Alone in the garage, Jim looked over the sheet of plywood. He ran his open hand across the dip where he'd sanded away the wood. He followed the bands of grain with his fingertips. They seemed to form the outline of a face. There were eyes, the mouth, a nose. A little, cute nose, he thought. He jerked his hand away and stumbled backwards, over his own feet.

“Well I've got to do something,” he thought. “Where was I?”

He sprung back to cleaning, careful to work quietly. He swept and mopped, working around the new obstacle in the room. Though he chose not to look at the wood across the saw horses, he felt its presence in the room.

Still awake, he began to organize the nuts and bolts from the old baby food jars left by the custodian before him. He dumped them out across the workbench. Once they were all jumbled together, he didn't where to begin.

He focused his attention, again, on cleaning. He attacked the underside of the lawn mower with a rag and screwdriver then made the weed whacker look new again and even scoured the tines of the rake. Exhausted, he finally stumbled upstairs and slept.

In the morning, the panel was where he'd left it—hadn't moved or changed. He felt like he had to keep his eye on it, like it might do something. Jim decided to roll up the garage doors and drag it out to the brush pile next to the garage.

The fresh air and soft light steadied him. When he stepped up to the wood, ready to drag it away, he peaked at where the face had been. Nothing. He felt it with his hand. Only wood. He scolded himself for wanting to throw it away.

He dumped what was left of the black paint onto the surface and started to spread it out with a brush, only there wasn't enough to cover. He'd felt an impulse to make it uniform, somehow return it to not being anything. Then he could lean it back up against the wall. Instead of having the paint spread out in sloppy brush strokes, he decided to tape the sides and paint a straight stripe right up the middle. He felt like it was the best he could do at the moment. Stepping back, from having spread the paint to edges of the tape, he thought, it looked like he'd made a road—if only it wasn't so shiny.

The glare began to bother him and he couldn't walk away. He thought it was like a mirror, only one you couldn't see into. He tore a tiny pinch of Styrofoam from his cup and pushed it into the corner of wet paint with his finger nail. He minced up the rest of the cup with a kitchen knife and let it sift down from his fingers. Jim further dulled the surface by tapping an empty dust pan

overhead. And finally, he went over the whole stretch with a crusty paint roller.

It's crazy, he thought, how much it looked like a road. You almost don't have to imagine. A pair of intersections would really do it. That's when he realized the time. Nearly ten o'clock. He was late for work. He grabbed clippers, shouldered a ladder, and rushed out one of the open doors.

Over the next week Jim added the intersections, resurfaced the street, and painted in the yellow lines. When he realized something was missing, he carefully cut squares out of soup can lids, knocked in oblong holes, bent over the edges, and colored the surface with brown shoe polish for sewer grates. Next came the sidewalk and curbs, each slab carefully painted-in, layer after layer, built up with a mix of gray paint, Plaster of Paris, and sand.

On his first free weekend at the church, he did little else but pay meticulous attention to what was taking shape. He scratched marks inside tiny ovals at the edge of each few sections of sidewalk to mimic the impressions made by cement companies. With a small brush he daubed orange markings, like "2/7," for the paint sprayed on the sidewalks by the gas company to indicate the depth and length of the lines for any utility workers that would come after. Manhole covers were pennies with the impressions ground off and replaced with stampings he beat into them with screwdriver. Obsessively, he worked at correcting the

difference between what was before him and how a street would actually look.

With each addition the scene became more its own and further from the mistake that began its construction.

On Monday, the priest mentioned how he hadn't seen him at mass.

Jim gasped and felt his insides wobble. Sheepishly, he asked, "Did I... Do I have to go?"

"Well, no," Father Don said. "But as long as you're not working or—."

"No!" Jim said and muttered how it was personal.

Eventually, Father Don must have seen the project because one day while Jim was up on a ladder clipping out the ragged edges of a cedar by the parking lot, he called up, "I'm liking your little what-ever-it-is. That train set sort of thing."

Jim suddenly felt unsteady like he might fall, lose control of his own grip, knees, and ankles. He held on, looking down.

"No, really. Very creative," the priest said. "Hope you find room for a church in that little village."

Father Don looked small down below. His loud voice seemed out of proportion with his size. The tips of his tiny, black shoes glinted against the asphalt, magnifying the sun. The hedges beyond, started to look like moss on round rocks and seemed to be shrinking, getting farther away and out of focus.

Jim felt queasy and carefully began to descend. At the bottom, the priest asked if he was scared of heights.

“No,” Jim said. “Just a bit startled, I guess.”

“Huh. I should wear bells or something,” Father Don joked then thanked Jim for changing the burned out lights in the church and doing the tree, saying, “It’s amazing. I don’t even have to tell you things.” He motioned with his arm and they began to walk together.

The priest spoke, saying something about renovation. Jim found it hard to listen. He thought, instead, how he should have covered the panel. He went over and over how he should have hidden it, somehow.

The priest paused their stroll and pointed out over the large lawn. “So maybe over there, a pergola,” he said. “Something for *Campsis radicans* to climb on. I’ve been reading all about it. Or *Passiflora incarnata*. Both robust. But with you on the job, it should be fine. I mean the last guy couldn’t even keep up with the ivy.”

The priest gestured again, waving his hand, mentioning benches, raised beds, and a pond. “You know,” he said, “something small. Just big enough for some *Eichornia crassipes*.” Jim wasn’t exactly sure what the priest was describing but nodded.

As they continued over the grounds, Father Don went on to mention, “A



grotto for Mary with *Ipomoea nil* and *carnea*” and “a small labyrinth made out of pea gravel like the one at St. Olaf’s where the archdiocese did their retreat.

Perhaps bordered with *Mentha sachalinensis*. I’m just so excited about this,” he added. “And they still use Latin!”

The priest brought Jim back around to the cedar he’d been trimming. “So what do you think? Probably too late for this year’s garden walk. But next year!” he exclaimed, “Well, we’ll be a destination! Maybe get people back into pews.”

Through the summer, Jim dedicated himself to both projects: his own construction in the garage and Father Don’s transformation of the grounds. Outside, he worked with fervor during the day. Even with gloves, his hands became thickly calloused from shoveling so much dirt and stacking stones for the raised beds and grotto. The priest seemed pleased by the progress, often startling Jim from behind, whose mind was elsewhere, by exclaiming things like, “Looks great !” and “Wonderful!”

One sweltering day, the priest found him passed out, face down in the dirt.

“Oh yeah. I just. Must have,” Jim stammered. “No. Yeah. I’m fine,” he said and stood, propping himself up on the shovel.

The priest hurried off for water and told him to wait in the shade until he got back. Feeling a bit dazed, Jim downed a bottle of his own warm water and

picked back up to work.

The pergola and trellises went up quickly. Jim dug the pond and lined it with plastic. The perennials were planted and after only a day of appearing limp and withered, stood tall again, seeming to burn green. “Water and sunshine are all they need now,” Father Don said.

Weeding the beds became a constant chore as did training the vines to scale evenly up the wooden posts and not just tangle in low clumps strangling each other. The creepers, also, surged up the squat grotto and quickly began closing in on Mary, wrapping over her feet and twisting up her gown. Jim snipped back the thin tendrils with scissors and the fine, green curls fell at his feet like cut hair. The pond, in a blink it seemed, could disappear, covered over in exuberant green and blending in with the lawn—a soggy, floating carpet.

He could never remember the names of the plants as Father Don referred to them, in Latin. “*Radicada, Ipanema, Cataracts.*” They were just orphan sounds that wouldn’t stay still or fix themselves to any one plant. Perhaps it would be easier once they flowered. For the present, they were surging, rambunctious tangles known to him by where and how they grew.

Only the mint, planted around and between the twists of the small labyrinth, he knew by smell. It shot hardy feelers underground and burst up

through the pea gravel. Jim had to cut them back daily so the path wouldn't disappear. He piled the clippings with the others in the ever-rising heap next to the garage.

Jim applied himself, pleasantly busy and unaware of the specific passing of days through July then August and September. Inside, he worked late into the night until he began to nod off on his feet. Then he'd be up again in the morning, feeling as if he'd dreamed of the streets as a dusty building site before people came to live there—all hammers, saws, and growling machines, with himself as a kind of replacement foreman who'd taken charge over a project gone wrong, barking orders, keeping the pace from going slack.

He framed two-flats, three-flats, storefronts, and other buildings out of cardboard he'd raided from the priest's recycling. But he thought he should have planned ahead, as the contents of the trash had changed. The cardboard had gotten thinner—just macaroni and cheese boxes now instead of the sturdy, frozen entrees from before. And he was mad at himself for not having saved the fresh pasta containers to use as windows while he had the chance. Luckily, Jim had kept the round wooden brie boxes as he'd found them because those had disappeared as well. And now cheap, thin walled aluminum beer cans had seemed to replace the green, wine bottles from before. He wished he'd saved a few of those, at least, to use the peak of the dimpled bottoms for traffic lights.

Perhaps stop signs would be enough.

Jim began to shop at the corner store more, with packaging in mind. He bought donuts, saving the clear trays for windows and got sandwich wedges in plastic for the same reason, only opaque. He also started eating lots of popsicles to save the sticks for window sills, porches, and strengthening the frames of the buildings to support the eventual weight of the roofs. Only one morning, he saw black specks roving all over his landscape—ants.

A twisting line of them scurried up his street. They streamed through empty windows, scaling the support planks he'd glued into the corners and hovered there over the flavor stained sticks. He began to blow, knocking some off. Others held. He smashed them with a flat head screw driver. He whisked the scampering line off the road with his hand. Some stuck there to his fingers and Jim mashed them with his thumb.

The undulating trail ran down one of the sawhorse legs and twisted across the concrete floor to the wall under the workbench. He shuffled, dragging his boot over the advancing ants.

“You have no right,” he muttered.

He dumped bleach onto the floor, making a puddle against the wall and bounded back to clear the darting specks left on what he'd built. Yet more appeared heading into the room, making a tentative line around the bleach.

He pushed down the nozzle on a rusty can of Raid wasp killer and soaked them then covered the base of the wall with the spray. He bolted outside ready to do the same but was stopped by the moldering heap of clippings, now as high as the gutters. He dove in between the wall and vegetation, pushing with his hands and feet, heaving the pile over, away from the garage.

After emptying the can, Jim ran up the rectory stairs and through the door, expecting to find the church office, but burst, panting, right into what was Father Don's living room. He was on the couch in blue pajamas.

"What happened?" the priest asked and bolted up. "Were you attacked?"

"What? No," Jim replied and said how the trimmings had become a bug's nest. "They're like a disease," he said.

"But you're cut all over," Father Don said and stepped towards him.

Jim glanced at his arms. Overlapping, puckered scratches dribbled red. "We should burn it," he said.

"Burn it? Your face. It's all scratched."

"Things are living in there. We should burn it now!"

The priest told him he would call a service and see how much they would charge to haul it away then suggested Jim clean himself up in the bathroom.

In the mirror, he saw his cheeks and forehead crisscrossed with lines like pink webbing. He ran the water until it was warm and washed his face and arms,

using what was left of a small bar of soap, like from a hotel. He wasn't bleeding anymore but the abrasions were puffy and beginning to itch.

He lathered again and washed, remembering the stain of black paint on the sheet of plywood, how deeply it had penetrated and thought he should have known better with the popsicle sticks and soaked them in bleach or salt water. Just because they weren't sticky didn't mean sugar hadn't gotten into the wood. Things get inside and are hard to get out. He should have known that, he thought and shook his head, angry with himself. He wondered how he'd clean his buildings, the sidewalks, and streets to get rid of the dirt ants leave so they can find their way back, which reminded him he should do that right away, go and erase their trail.

When Jim came out of the bathroom, Father Don told him he was looking better.

"What did they say?" Jim asked.

"Who?"

"The trash people," Jim said.

The priest told him he would call when they open.

Soon, as temperatures began to cool, the seemingly boundless advance of the unpronounceable plants, slowed.

Jim had time to start working on Father Don's "to do" list—maintenance

that had been put off during the big push to get everything done outside. He also mulched the beds with the seasons accumulating leaves and cut the exuberant plants back to their trunks.

The new mound of clippings, stacked away from the garage, grew equal to the height of the first pile. Only, now he had to dispose of the tangled heap two bags at a time because Father Don had said getting it hauled away again wasn't an option after the previous crisis. The service had tried sending another bill after the vines began to grow in the dump and started taking over. Apparently, another service had to be called in for eradication.

"If I didn't have the archbishop's attention already with hardly anyone coming to mass," the priest said. "I do now."

"We should have burned it," Jim said. "Especially because of the bugs hiding inside."

With the change of season, Jim also had more energy for his building and more time, because night started coming earlier as well. He began to texture the surfaces of the store fronts and homes: some with overlapping sanded Popsicle sticks; others with stucco; and many with miniscule bricks made out of sculpted, wood putty that he'd prick with a pin and dry before stacking them in miniature masonry. Soon, he was mounting the first windows on frames and using thickened glue to mimic glazing. He hung doors, some made from the priest's,

old, brie boxes and others from his aluminum beer cans, cut, bent, and creased. The knobs were screws that he ground down and rounded over.

He painted in some tiny doorbells, building them up one brush stroke at a time, same as he did for the key plates around the doorknobs. And using the concave bottom of a *Barbasol* shaving cream can, he formed small, television dishes out of papier-mâché. Next, he would be framing the pitched and flat roofs and working on making suitable shingles. Then early one evening, as he waited for a new layer of paint to dry, he thought how it wasn't far from being finished. A complete scene, though still a bit rough, was in site. He put up a couple small metal mail boxes, imagining the rest would be out of site, inside the entry ways. That's when he stalled over that thought of entry ways to suddenly wonder about what could be seen and what would be hidden from view.

For the first time, he considered the interiors. He'd never thought about carpet or paint, furniture or appliances. Jim suddenly imagined some crayons abandoned on a glass coffee table. No, he thought, just go on as planned. He realized he had never really planned. One thing had come after another, in spontaneous order, naturally, building up from what had looked like a road.

The roofs could be removable, like a doll house, so he could decide later. But this wasn't a doll house. And even if he did that, there would still be floors he wouldn't be able to furnish unless he worked through windows like building a



ship in a bottle. But this wasn't a model ship. What was it, anyway, he asked himself. But instead of being able to consider an answer, he began to see only what was wrong before him.

There was something off with the proportions of doors to buildings, of the doors to each other, the size of windows and their sills. It all looked haphazard, like it was hastily cobbled together, rather than built to last. The window panes were too wavy to truly mimic glass. He could pull them out and strengthen the frames, maybe heat up the plastic and pull them tight. He reached in and tried to correct one of the light poles that was twisted, had warped since mounting, but it broke off in his hand. He noticed there were no addresses or street signs.

Just add another layer to the doorbells, he thought. Get on with what I'm doing. Fix the pole. Keep it moving.

He'd left the little brush sitting out across the paint jar and the bristle had dried to be as hard as a nail. He tried to use it anyway, thinking it might even let him be more precise, but it gouged out a wet chunk from previous coats and fell down onto the small, concrete porch about an inch below, staining it. With a Q-tip he applied a drop of paint thinner. The smudge reminded him of blot on the wood when this all began and then of running mascara.

His focus blurred and instead of looking down into his world, he imagined looking up and seeing it from the inside. I should put up street signs so people

there would know where they are. His knees wobbled.

They're just buildings on a street, he thought. Any street. Main Street. Main and Grant and Park, he decided and felt sturdy, again, looking down into the landscape. Jim sifted through a shoe box for bits of tin, he told himself the street names, again and again: Grant Street, Main and Park.

Overhead, a moth beat against the florescent light. It's intermittent, "tink, tink," against the tube distracted him from his own mantra.

"Where did you come from?" he muttered then swatted at it, knocking it to the ground. It fluttered back up. Jim caught it in his hand. He narrowed his grip but, feeling it tickle his palm, stopped. He pitched it at the ground again, to stomp it, but the moth flew back to the light. Jim found gold dust smeared in his hand from the wings. His first thought was, could he use gold for anything?

Blonde hair came to mind. He rubbed his fingers together to feel it and the dust was gone when he looked again. He grabbed the fluttering moth and pitched it forcefully out the side door into the cold. A dusting of snow was beginning to collect in the dark grass. The moth shook back into the air and planted itself against the lit garage window.

With temperatures dropping and things not going well inside, Jim decided he should double check that the water was turned off to all the faucets. He walked through the church to get to the basement and realized that there had

never been anyone there at the same time as him—not ever. Maybe that’s what my streets need, he thought. People!

The moth was gone from the window by the time Jim came back to the garage. He stayed up most of the night trying to make little men and women. He feverishly shaped tin and fabric, bent wire, and mashed clay into little forms. When he placed them on the street, none looked real, only made everything else wrong, seem false, fake.

Across a sheet of plywood, between the riding lawnmower, shovels, and other tools for keeping up the parish, he’d constructed a tiny neighborhood, bit by bit, with streets, apartment buildings, storefronts, hydrants, in complete and ever increasing detail—a world he could stand over instead of in. He built it the wrong way around, he thought now.

One after another, he knocked his attempts at people to the floor, though he felt them there, like the face that had once appeared in the wood grain. Only, he felt he could almost begin to hear their faint voices, so dragged down his TV and turned it on for noise. All the voices steadily merged, like that of a crowd. He had to get it out, all of it. No one knew what he knew. No one else should speak.

He dragged the panel out through the doors and heaved it up against the brush pile next to the garage and swept and cleaned and scoured everywhere its memory had been then listened closely only to become unnerved by the wind.

Claudia

It was a summer of cicadas some years ago when the cars were big and took leaded gasoline. It had been a mild June in Detroit and the cool air hung in pockets of shade under the elms and the bark still smelled of rain.

One night while the city slept a line of semis pulled in off the freeway and stopped in front of a large open field called Lipkey park. And one by one they eased up over the curb, pulled across the grass, and parked in a wide circle like a diesel wagon train.

As the sky turned grey with first light, hammers were striking iron stakes. Tent tops rose. Piping clanged into heaps on the ground. There was an inky haze pattering out from a generator as the towers of an inflatable castle began to rise.

Some kids stood still with their bikes on the edge of the park, eyes wide, mouths open, not saying a word.

Before, the rides, tents, and games had all been in Toledo. But this week, it was another city, the sign flapping overhead would read, "Holy Name Festival June 8-11."

The booths were being made ready. A man hung stuffed animals up on hooks. Another tested the water pistols for the poodle race. The smell of butter

popcorn poured out of the windows of the concession trailer while a woman in a white apron sat smoking on the steps.

A man was leaning over a table full of narrow mouthed fish bowls, one right against another, and filled them with water from a plastic garden jug. The goldfish were a mass of flickering orange in a white pickle bucket waiting to be scooped out and put into their own bowl—a chance to be won.

Claudia, one of the goldfish, heard a nearby murmur, “Don’t worry.” She told herself that everything happens for a reason. She remembered the weekend before in Toledo.

The weather hadn’t been good. Not many people came. The few that did, threw like they didn’t want to win. A ball had hit the edge of Claudia’s bowl more than once, but only to bounce away with a sharp “tink.” There had only ever been the slightest ripple across the surface of her water. All the goldfish expected to be among the first to get won on the first weekend of the season. On the last day a group of kids stepped up to the railing while the gamekeeper was away and showered the bowls with handfuls of skittles. The next time they came the attendant was there and they paid for a toss, won Edwin, and took him away. As she thought about the weekend to come, she wondered if she would be crazy not to worry as they jostled all cramped together in warm, itchy water waiting for a bowl.

“Now we’re in Detroit,” Claudia’s friend, Lula said. “Another city. Another chance. Don’t you have good feeling about this?”

“Yeah,” Claudia said. Why make someone else feel bad, she thought.

The man overhead scooped them out one at a time with the net. Fresh clean water would be a welcome feeling to Claudia. She would swim in the small bowl just to feel it against her scales and roll through her gills.

The man had gotten every goldfish out but Claudia. They were a bowl short. One had broken in transit. She was left bobbing in the bucket of dirty water.

There were already some kids at the booth next door, taking turns leaning far over the rail, pitching bean bags at the mouth of a milk kettle.

Lula called out to Claudia from the fish bowls, “What the hell are you doing down there!”

“I don’t know,” she called back and began nervously racing around in the emptiness of the bucket, up, down, across.

“Think positive!” Lula said. “That’s you’re problem. Probably why you’re in that mess.”

The man came back and dipped a baggy into the bucket and got Claudia inside. He held her over the other fish, as if comparing their brightness of orange.

“Are you open?” some said at the railing, behind him.

“Yeah. Just a sec’” the man said and tied Claudia’s baggy closed.

The kid threw. Each of the three balls went wild, ricocheting off the edge of the bowls then the man handed him Claudia.

“The first customer wins a prize, “he said. “Now go show all your friends.”

The kid went away happy. He took small steps, holding the bag up before his face, so he could watch the fish swim.

That night, the um-pa music bellowed out of the beer tent. Passengers shrieked, as the clattering rides swung them through the air. Crickets and cicadas hummed outside. Claudia took easy turns in new large bowl enjoying the delicious water. The boy had her perched on the edge of the tub, while he took a bath. Then he grabbed her bowl and turned it over into the hot water. The heat made her muscles spasm. She couldn’t see anymore.

The boy screamed, scooting back in the tub. His mother rushed in and yanked him out of the bath. As soon as she got her sobbing child him out of the room, she flushed the fish.

## Father Don's Fish and Chips

First, make sure the pieces of fish are dry before dipping them into the batter.

Also, your oil has to be hot, about 375 degrees.

The Batter :

Two cups of flour

About a cup and a half of water

1 teaspoon of baking powder

½ teaspoon salt

Dip the dry fish into the batter and let them go into the oil. Make sure they don't stick to the bottom of the pot. Careful about adding too many pieces at once or the temperature will drop. The fish will float and turn golden-brown when done.

The secret to good French fries are to fry them twice. Do a batch before you fry the fish and then drop them in to finish when the fish is almost done. Perfect, batch after batch!



## Big Love

She went back to Paris and he followed her there, taking the TGV through the night up from Bordeaux. Her address, name, and phone number were written on a torn piece of paper that Eric fondled in his pocket. The letters had begun to smudge from the heat of his fingers. He couldn't sleep—was a twitchy shell left empty without her. Often, as the train shuttled through the darkness, he took out the paper to see her name: Valerie. She'd put a little heart over the "i".

Eric was roused in the grey morning by the change of speed and rubbed his eyes. He moved the paper from his jacket pocket to his jeans. Rain drops slid sideways against the window. As they slowed, the streams trickled down the glass. "This," he thought, "must be Paris in winter: gray, wet."

The halls of Montparnasse station were a blur of rushing bodies. Shoes clacked. Luggage rolling along the hard floor sounded like waves draining off a beach. He paused on the edge of the great hall. He studied the passing faces for hers. He took a deep breath and decided that maybe he should get a phone card, make sure she was coming.

What if she didn't come? What would he do if she didn't answer the

phone?

The elevator was a stream of people jammed together. Suddenly, coming down on the right, jumping and waving her arms, was Valerie. He rushed to greet her at the bottom. She had a wide smile as she leapt at him. Her warm arms clenched him and he felt giddy, as if tickled from the inside.

Into his ear, she bubbled, "*Je t'aime. Je t'aime!*" then covered his neck with kisses. They kept kissing as they rode the elevator up to the street.

While they waited to cross the street, her black hair blew against his cheek. There was a smell there—hers—mingled with the exhaust. The sky was low, grey, and seemed an extension of the blue wisps pattering out of the idling mopeds. The light changed green. On the other side they kissed again and locked together the pedestrians parted around them. They paused at a corner. He saw she had dark circles under her eyes, like she hadn't slept either. He peered into her eyes and clenched her delicate shoulders. "It was true," he thought. "This is real." Together, they lurched ahead, hungry hands wrestling for every new arrangement of fingers.

Valerie needed both hands to open the door. They clutched each other as they mounted the stairs, went through another door, down a hall, pushed a door closed behind them, fell into each other on a bed, and got lost in the joy of mingling. Lips, muscles, skin. Warmth tingled in aching waves. Valerie moaned

through crumpling shudders. He shook, breaking. They dwelt together, through the day and little sleeps, their breaths overlapping, until it was night, dark, and the room was heavy with their musk.

Eric lit a cigarette that they shared. The glow of the drags cast an amber glow across her chest.

“I’ve never felt so close to anyone,” she said. He caressed her shoulders. “I always thought, you know. That you can never truly know anyone.”

There were sounds in the apartment. “My roommate,” she said, “Alex.” The gap at the bottom of the bedroom door lit up when the hallway light went on. Two shadows, from a pair of feet stood on the other side of the door.

“Valerie?” a voice asked.

“Shhh.” She told Eric.

When he finally walked away and turned out the hallway light, Valerie said, “He’s nice. You’ll get along.”

The next morning, he woke-up alone in the bed. He wanted to wait for her to come back before going out. Eric lit a cigarette and opened the window. Below, there was an empty concrete courtyard. The sky was gray and low, again. There was a sink in the bedroom. Maybe he could pee in there, in an emergency. This is crazy, he thought and flicked his cigarette out the window.

On the way to bathroom, he found Valerie with her roommate in the kitchen. They stopped talking. Valerie smiled and asked if he wanted some tea.

“Yeah. I’ll be right back,” Eric said but stood for a second, wanting to walk in and kiss her.

Alex and Valerie both stared at him. She continued to smile. Alex glared. His arms were folded. She began to introduce them.

“Yeah, I’ll be right back,” Eric said, again and darted off to go to the bathroom. When he got back, Alex was gone and Valerie buttered toast.

He put his hands on her waist and she glanced towards the doorway.

“Maybe it would be nice,” she said, “to get to know each other someplace new to us both.”

Lauren's one dish casserole - Made for her Mom after her furniture was delivered.

1 box Kraft Macaroni and cheese. Cook the noodles until they're soft. Drain the water. Put a stick of butter into the hot noodles. Add a cup of shredded cheddar cheese. Stir over the heat. Once the butter melts add a cup of milk. Heat so the cheese is melted. Turn off . Add another half cup of cheddar cheese and two eggs. Mix in 1 can of peas. Mix in 1 can of tuna. Fold into a casserole dish. Top with shoe-string potatoes and bake.

## SUBPRIME

We were in the hotel that we moved into after we lost our house, and my Dad was putting on his tie like he used to. My Mom tried to stop him from going out.

“Don’t even think about leaving with your own mother coming over,” she said.

My Dad pulled a chair into the bathroom, “You know what this place is missing? A full length mirror,” he said. “Nate,” he said to me, “that’s what you should ask your Grandma for.”

She was coming over to visit for my birthday. The day before, when I actually turned eleven and we celebrated at my other Grandma’s, she wouldn’t get out of her car—said, not unless the Obama signs come down. My other grandma refused, so she left.

My Dad took his black dress shoes over to the kitchenette part of our hotel room and started to rinse them in the sink. He said we should start keeping a list of the things we missed from our old house, to keep us motivated for we want again. “One for me,” he said, “is a full length mirror. I’m supposed to find a job and can’t even see myself.”

My mom was mad he wasn't going to be there when his mom came over, but he asked her what she missed.

She said, "The bed. Washer and dryer. Don't even get me started."

Before my Dad left he asked if I wanted anything. "BBQ chips," I told him.

My Grandma came over. It was the first time she'd ever visited us at the 'Roachtel,' as I call it. Not that I've seen any Roaches but because my mom called it that once, as a joke when we were pulling up one day and we both laughed.

The headboard knocked against the wall when my mom sat on the edge of the bed. I sat on the dresser. My grandma sat in the chair, looking around at where we lived like it might get her dirty, or something.

Our old house had lots of chairs, a big table, a couch, and a flat-screen TV. My Grandma told my mom quietly, like how people talked at my cousin's funeral. "If he were any good at his job," she said. "They wouldn't have let him go. And remember how he complained when he *was* working. I would have fired him too. You're too good for him," my grandma told my mom.

I remembered what I missed most from our old house—my own room.

As she spoke my mom just nodded. Her hands were folded and she sat still.

When my mom told her that he was out looking for a job right now, my

grandma said, “Good,” and nodded.

My dad used to work at Chrysler. I’m not sure what he did—something with dealerships. He would have to go to lots of meetings and stay up late working on the computer.

While my mom was giving my grandma an update of the job search, a woman threw open our door and walked in. She had on shiny shorts. Her legs were thin and knees looked big. “This 4G?” she asked. My mom told her that she had the wrong room. The woman wobbled in her heels. “This fucking 4E, or isn’t it?” she asked. “Where’s Jerome?”

My mom got up and went towards her. “I think you have the wrong room, miss.”

“This aint no mistake!” the woman said. “Cuz’ no one gonna believe me if I say I wasn’t here.” Someone laid on a horn outside and she turned her head. “You can at least help me out with a little something.” When no one spoke, she said “Well, fuck you then,” and left. My mom locked the door behind her.

“Are they still out there?” my grandma asked. After my mom looked and said no, my grandma left too. “Tell Charlie I was here,” she said, standing by the door. Then she looked at me and said, “Happy Birthday,” and handed me an envelope with twenty dollars inside. I tried to imagine what I missed from our old house and could buy with the money. All I could think of was the mirror my



dad wanted, but wasn't sure if I had enough.

When my dad came home no one mentioned that a stranger barged in while he was gone. "I told her you were out looking for a job," my mom told him.

"You know," he said. "the place on the other side of the fence? It's the place with no password on their wifi. Maybe they need someone to organize the technical side of things—as a consultant. I'm good at organizing," he said.

My mom said the only thing that would happen is we would lose our internet.

With my dad back we went over to my other grandma's for leftovers. She'd baked a ham the day before for my birthday. There was a lot of it, too. But I don't like ham. When we got there, we couldn't pull into the drive because there was a big silver trailer in the way.

"Hey, wow!" my Dad said. "That's just like my Uncle Tommy's." He said they would take it deer hunting every year. My dad walked all around the trailer and said it was identical to his uncle's.

My grandma, Grandma Josie, came out and told us that my other grandma had it dropped-off for us to live in. My mom and Grandma Josie started arguing on the lawn. My dad brought me inside and in the kitchen started making me a sandwich. My mom and grandma came in, still yelling. My dad threw ham on

bread with mayonnaise and told me to eat it in the basement.

“I don’t want a ham sandwich,” I told him. He pushed me towards the stairs and said he would come down soon.

In the basement with my sandwich, I heard my mom and grandma yelling right overhead. I had lots of dreams about falling through the floor, so stepped out of the way and sat in the corner on a file cabinet.

I heard my Dad’s booming voice. “At least here,” he yelled, “we can get him into a school, for Christ Sake. He needs that kind of... He needs to be around other kids.”

“So now he’s special needs!” my mom screamed.

I covered my ears and it was like being underwater. I remembered the play group we tried at the pool. At first the kids were nice. Then they told me how every new kid has to do a belly flop off of the diving board. I felt like I broke open, when I hit the water and didn’t know how to swim. Still, I found out I could float if I held my breath. Everyone was laughing at me when the lifeguard pulled me in with a stick. He told me I was banned from the pool because diving wasn’t allowed. That’s what I thought going back to school would be like, only everyday.

Before, my dad didn’t want me to go to school because of the shots. He thought they make kids sick. He thought the doctors were in on it. “They will

always find something wrong with you,” he’d said. But lately, he had started talking about me going anyway.

With my hands over my ears I couldn’t hear what anyone said upstairs, only muffled shouting that rose and fell, like what a dryer sounds like with the clothes going around.

A bug ran across the floor and I suddenly felt alone down there and that my sandwich was too dirty to eat even if I wanted it. I had been sent to the basement with a leftover sandwich before and knew how to get rid of them.

The drain was under where they were all standing, so I had to be quick. I popped up the cover and jammed in my sandwich. I remembered how, last year, my Grandma’s basement flooded, and got scared again. Like the black water could be just on the other side of the walls, looking for a way in. I thought about the water on the other side of the walls and the floor caving in and had to get out of there.

“Ha!” I yelled back as I shoot up the stairs. “I finished my sandwich,” I told my family in the front room. My mom went into the kitchen and my dad took me outside to the trailer.

“This is a classic, Alex. People collect ‘em.” After we climbed inside, he said how this one had belonged to his uncle and when he was about my age he started going up north, hunting. “We should do that,” he said.

“Okay,” I told him.

“Every time in Uncle Russ’ trailer,” he said, “I got a deer.” My dad pulled a pin out of the trailer’s little table and it dropped down against the seat cushions. He moved things around and it became, sort of, a bed. “This is where I used to sleep,” he said and asked me to try it out. “Go ahead, jump up and down,” he said. The whole trailer shook.

“Come on,” my mom said from the side door. “Let’s go.”

On the drive, my parents didn’t talk. I followed the slopes of the power lines up and down and watched the shadows slide across the back seat. My Mom started playing with the power window.

“If that gets stuck down we’ll have to put plastic in the window,” my dad said and my mom stopped.

When we got to the motel, our door was broken open and there were wooden splinters all over the carpet. My dad’s computer was gone. The TV was gone. All the trash bags that held our clothes were spilt open. I saw a Red Wings sweatshirt that I’d forgotten about. Our things were strewn everywhere. My dad called the police. A man from the Roachtel came and told us we had to pay for

the door. My dad asked my mom what she was smiling about.

“Renters insurance,” she said, grinning. “Money.” My dad smiled and I did too. For the first time since we left our house, it felt like maybe something good had happened. My dad said how we couldn’t stay there and we jammed everything into the car. I road up front with them.

“Well just stay there,” my mom said, “until we figure something else out.”

That night, we all took hot showers. My grandma made coco. We watched TV then we all went out to the trailer to go to sleep. I didn’t know why we didn’t stay in the house, except there’s only two bedrooms: my grandma’s and where my uncle used to live. She keeps his room the same as when he was alive and no one can sleep in there.

Once inside the trailer, my mom said, how we have to take tornado’s seriously now. She said it the same way she called where we’d lived, the “Roachtel,” My dad chuckled, but I was scared of tornados. They come out of nowhere and suck everything up.

My mom tucked me in. “That’s where I used to sleep,” my dad said.

The trailer shook as my parents got into their bed. My dad got right back up and said he felt a draft. The trailer shook as he pawed around the windows and the door.

“Maybe it’s a tornado,” I said.

My mother asked him to come back to bed. “I will,” he said then leaned to feel the window above my bed/table. “Every time I was in this trailer,” he said down to me, “I got a deer. That’s got to mean something.”

“Come back to bed,” my mom said.

“How do we find out about tornados?” I asked.

From her bed, my mom said there would be sirens.

My grandmother spoke from just outside the trailer. “Just so you know, I can hear you clear as day, inside.”

I called out, if she’d heard anything about a tornado. There was no answer then I heard the door close.

“What happens when there’s a siren?” I asked. One of my parents shushed me. I couldn’t stop thinking about it. “Where would we go?” I asked. My mom said we would go into the basement. “Can we fall through the sidewalk?” I asked. My dad chuckled and my mom told me to go to sleep. “But I don’t think the basement’s safe,” I said.

My dad got out of bed again. “I swear I feel a draft,” he said and started checking all the windows. The trailer shook with his steps and my mom started to cry.

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## MANEUVER

Gail and Dave were brother and sister. They lived together in a houseboat on the Chicago River—an arrangement that began as temporary. In fact, the houseboat being temporary encouraged Gail to let Dave crash there. Her apartment was being renovated and the landlord offered her the old houseboat for the two weeks while the work was being done—he was doing the whole building. The first delay came when a pipe broke and set back the whole job a month. Then the landlord died or left. He disappeared and couldn't be reached. Gail and Dave stayed, thinking any day someone was going to come and say something.

The houseboat was, basically, a two story glass cube. The walls were made of sliding glass doors. At any one time half of the windows could be open. Inside, curtains hung along the glass—which helped in the winter. Gray, plush carpet had roughly been cut to fit in the spaces. The edges, where it met the walls, was curling up, exposing the burlap threads on the bottom. Outside, the deck was covered in old, puckering Astroturf.

They had started their first winter on the Chicago river, thinking once it got



cold they would leave. The woodstove kept things toasty-warm, inside, even as ice laid up in sheets along the hull. There was a cold snap but by then they figured they were through the worst of it. Another year went by and they were still there—through spring, summer, and fall. It looked like it would be another warm winter. Then, a couple days before Christmas the second year, Gail decided to decorate. They had never had a tree and she thought they should get one.

On the peeling deck, Dave rolled out the raft and fitted the pump nozzle into the valve. He pumped with his foot and the yellow canoe began to take shape.

“Let me know when you want a turn with that,” Gail said. She screwed the oars together and took over after Dave had finished the side walls. A trail of smoke from tin chimney on the houseboat twisted into the sky. “Do you think it will snow?” Gail asked.

“Does it matter?” Dave said. Gail said how he didn’t need to go. He responded saying how she didn’t know where to tie-up for the Home Depot, so needed him.

“You say you don’t remember going for a tree,” she said as he slid the boat into the water. He brought up even with the deck. Gail added, “I know we got a fake tree. But before, with Dad.” Dave only remembered the artificial tree.

Together, they paddled downriver—Gail in front and Dave in back. They slid under The Ashland Bridge then under Cortland. Traffic clattered across the grates as they went under North Avenue. They hugged the shore into the Turning Basin, tied up near the ADTS building, and climbed up the grass bank.

Dave and Gail waited for a hole in the traffic and darted across the street to Home Depot. They strode together, briskly, through the bustle of shoppers and lumber carts, out into the Garden Center. They passed an island of artificial trees all covered in twinkling lights.

“What’s good about those,” Dave said, “is that they fit in a box.”

“I can’t stand it,” Gail said. “All these people. I hate feeling like—.”

“Well considering, you just rushed passed everyone to get here, where—.”

“Not now Dave! Just help me pick out a tree.” She began checking-out the trees, grabbing them and giving them a shake. She asked Dave’s opinion on one with a blue tint to its needles. He told her one was as good as another. She told him he should have waited at the boat.

“I think you’re right,” he said and left. He turned to see if she was watching. Gail was standing on tippy-toes trying to reach the top of a tree. Dave found a spot on the grass slope over the boat and propped himself back on his elbows. When she came, he heard the dragging first.

The tree, bundled tightly in layers of netting, looked like a lawn umbrella

hiding a pig. Dave walked around the heap on the grass. “Well G, you know it’s as big as the canoe, right?”

She accused him of hating Christmas then asked, “Do you even have money to buy me a gift? A nice one? This is your gift.”

“Well, not much of a surprise is it?” He agreed to try. The tree went in with the truck sticking out over the back and the top buried in the nose. Dave sat on the lumpy bows just up from the truck and wedged his feet into crease between the side wall and floor. Gail got in and laid back over the wrapped bed of pine.

“This is comfortable,” she said.

They paddled out of the Turning Basin and under the first bridge. The girder silhouette of the Cortland Bridge was in site when Dave felt the firmness against his right foot begin to go slack. He told his sister that they might have a problem.

“What kind of problem!” she demanded.

“We might be losing air in one of the chambers.”

“Losing air,” Gail muttered. “You mean, like sinking.”

He assured her that they would still float without one of the side walls.

They just might get a bit wet.

“I thought you said this thing went up and down the Amazon,” Gail said.

“Keep paddling!” Dave told her. The side wall was collapsing, cold river

water began to spill in. The canoe was listing to one side. He said how he wasn't sure about the tree if they lost that side completely. "It's going to make us tip, if we don't get rid of it."

"What if I swim?" she suggested. "I want the tree."

He told her the water was too cold to be submerged. Water filled in over their shoes and they leaned away from the river. The lumpy, yellow rubber held air in weak pockets.

"Maybe," he suggested, "if we straddle the other side." He explained the maneuver: she would have to hold the tree while they simultaneously threw their legs over the other side. She would then lay down flat on the round chamber, clutching the tree in the water. He would sit up and paddle. The current had turned them around and they were slowly being pulled back towards the North Avenue Bridge. On the count of three, they executed the maneuver. She held the tree and they slid up onto the solidly inflated sidewall. He sat up, both feet in the water and began to paddle them nearer to the shore. "How heavy is it in the water?" he asked Gail after she had gotten into position.

She told him that it wasn't bad and "The water didn't feel that cold at first."

He paddled with vigor up the gentle river and informed her when they were about to go under Cortland bridge and they were almost there.

"When I used to work at Whole Foods," she said but trailed off.

When the Ashland Bridge was in site, Dave exclaimed, “Almost home!”

“Hey!” Gail asked, “can you knock it with the paddle? Make sure it’s still there.... I can barely feel anything.”

After telling her it was there, he regretted having missed the opportunity to tell her that it was gone and then that he was only kidding. “Why do you want this tree, again?” he asked her.

“For Christmas,” she said then added, “Because you don’t remember having one.”

Dave continued to paddle. They were slowed, going around a tree that had tumbled off the bank. On the other side, he again sought the slower current near the shore.

“I think I might,” Gail said, “You know, move in... That Neal and I might move in together.”

Their craft continued to limp on, near the shore, towards the boxy silhouette of their river home.

“That’s great!” Dave said.

“Really?” his sister asked, craning her neck to look back at him.

“Yeah. Sure. Neal’s a good guy.” He added, after a few paddle strokes, that he’d been thinking about joining the Army.

“Just right now,” his sister asked, “or always?”

“Lately,” he said, “I’ve just thinking about when. How’s your arm feeling?” he asked. “Cold?”

“Fine.”

As Dave guided them around to the deck, he said, “This part might be tricky,” and proposed another maneuver: He would get off first and, from the deck, reach over her and grab the submerged tree. She would then get off, climbing over him, and together they would haul up the cargo. Gail agreed.

It worked and, together, they heaved the tree onto the deck as water gushed out.

“Well,” she said, “we won’t forget this.” He agreed.

## Dex's Pizza

If Papa's is closed or, more likely, gets burned down by the competition, this is what you do:

Make the dough, same as bread, only stickier. Cover the square pan with olive oil and work the dough into the corners. When you get there pinch them in with your thumb. Let rise.

Heat up the oven to 425.

Cover the dough with sauce. The sauce is tomato sauce with salt, pepper, oregano, garlic powder, and basil. Cover with cheese—brick or mozzarella. Add pepperoni and banana peppers.

Bake until the cheese starts to brown. Pull from the pan and cut immediately.

## A BIRD AND SOME BEES

The bird came from Africa, spent thirty-four days in quarantine before being trucked in from an eastern port. The tag on the crate named it as a, “Speckle Bodied Tern.” The driver, Teddy, used to transport bees for pollination. He drove them all over the country—had a circuit. Then one day when he parked in a grove of almond trees in California and let out the bees, they didn’t come back.

They flew out like a cloud tumbling over itself. He sat back to wait out the afternoon, and waited, and waited. At night he called it in. Apparently, it was happening all over. Since then, he made his living transporting animals for a zoo.

His-ex wife, Sue, had been a driver when the same thing happened to her. The bees just went away. She sold her rig and got a job in an EBay consignment shop in Ferndale, Michigan.

The two would meet and say hello whenever one was near the other. Teddy was in town dropping off the bird.

“There's always Haz-Mat,” he said to her as they strolled up past storefronts on Nine mile.



“No,” she said. “I’m done driving.”

They paused in front of an antique shop window. Their reflections floated in the glass, superimposed over a vanity with a lace table cloth draped over the mirror.

He was tall, thin, and wore a faded black t-shirt tucked into his jeans. Teddy saw that his lips were scrunched to one side and realized he was chewing on his cheek again and stopped.

“People pay for that,” Sue said, pointing. “Look at that pile of quilts. I go to thrift shops waiting for one of those to show up.”

“Didn’t you used to have one of those,” he asked her, pointing at a brass lantern.

“No,” she said. “You always thought that was something. It was just an old camp lantern. Those are brass, from a boat or train or something. People pay for those.”

After looking in the window, they moved on, strolling slowly up the sidewalk. On the corner, waiting for the light, they both seemed to gaze up the wide road, over the cars, as if into the place from which something could return or everything goes. When the signal changed, they crossed.

## Valerie's Truffle Omlette - Because you can't live on love and air alone

Wisk one minced truffle with three eggs

Pitch in a dash of salt and pepper

Heat a dash of olive oil in a pan

Melt in a large pat of butter

Pour in eggs, mix, spreading the heat

Mix until the eggs stiffen

Turn off the heat and let rest

Eat

Rich truffle in every bite!

## Nahual

Our farm was on the outskirts of a tiny town called Popocatepetl. I used to take the goats up onto the hills to graze and from there I could see the city of Puebla which stretched out over the gentle contours of the valley to the west like a carpet. I'd gaze, picturing myself down there, sometimes as one of the boys on the bus collecting the fares, speeding through the streets, and at other times as one of the kids selling gum and cigarettes out of a tray hanging from their shoulders and able to go wherever I pleased. And then, as the sun set over the hills, I imagined that the lights of Mexico City could be seen glowing far in the distance the same way the sun pushes pale violet into the horizon just before it comes up.

One summer the rainy season didn't come and the stream that ran behind the farm and fed our small reservoir began to shrink. My father dropped a spool of wire by a rock I used to sit on in the shade of our house and then told me to start making barbwire. He said how we had to keep animals from drinking the water and that if I didn't finish by the time he got back he'd beat me. Then he and my mother walked to where the road passed near the farm and caught a bus

to go to the clinic in town. She was pregnant, had been sick, was throwing up, and thought she had a fever. She's been pregnant since me, but always miscarried.

The wire cutters were old and dull and I was small, only ten. I had to put the bottom part on a rock, with the wire between the blades, and then smash down with another rock on top. I worked for hours making the short lengths to twist around the other wire. Then a slight chill ran down my back and I had that feeling of being watched. I stopped banging, figured my parents were back and nonchalantly stretched out my leg so that my heel spread out the strands I'd cut to make it look like there were more.

But it wasn't my parents. There, on the other side of the bare dry ground just in front of our house, under the fluttering shade of a low and gnarled madraño tree, three dogs sat together, stock still, looking at me. The two on the sides had beige short hair, just a shade darker than the baked ground. Both were so thin that their skin hung loose on their bones. The one between them was small with a dappled coat, black spots on white. As I looked, the one on the left opened its mouth and started to pant then the one on the other side did too, when just as suddenly they both stopped.

The smaller white and black dog took a step forward out of the shade towards me, wagging his tail. He looked friendly, like a mutt, a perfect

patchwork of other dogs. Then he froze in place with his ears up and twitching. I blinked and he was gone, followed by the others, back through the shade of the low tree and away, leaving only a faint haze of dust. I remember thinking, no, don't go, you can trust me. That's when I heard footsteps. My parents were back and walking around the house.

That night while we ate tortillas and drank a broth made from chicken skin my father said how at the clinic they'd recommended a hospital for the birth and maybe an operation. "Like he wants to stay in there," he said and winked at my mom while smiling broadly.

"Who can blame him?" she growled then looked around our small room.

My dad grabbed his *mezcal* and stomped into the dark corner behind the curtain where their bed was. I heard it slosh in the bottle. The liquor's sharp smell drifted into the room and thickened with the aromas of tortilla and salty chicken fat. I'd started to ask if I would go back to school after the baby came. But before I could finish my mom ran outside and started throwing up.

"Go check on your mother," my dad said. Outside she pushed me away and muttered how being pregnant was a curse then spat.

Later, I worked by candlelight sitting at the open doorway in the still cool air, half in the house and half under the stars. With the pliers and the flat part at the top of the handles of the wire cutters, I twisted the lengths I'd cut around

more wire from the spool. As I worked and my mom and dad slept, I kept thinking about the friendly dog and how if my parents hadn't had come back, the two of us would probably be friends.

A stretch of days started with each one as hot as the last. We strung the fence up around the small pond. When the stream went dry my dad took the sheet down from their corner of the room and hung it over the water to keep the sun from taking any. And in a few days I saw the dogs again, when I took the goats up to graze. Soon the little black and white one, who I began to call Chucho, started to play fetch. And though he'd come close to drop the stick or take a nap by me in the shade, he never let me touch him. I figured that he'd been treated badly before. The other two always stood off in the distance, watching, sometimes panting in the heat, sometimes not. All three would follow me back down the hills towards home but turn off and disappear before we got there.

One night after we'd gone to sleep there was a terrible yelping from down by the stream. My father grabbed the shotgun but I ran out barefoot ahead of him, smashing my toes on rocks in the faint moonlight. One of the beige dogs was tangled in the barbed wire and wailing like a wounded rabbit. Before I knew what to do, my father fired from a few steps behind me. The still black surface of the pond exploded.

Then my father said, "Your fence works good," and patted me on the

shoulder.

I asked if I could bury the dog but he just told me to drop it somewhere where we couldn't smell it. "But you can leave it until morning," he said, like he was being nice by not making me work in the middle of the night. "Good worker," he called me when I started to pull it out right away.

After he'd gone back into the house, in a hushed voice I called out into the night as if the other two dogs were nearby. "Don't," I whispered. "No. Bad. I'll bring you water."

Inside, my dad told me again how good I was at making barbwire. I could tell he was happy with me, proud even. And before, I think that would have meant a lot to me.

The next morning before I left with the goats I tried to take the shovel but my father stopped me, saying all I needed to do was roll it off a cliff. He was still smiling as he watched me wrap the dead dog in some burlap. But all I could think was that it could have been Chucho and he'd be just as happy.

I took the beige dog off of my shoulders under the shade of some trees. The ground was too hard to scrape away with a stone so I piled up rocks instead and filled in the cracks with loose dirt.

That day I didn't see Chucho or the other dog. I hoped they weren't mad at me for making the fence, though I figured that they had a right to be. Up near

where I let the goats eat, I spread a plastic bag into a dent of the earth and filled it with water in case they came after I left. The next day there were some birds there when I crested the hill but I couldn't tell if Chucho or the other dog had come. I filled it every day but there was no sign of them.

Without the rains everything green was turning brown. The pond shrank and my dad started bringing water from the lake the power company built for the damn. He'd leave on the long walk in the morning with the empty jugs and would get a ride back at night from my uncle.

One night I stayed late in the hills. The moon was almost full and so the walk back would be easy. I watched the carpet of lights flicker on in the distance below and dreamed about living there. And since it had been almost a week since I'd seen Chucho and the other dog, I figured that that's where they had gone too. At least, I thought, after the baby was born and then my father came back from working the poblano season, maybe I'd get sent back to school where I'd had fun before.

But because of the drought I wondered if there would even be a poblano season, so I decided to pray for one to San Antonio. That's when I heard steps behind me. I swung around with a stick I used to carry, ready to strike. But it was Chucho cowering, his head down, tail between his legs, and tongue hanging out. He licked water right out of my hand. It was the closest he ever been. Then he



slowly wandered off, shuffling for awhile in one direction then another, like he didn't know where he was going.

When I got back my mother was in bed sick again but my dad seemed happy. "We got another one," he boomed from the table over his bowl of soup. "Same way. His twin, looks like." Then he told me I could have as much soup as I wanted. "With that water trap I bet we'll start attracting something we can eat. It's just one more probably keeping the good stuff away." I asked what he meant.

First he burped then called out to my mom, "You'd seen two of them, right? Slinking around the house." She didn't say anything right away but when she did I realized it had been a long time since I heard her speak. Usually she was quick to yell and curse. "I don't feel well," she said quietly.

I went over to the bed. She was wrapped in blankets and her black hair was stuck to her wet face. "Children," she said like the word had a bitter taste and then turned her eyes away from me, up towards the ceiling.

The next day my father put her in the wheelbarrow and together we walked to the road where the bus goes by. He told me if I see the other dog to shoot it, but to make it count because the shells were expensive. Then he called me "killer," and tussled my hair.

"Shoot it ten times if you have to," my mother said. "It's probably a *nahual* who's come to kill my baby and steal its soul." And in that moment I wished that

that was exactly what Chucho was.

When the bus came one of the boys who collect the fares, just a bit bigger than me, came down and helped my dad get my mom inside. I was happy to see the bus roar away and disappear in a cloud of its own smoke.

I raced back with the wheelbarrow, went straight to the barbwire fence, and then undid the bottom-most coil. And as I got the goats ready Chucho came and I showed him where to drink. He dove in. “What are you doing?” I asked him as he played in the water. When he came out he shook and water went everywhere. I laughed and his tail was wagging so hard his whole back half went side to side. Then, like we both remembered, we walked over to the tin awning where my father had dragged the other beige dog and stood side by side looking down.

I took the shovel, got the goats, but Chucho led the way. I thought I knew where he was going even before we got there—to the stand of trees where I’d put the other—but he kept going, scampering ahead, sniffing at the ground, doubling back to make sure I was coming. We climbed all the way to the spot I’d sit at night and look out over the world. “Here?” I asked him. I tried the shovel but it couldn’t break the ground either, or maybe I just wasn’t strong enough yet. He barked at a pair of turkey buzzards circling overhead then walked off like he didn’t want to see anymore.

On the way back down I put the buried the dog under the same stand of

trees as the other and prayed to San Francisco of Assisi to comfort Chucho.

When my parents didn't come back by the time it was dark I figured that they wouldn't because the bus didn't run at night. After I went to sleep I had a nightmare that I was buried alive inside the house and running out of air. All I could do was scratch at the walls trying to get out. Then the way real sounds will blend from outside into a dream, I woke-up thinking I heard scratching at the door. Then it started again. It was my friend. "Come on boy," I said while patting my leg. When I closed the door with him inside he started to shake and whine but when I opened it again he didn't want to leave, so I left it open a crack and got back in bed. He walked around smelling at the table legs, up at the shelves with the food, and around my parent's bed, before coming over and curling up next to me.

We had the place to ourselves for the next couple days and I didn't care if my parents ever came back. But without my dad making the trip to the lake to fetch more water the pond got lower each day.

That's when I realized that with me taking out the goats and my dad getting the water that, baby and *poblano* harvest or not, they would never let me leave unless it rained again. I decided to go before they came back. One morning while trying to figure out how to let my uncle know to care of the goats without him seeing me, Chucho ran off. When looking to see where he went I saw my father

walking back alone from the road. He saw me or I would have run off too.

The baby, he told me, was born premature but would be fine. It was a boy, named Diego, after my father. He was happy again and said how he'd known I could be trusted to be left alone for a few days. When I didn't say anything I think he thought that I was worried about my mother. "She's going to be fine too," he said. He asked if that dog had come back.

"No," I told him.

"Must come when you're not here," he said while looking down at some paw prints in the dusty ground. "I'll just put out some poison. Your mother's superstitious." And he said how she was convinced that it was a nahual after her baby. I know my dad didn't believe in those stories and I didn't either, but I wanted to. And thinking that maybe there was even a chance it could be true made me smile. My dad smiled too.

He mixed the poison in corn meal dough and put it out in small piles away from the house. Something ate all of them while I was up with the goats and he was gone on the long walk to get more water. There weren't any tracks. No turkey buzzards either, to point the way to where something died. Not finding Chucho let me hope that he'd just gone off as he had before and was still alive. Finally, thought I put it off for a couple a days, I went up to my lookout to check if he was there but the hilltop was bare.

The days before my mother came home from the doctor's, my dad started getting a ride back from my uncle in the mornings instead of the afternoons. He would sleep during the day and then walk away with the empty jugs in the evening, leaving me at home alone. I wanted to leave again, but thought that maybe Chucho would come back, so I stayed. I had the nightmare again where I was clawing at the walls to get out and woke-up but the scratching was only in my dream. Still, I cracked the door and left it that way each following night, just in case.

Then one morning instead of my dad just coming back with the water, my mother was in the car. She clutched the wrapped up baby tight in her arms. My father helped her walk. My uncle carried in a big pot of *pozole*. As soon as she stepped inside she started yelling which made the baby cry. "You've done nothing," she screamed. My father shrugged with a smirk and looked at my uncle. My mom got wobbly and sat down on the bed with the baby. I asked if I could have some soup. "Not now," she said and so I tended to the goats.

When I came back I saw that the barbwire coil was rebound to the post. Inside, I saw my warm blanket had been stripped off of my bed and some of it was peaking out of a wooden box on the table next to my mother. "What are these?" she asked holding up a handful of white hairs. I shrugged. "What have you let into my house!" she screamed and jumped up with her hand raised up

over her head, but had to grab the table. The baby was crying. Then my father slapped me and knocked me down. When I tried to get up he threw me, hard, into the corner then grabbed me by the hair, poured some rice on the floor, and kicked out my feet to make me kneel on it facing the wall. My father tried to comfort my mom by telling her that there was no such thing as a nahual. Then they finished the soup.

After it got dark they let me off of the rice. “Where’s he going?” my mother asked my father when I stumbled towards the door. “Bathroom,” I said.

Outside it was darker than it had been since the moon was getting smaller. And though I didn’t know where Chucho was, getting beaten made me feel closer to him. I called out in whispers and told him not to come back for me, while of course, since he was my friend, I still hoped he would. It all made me feel more heroic, like my pain meant something. Then the baby started crying inside and I told myself we all hurt. And suddenly I felt like no matter how much I hoped, Chucho wouldn’t come back and that this was somehow what I deserved—was even, where I belonged. I cried, because thinking that made me feel that Chucho had eaten the poison and was dead. I limped back inside and curled up in bed on the side that hurt less and fell asleep shivering.

In the morning my mother screamed. The baby was dead. The door was ajar. I guessed I didn’t make sure it was latched when I came in the night before.

While I was still down on my mattress, my mother grabbed a knife and rushed at me. “You let it in here!” she screamed.

My dad caught her. She screamed that he never wanting a baby just something to stick his dick into. She got her arm free and raised the knife at him. My dad jumped back. She stood holding the knife in the air, shaking it at him. I slipped out of the room and started to run.

I ran in the direction I’d gone everyday with the goats. When I caught my breath, I paused where I’d sat before. I looked out over the valleys, followed the band of road with my eye until it disappeared. I decided to go to the city, try and be one of those boys on the bus or sell sweets from a tray. When I went to get up, I saw Chucho was sitting next to me. He wagged his tail across the dry ground and nudged his nose under my hand. I scratched him behind the ear.

Sue's Pineapple upside-down cake

1 Box Dunkin' Hines Pineapple Upside Down Cake Mix

Add an extra egg and an extra cup of brown sugar

Use Pineapple rings. No cherries, ever



## Bright Side

Wrapped in winter clothes, Eugene squeezed into his rusty, blue, Dodge Neon and braced himself for what was to come when he turned the key. His pale skin and black, puffy coat, made him look like a lumpy snowman squeezed into a hefty bag. And though not normally one to wear hats, because of the bitter cold, he had a bright red stocking cap pulled down tightly over his head. He wore one mitten and one glove because he had convinced himself that a match to the pair would probably be out in the car. Though really he'd just been too eager to get to the mechanics than to spend any more time looking.

The starter moaned like he'd stepped on a cat's tail. The engine spat and stuttered into a loud trembling quake. The rearview mirror shook and his teeth rattled. Eugene cranked down the windows so the fumes from the open exhaust wouldn't kill him on the way to getting it fixed. The frigid air of an early December morning in Detroit blew through one side of the small car and out the

other. When he rolled down the drive and hit the gas on the street, clattering forward like a chainsaw coughing through wet wood, car alarms blared behind in his wake. Just overhead, the gray sky resembled dirty concrete. Still, as his car chugged out onto Van Dyke and he headed south, the extreme conditions of the morning made him feel important, like a hero even, the chivalrous knightly kind who could endure any discomfort for the good of another.

The night before, while the street slept, someone had crept under every car and stolen the catalytic converters—that boxy piece of metal between the engine and muffler honeycombed with about twenty-five dollars worth of platinum that catches the poison of unleaded gasoline before it spews out the back.

Marcia, from across the street—a woman he was sure had such a powerful desire for him that it frightened her into inaction—had agreed to let him take her car in to get fixed once he got back with his. “I know the perfect place. Cheap and everything,” he’d told her excitedly as a few of the neighbors gathered together on the street in the cold, dim, morning; everyone still in their pajamas or sweats, under winter coats.

Charlie, who lived next door, wanted to know which place he was talking about; and after Eugene had described it as down kitty-corner to the cemetery, he said, “Aw, hell no. Down there?” But before he could say anymore, Marcia interrupted, scolding him for talking bad about the city.

“Yeah,” Eugene agreed and added how they were so busy he thought there were two shifts of mechanics. Though in truth it’d been years since he’d been there; when exactly he wasn’t sure, but before his father had died, at least.

Alton, who lived across the street next to Marcia, said how cold it was and the group of neighbors slowly separated to shuffled back into their houses.

Eugene stood, transfixed, as he’d watched Marcia sway up her drive. “I’ll come over as soon as I get back!” he’d called after her. When she’d glanced behind and nodded to him, his insides fluttered.

Now as he shuttered and shook up to the red light at Seven and Van Dyke, just a few blocks from home, Eugene thought how the morning was shaping up to be exactly how the motivational speakers on PBS had said things could be: great ideas and improved situations always come out of crisis. Take a problem, he remembered hearing, add commitment, and out comes success. Everything can be an opportunity. That he believed. Everything! And really, he had Marcia to thank. He never would have known about such life changing advice if he hadn’t been synching up his little television to match hers by the lights that flashed behind the blinds across the street, in order to have that much more to talk about.

His car rumbled alone at the light as he waited for it to change. A man strode around the corner and stepped into Al’s convenience store. The green

digits of “8:17,” shook on the faceplate of the radio. I always wondered how early he opens, Eugene thought. Now I know.

The thought of the shelf inside, full of Pepperidge Farm Raspberry Milano cookies, that he used to clear out by the arm full, made him nervous and stare, instead, up at the traffic light. Even its red color reminded him of the delicate berry sweetness and rich chocolate that would erupt on his tongue after the hesitant snap and crumble of the oval cookie between his teeth. The vibrating steering wheel shook his shoulders as he clenched down through one mitten and one glove. Then the light changed, thank God, and again he clattered forward.

He bit down on his mitten, yanked it off, dug into his coat pocket, and then pitched a handful of baby carrots and celery sticks into his mouth—snacks he’d been eating whenever the cookie urge struck, since being diagnosed with diabetes. Out of crisis, he reminded himself as he crunched, comes success; and then congratulated himself on the weight he was losing and would lose. Soon he’d even be able to retire the with dingy, blue track suit he’d taken to wearing.

The exhaust was deafening as his car struggled up towards the speed limit. But when he pulled out another baby carrot from his pocket, it hit him. Those motivational speakers were so right about where ideas come from. The carrot, as it was, was too big to fit in his ear; so he nibbled off just the right amount until it twisted in nice and snug. He did the same for the other side and the noise

receded, like a thick pile of downy pillows suddenly filled in the space between his eardrums and the clamorous racket raging under his feet.

Occasionally cars, that had no trouble maintaining or exceeding the speed limit, darted by, with the passengers staring at him, wide-eyed, as they went. He tried to look at himself in his rearview mirror, to see what they saw, but his reflection was like a cloudy, buzzing flag. When he reached up to dampen the mirror's vibrations, it came off in his hands. But how could he let something small like that bother him, after the direction that the morning's crisis on his block had taken, allowing him to do a good deed for Marcia and thereby bring her that much closer to be able to admit how she felt about him.

As he lumbered further and further down Van Dyke, he considered the significance of the mirror falling off and remembered how one of the motivational speakers had said that certain things will happen when in the midst of dramatic change and it's up to you to turn them into positives; and, as always, going forward requires an honest assessment of the facts. Without a rearview mirror, Eugene thought, I can only see where I'm going and not where I've been. Pretty good, he congratulated himself. That was easy. Then he figured, how if he wanted them to, the mechanics would be able to fix the mirror and if anyone there remembered his father, would probably even do it in for free.

What was the name of that place again, he wondered. Did he ever even

know? They had a huge lot, free towing, an enormous salvage yard out back to cut the best deal on parts, and were open from early until late, every weekend, and most holidays. While he and his Dad waited, a line of cars would limp in and others would roll back out running like tops. So why've I been away so long?

He hit another light and shook to a stop. Looking around, he saw things weren't exactly as he remembered. Weren't there more buildings before, he thought. And except for all the bits of paper and shreds of plastic caught in the dead, limp grass and spindly trees of the open fields on either side of the road, it looked more like he was heading far out of the city instead of further in.

No, for sure, something wasn't right. He glanced up to where the rearview mirror had been, out of habit, to try and get his bearings. The street signs were coming in the right order, but at the same time, somehow, didn't make sense. He rattled forward when the light changed and pitched some more carrots and celery into his mouth but the crunching was so loud behind his earplugs that it annoyed him more with each chomp and so spit the mess out the window.

He chugged by empty storefronts with no window or doors. Some of their brick faces were charred by fire. There were more empty fields with bits of trash and twisted scraps of fence. He slowed down and bounced over some railroad tracks. On the other side of the street, there was an old gas station. Sheet metal was flapping down from the rain fly over the island where the pumps had been.

Plywood covered the building's windows; and spray painted in large, sloppy letters on the front wall was, "No Copper."

He pattered by a car half on the curb and half in the road. It had no wheels and sat on its rusted brake rotors. This was looking like another country, he thought. Like a TV country where Generals are always announcing new timetables for withdrawal. He glanced down the side streets as he went by: more dirty fields; and of the few houses, some were standing, others were charred and caving in.

Then ahead, on the other side of the street, there was a person, probably a woman, standing still next to a bent bus stop. The sight made him feel warmer as the cold air blew through the open windows. The person stomped her feet in place and then stepped out into the street as if to see if the bus was coming. She looked so fragile amidst the gutted buildings and empty road, that Eugene felt like he should to a U-turn and see if she needed a ride. He told himself, one good deed at a time.

He caught the first glimpse of the cemetery and its wrought iron fence. Almost there. His wrists were aching from the vibrations that shook through the steering wheel. A headache was beginning to gnaw between his temples. And in his ears, behind the baby carrots, he heard the swishing pulse of his own heartbeat. He didn't like hearing that and tried to ignore it, for some reason every

heart beat made him feel like there was one less.

The light ahead swung gently over the street and changed from yellow to red as he approached. He didn't stop, only slowed and idled through the empty intersection, and guided his car up the sloping drive into the enormous lot of the mechanics.

This was where he bought his first car, a '79 Bronco. He also came before that, with his father who would exchange surly banter back and forth with the men as they lay with their legs and greasy boots sticking out from under cars or with others with their elbows deep in engine wells while Tiger game was turned up so loud that Ernie Harwell's announcing sounded like the voice of God. But it had changed since his last visit.

Now, there was only the cinder block shell with yellow, flaking paint and five dark, gaping mouths where the pull down doors had been. Old tires were strewn across the uneven lot. Eugene clattered to a stop in front of a pile of shattered car batteries. He stepped out and wove around tires towards the building.

Standing in one of the tall wide openings, peering in, he felt little again and recalled more of what had been the magical kingdom. He took a few more steps inside, out of the wind. In the dark hollow, he could almost hear his father's cursing, see his uneven smirk, calling the prices robbery, swearing never to come



back—though he always did, was always running into things—a careless driver who drank daily. Eugene remembered feeling safe in the garage while they waited for the repairs to be done. At the end, they would let him pick a lollipop out of a bowl. Now, wisps of snow blew across the open doors. The flakes floated as much as they fell, turning over in the breeze, too light to stay on the ground; a bit of powder that would neither accumulate nor melt. Eugene wondered what fallout would like. Quickly, the flurry passed, like it had never been. There was that swish of heartbeat in his ears and he realized he could have taken out the carrots and stopped hearing his clock—only there was no reason to stay anymore.

As his car chugged and shook back up the road, the person was still there waiting by the bent bus stop. He was going to do it, he thought, as he slowly approached not yet having gained much momentum. He would stop and offer a ride, be kind, help someone, at least.

When he rumbled to a stop, the person, wrapped in a long, dark coat, scarf, hat, and hood, backed away. He yelled out through the window and the person shuffled faster. Eugene stepped out of his door and yelled that it was okay, that he just wanted to help. “There’s nothing to be afraid of!” he yelled.

As his car slowly shuttered back up to speed, he told himself how they’d be better off in a bus anyway, warmer and not so loud.

Marcia was outside sweeping her sidewalk when Eugene clattered back onto the block. She was obsessive about her yard: out pulling dandelions all spring and summer, methodically racking leaves in the fall, and then policing every speck of snow and ice from her cement all winter, mostly with a broom and salt.

After rolling the windows back up, Eugene shuffled across the street to explain about her muffler. He saw her lips moving and heard the peaks of her voice but couldn't make out any of the words until he took the carrots out of his ears. The world suddenly sounded hollow like a big empty room and he wobbled, slightly, with so much space.

"This man came with a truck," Marcia said. "Some white guy. Said he'd heard about what happened or something from someone that does board-up or something. He had a whole story."

She explained how he had everything, a welder on wheels, a jack, and charged us twenty bucks to put in a straight pipe. "I talked him down to fifteen," she said.

Eugene was so happy that Marcia was talking to him that he felt grateful for the man who'd come to fix the mufflers.

"He was up under Charlie's van," Marcia went on, "when the police came to do the reports." Marcia paused her story to ask if Eugene was wearing one

mitten and one glove. He shook his head no and tucked them into his pockets, baring his hands. “You’re hat’s funny too,” she said. He said it was because he’d been in a hurry and reminded her about the story.

Marcia explained how the police talked to the fix-it man and arrested him for stealing them in the first place. “I guess it wasn’t his first time,” Marcia said. “They took him away and left his old rusty, piece-of-shit truck with our mufflers or something in the back.”

“We should steal something from him,” Eugene said.

“Now you’re talking,” Marcia agreed.

Eugene was elated. Together they sorted through the contents of the truck. Marcia found a little over forty dollars. Eugene took the jumper cables, battery, and found a matching pair of gloves. As they moved to see what they could find in the bed, he remembered what one of the speakers said on TV. You have to take a sober look at things as they are and build your dreams on with what you have.

## Henri's River Sauce

*Panela*, guava paste, cloves, *taheebo* and *catuba* bark, whole red chilies, garlic cloves, sumac, and salt. Mixed together over high heat. Add coconut water to thin.

## Swimming Lessons

Greg had been at home cleaning his guns. His fingers left dirty smudges on the lid of his gas station coffee cup. He took another slurp. It had had gotten cold.

As he sat in his dark car on the park overlooking the Mississippi, from the Minnesota side, he thought about his sister-in-law and how she wanted him to move out. I should take her, he thought, and teach her how to swim. See what happens when she doesn't have anything to hold on to.

He turned the knob on the dashboard, dimming the interior lights and put the binoculars around his neck. Someone was stumbling through the parking lot towards the pier. He looked young and was dressed like a local college student in a red baseball cap, matching hoody, and jeans. Greg turned down the radio as he watched the man, through his binoculars, shuffling out onto the pier.

That's it, Greg thought. You can swim. Of course you can. You can do anything.

The young man clung to a lamppost near the edge and threw up into the water. He held himself there until he slid down to lay on his stomach, head hanging over the edge.

Oh, come on, Greg thought. You're going down hugging the throne. I thought you had more in you. The man was motionless.

Greg put down the binoculars and took another pull of cold coffee. He contemplated driving over and giving the guy a nudge but that would mean crossing the bridge—about twenty minutes, making it an hour home. Wasn't worth it.

## Roadblock

Valerie and I were in Rurrenabaque, Bolivia longer than we'd planned. Protests, that had started in support of a miner strike, shut down key roads across the country. Nothing could move. La Paz, the capital, was getting hungry. The department of Santa Cruz in the east had another reason to secede.

Rurrenabaque was at the end of a thin, muddy road. We'd gone there to go someplace new for us both—not France, not America. During the first week, the talk in the town was that unless the road to was driven on, the jungle would take it back. By the second week, conversation centered around the names of fruit and vegetables that were becoming scarce. A bruised, softening tomato became a treasure.

The town was a perched on the edge of a wide, slow river. Valerie had asked in her best Spanish, if it went anywhere. No, she'd been told.

One late afternoon, we were out taking a stroll through town, killing time, waiting to be hungry. I wondered where everyone had gone. Normally, just before dusk, the town would be out in front of their doors on chairs or stumps chatting with passersby.

“Maybe they all got out on boats,” Valerie said.

The shade no longer favored only one side of the street. We paused in the central plaza, dumfounded, and sat down on a battered bench by a dry fountain. Palm fronds shook overhead. Suddenly, I heard a horn. A car! I thought.

We both leapt up and started walking. There more horns. We slowed. One was distinctly a trumpet, another a saxophone. A band had started warming up then stopped. We continued in the direction of the sound. It started up again—short squawks and raspy barks.

Around the corner, the whole town seemed jammed onto one of the dirt streets. The nearest people smiled at us and motioned with their arms to, ‘come along.’ A woman hugging a bundle of tall, purple lupine-like flowers approached put handfuls of the flowers into our arms. They smelled like bubblegum.

Valerie looked at me and smiled. I was happy to see her at ease. The band began to march up the road away from the river and we joined everyone else following them. Valerie, whose Spanish was better than mine, found out that we had joined a religious procession up to Calvario, the high hill, outside of town. It was a lunar holiday and the changing of the Virgin Mary’s clothes.

At the edge of town some men lit torches. Others turned on their flashlights. And we began plodding up the trail.

The band ahead wheezed out an off kilter dirge. A slack drum that sounded



like a rock falling into water beat from time to time. Red faces would flash in the flicker of a shacking torch. Silhouettes marched up the hill cradling flowers like they were sleeping babies. Once the crowd began shuffling up the hill, no one spoke.

At least this was something different, new, I thought. It might distract Valerie from feeling so claustrophobic. She's told me the day before that the best part of traveling was being able to leave someplace and know you would never see it again.

We walked with the procession across the hilltop towards a cement church. The doorway glowed with electric light. A generator pattered out an inky haze that drifted across the pale horizon. We walked with the crowd up the center aisle of the chapel. The people before us pitched their flowers onto the heap at the foot of a large, glass box that contained a life size depiction of Mary. All the flowers massed together smelled more like powdered sugar than bubble gum. We found a place to stand in the back, by the door. Once everyone had dropped their flowers, a white curtain was brought down between us and the virgin. A woman climbed up a step stool and got inside. Another woman handed her up some purple fabric, solemnly stood by, then accepted a folded bundle of white—Mary's previous robe.

When the curtain went up, Mary was in a purple gown.

Valerie was shaking her head and starting look upset. I nudged her and mouthed, “What?”

She waved me off, then tugged at my hand to go. Outside, she said how she had wished it was a car. “And that in there,” she said, “what bullshit. Imagine something like that, always the same. Never changing. You may as well be dead.”

I mentioned how from the hilltop it was a nice view over the river—and how the moon had come out. Inside, the woman who had changed the clothes gave a kind of a mass. When the congregation sang, I mentioned how it sounded beautiful. “What are the chances we would ever have this experience? I said.

“I still wish it was a car,” she said.

After the ceremony the hilltop became a party. Some jeeps were positioned so there headlights illuminated the field. Someone with a propane stove began to heat a metal caldron and people lined up, taking a way steaming cups.

“Let’s get one of those,” I said.

“What do you think it is?” she asked. I told her I couldn’t guess and we got in line. A smiling man handed us warm, plastic cups. The stuff smelled like rubbing alcohol and burnt milk—made my eyes tingle and I sneezed after I threw it down. Valerie took a sip and gave me hers. We went back for seconds, which seemed to make the guy ladling it out really happy. A radio in one of the trucks

started blasting *Cumbia*.

“Let’s go to Henri’s,” Valerie said.

We went there almost every night, since we’d found it. The restaurant was a small shack on one of the dirt streets. The walls were made of knotty wooden planks. When it was open, a tattered curtain hung over the door. Inside, there were a few tables. It was never busy, but the thing is, Henri always had food—meat, produce, even some baguettes. Apparently, he got them in almost daily on the military plane that supplied fuel to the nearby Marine base.

“Things. No people,” he’d said when I asked if he could get us out.

So, he always had food, spoke French--which was good for Valerie—but at the same time, he was a bad cook and his place, run down as it was, was quite expensive. And I don’t know if it was because of the roadblock or it would have happened anyway, but it seemed like we were exchanging the same bills. Since there wasn’t an ATM in town, we’d go to the bank to get money to pay Henri and, I swear, we would get back what we had just paid him.

As we walked up, the curtain over the door glowed from light inside. The place was empty, as usual, and Henri was at a table bent over a book. He got up and told us he didn’t think we were coming.

“If we don’t come every night,” Valerie said, “it’s only because we are saving it for a treat.”

We both ordered the grilled fish with no spice, which made him say, “I tell you, it’s not good to eat plain out of the river. Not good for your stomach.” He preferred to serve the fish covered in a bitter syrup of tree bark and who knows what—to keep us from getting sick.

We were served our plates. The heads and tails hung over the edge of the tin plate. The skin was crisp, sprinkled with cracked peppercorns, and sizzling with butter. Sprigs of singed rosemary sat across on top. Chunks of lime covered what remained of the plate. I was stunned. It looked great. Smelled great. Valerie was beaming with pleasure, smiling broadly.

“What is this?” she asked. He answered in French and Valerie translated. “He says, ‘If he can’t protect our bodies, at least he can protect our pallet.’”

I quenched the sizzling skin with lime and peeled open the skin.

“*Biere?*” Henri asked.

“Sure!” I told him.

Valerie, with mouth full and fingers glistening, murmured, “Uh-huh,” for a beer and nodded. “*Merci,*” she called after him once she swallowed. “This is really good today,” she said to me.

She’d put her black hair was up in a loose knot, exposing the delicate line of her tan neck. Her brown eyes glistened with gold flakes. Our feet twisted together under the table as we ate. By the time the butter began to bead on the

tin, we'd cleaned those fish to the bone. The bare ribs stuck up like an ancient shipwreck. After Henri cleared the plates, he joined us, as usual, with a whisky. That's when the French would really start and I'd tune out and drink.

Valerie interrupted my drifting with, "Henri says he likes it here."

"I have all I need," he added in English. "People come to me."

Then they were off in French again. I finished my beer and helped myself to another, out of the damp fridge. Henri got up and came back with the bottle of whisky and another glass.

"I'm going to get drunk," Valerie told me.

In English, as were telling the story of our car horn hope and the procession, a man stepped in through the curtain. He looked startled to see us there.

"My partner," Henri announced as the man pulled up the curtain and bolted the door. When we shook hands, I saw his forearms were crisis-crossed with small, raised scars, like he'd worn sleeves of barbed wire. He said his name was Arturo. In perfect English, he said, "Do you want to go on a jungle tour? I'm a guide. The best guide you will find."

He had an American accent and told me he grew up in Houston but his family moved back to Peru when he was in high school. "I became a Marine in Peru and was a resident instructor at the School of the Americas at Ft. Atkins,

Georgia. Did you guys need any weed?"

"Sure," I said.

Henri and Valerie slipped back into some French, leaving Arturo and I to discuss the deal. He unrolled a folded piece of newspaper to show me the buds and told me I could just get caught-up when we pay Henri. Then he asked to taste Valerie's whisky, in French, bad French, no better than mine.

She giggled and complimented him, acted impressed. They struggled through a conversation. "You speak really well," she told him. She was always critical of my attempts, so that I'd pretty much stopped trying.

Henri came back with another glass and Arturo and Valerie laughed over who should get what glass. He wanted her to have the new one, that he filled up. She wanted him to have the new glass. I rolled a joint.

"You don't want any whiskey?" Valerie asked me.

"Sure." I told her. Arturo's eyes followed her body, as she went to get me a glass.

We settled into English, because it was the language we most had in common. I got up and went to the bathroom, smoked some of the joint in there alone. When I came back, Arturo was saying how it wasn't his fault someone got bitten by a snake and he didn't owe them any refund. "I didn't make anything on that."

Valerie told me Arturo had gotten someone on the plane to La Paz.

“Now, tell me,” he said. “How is that right?”

No one else wanted to smoke so the joint was mine alone. “How is what, right?”

“Someone gets bitten by a snake and they are mad at you when you save her life.”

I didn't say anything. He said, “Come on man, you don't speak Spanish?”

I told him I get by and asked, “¿Te gusta aqui?”—do you like it here?

He laughed and as Valerie and Henri slipped back into French, he kept talking to me in English. I got drunk and stoned and nodded.

He told me he couldn't go back to Peru because of what happened with Fujimori and Montesinos. Said he couldn't go back to America, either. He said, like with Henri, there'd been a misunderstanding with my government.

“Sorry,” I told him. I was about to fall out of my chair but had to get up to get to the bathroom. When I got up, I collapsed and steadied myself on Arturo's shoulders. I stood up and remember telling Valerie, “I do *too* love you.”

I woke up in the hammock in the hallway. It was dark. My head hurt. Henri's place was quiet and dark. The moon lit my way back to our hotel. Valerie wasn't there. I took the last of my Vicodin to fall asleep. She was there, shaking me, in

the morning, telling me to wake-up. That we had a plane to catch. We shouldered our packs and headed down the muddy road to the airfield. On the way she mentioned how she didn't drink that much, stayed up all night talking with Henri and Arturo. "His French is pretty good."

"We were here earlier," Valerie said, as we walked up to the gate. "Arturo got us into the officers club and we had the whole place to ourselves."

At the gate, the guard said he could only let Valerie in. "I'll go find out what's going on," she said and ducked through the gate. "I'll be right back."

I waited with the guard who wouldn't make conversation. A plane lumbered in and landed. I lost sight of it when it taxied in behind the hanger.

I tried to ask the guard if he could check on Valerie but gave up trying to say it, as he gave no indication that he was listening to me. The plane's engine roared. I saw it again, lumbering up the runway and into flight. It banked overhead and disappeared beyond the trees.

I wasn't surprised, not after it happened, which made me think I must have really known her.

Henri pattered up on his moped from the other side of the fence, loaded with groceries. After the guard let him out, he told me, while smiling, "Look, I got your kind of food so I can serve with no spice. Meat and the right potatoes for *frites*. Look!" he insisted.



Chucho's favorite - Chiles en nogada

Roast 6 poblano chilies and remove the skins and seeds.

Cook the stuffing: ½ pound of ground pork, 3 cloves of minced garlic, ½ diced onion, handful of chopped cilantro, 1 small diced apple, ¼ teaspoon cinnamon, ½ teaspoon clove, 1 teaspoon cumin, ¼ cup chopped pine nuts, 2 tablespoons of chopped raisins softened in water, 1 teaspoon salt.

Make the sauce: combine ¾ cup Mexican crema, ¼ evaporated milk, ½ cup ground walnuts, ½ teaspoon of sugar, pinch of nutmeg, pinch of salt. Gently heat.

Make the egg batter: Whisk 3 egg whites until they peak. Fold in the yolks. Add a pinch of salt.

Stuff and fry the chilies: Heat oil in a pan. Cover stuffed chilies in flour then dunk into egg batter. Fry until golden brown.

Serve: Pour over with walnut sauce. Sprinkle with fresh pomegranate seeds

SMILE PRACTICE

It was Charlie's first night in the borrowed trailer parked in his mother-in-laws driveway on the eastside of Detroit. The camper reeked of citronella, like a candle had melted into the linoleum floor. Outside, the yard light buzzed like dentist's drill. After getting into bed with his wife, he thought he felt a draft and became obsessed with finding it. He told his son, who slept on the dinette bed, that he always got a deer when he went hunting in the trailer. When his wife started to cry, Charlie went back to bed. He soothed her then got back up.

"It's that light!" he yelled. "The buzzing!" He stormed out and his wife bolted out after him. He paced under the light. Cindy stood, arms folded, watching him. Then the light went out—turned off in the house.

*"Thank you!"* Cindy called out.

Back in the camper, his son said, "Now its too dark. I can't see." A few minutes later, Alex asked, "Won't criminals come?" No one answered.

Charlie tried to remember what he was scared of when he was a kid.

The next morning, Charlie took an inventory of their things in his mother-in-law's garage. The lawnmower need sharpening. He wondered if he would cut the grass

there now. The kiddie pool was in a heap on the floor under a broken open box of tile. The grill was there but had no propane. The vacuum cleaner needed a belt. There was another box splitting open. In a heap, were all their garbage bags full of clothes. Every day, he thought, all of this is that much closer to being trash.

If you smile, he remembered hearing, even when you don't want to, it will make you happy. He started to practice. The only thing, he realized, was that it didn't feel right to smile there. He walked down the drive and strolled up the street. His cheeks began to tingle. Charlie paused on the corner as the morning traffic sped by and he practiced smiling. He thought if he could get used to smiling in public, maybe he could smile at home—that's how he understood the practice to work.

When he came back home he found Alex in the garage. "We didn't know where you were," his son said then gave him the twenty dollars he gotten for his birthday so his dad could buy a full length mirror.

## Arturo's Ceviche

Suspected, but unconfirmed: Sea bass marinated in lime juice for about an hour.

Before serving, added some orange juice, slivers of red onion, diced green pepper, and tomato. Served with corn on the cob and chunks of sweet potato.

## Foot of the Bed

Conner Creek bubbled up in a dense cattail marsh to meander gently down an easy grade towards the Detroit River. As the city grew, its slight hills were all flattened. The dirt was pushed into the sodden ground. Brick homes were built over what had been the marsh and Holy Cross Hospital went over the source of the stream. The water was buried underground, put through concrete tubes to pass under the airport, the cemetery, and freeway before falling out of a pipe and splashing into the Detroit River, to disperse into Lake Erie, the Saint Lawrence, and then, finally, the sea.

When the cold begins, geese come south in wedge formations. They honk, flying just over the power lines and shingles. Often, some set their wings and land on the hospital lawn, pausing where the water had once been.

From her pre-op bed, next to the window, Helen muttered, “That time of year again.” She was sitting up, wearing a thin blue gown that tied in the back. Gray roots showed through her limp, auburn hair. Her husband, Stanley, stroked her hand while sitting in a chair. The room smelled like dryer sheets.

A male nurse, clipboard in hand, glanced out though the hanging blinds,

nodded, and began to explain that he was there to help improve the outcome of the surgery and answer any questions they might have.

Helen looked away from him and back up at the wall-mounted TV.

Archival footage flickered, tinted like the color of a brown, paper bag splotted with oil—a PBS special about the dust bowl. Men and women walked shoulder to shoulder through low prairie grass, trashing the thicket with sticks. Hundreds of rabbits bounded ahead of them.

The nurse stepped between the couple and the TV. “This should only take a minute,” he said and tapped the mute button before going on. “Just to make sure,” the nurse asked, “you haven’t eaten or had anything to drink in the last eight hours?”

She shook her head, looked at her husband, and signed.

The nurse asked her if she had discontinued all blood thinning medications, such as aspirin for the last twenty-four hours and added, “This,” while handing her the clipboard and pen, “is an informed consent form. But before you sign , just a few more questions. Your name?”

“It’s written right here,” she said while pointing.

“It’s a formality,” he said.

She rolled her eyes at her husband and then said her name, “Helen Milski.” Then the nurse asked her the date and the current President. “What’s this

got to do with cutting off my damned foot?" she barked.

"He doesn't think you know what's happening," her husband whispered.

The nurse explained that he just needed to confirm her awareness, that the question was standard procedure.

"John F. Kennedy," she said and her thin lips pursed into a defiant smile.

"Sure dear," her husband said and rose out of chair holding an arm out as if around an imaginary waist and the other up like tea spout then briefly shuffled near her side of the bed.

"I was a pretty girl," she said looking down as if at her husband's feet.

"We would go dancing." After a pause she looked up at the nurse and asked, "Do you take anyone dancing?"

"Sometimes," he said then asked if she would prefer a different question.

"What question?" she asked.

"The President, dear," her husband said and sat back down, taking her hand in his.

"And what if I don't know?" As the nurse began to suggest alternatives, like naming the next holiday, she snapped, "Balack Obama! Voted for him."

"Barack, dear. We've voted for all the winners," her husband added, nodding.

The nurse smiled politely and explained that after the surgery her throat

might be a bit sore from the breathing tube. He added that as long as there were no complications she would be up in a day or two working with a physical therapist; getting used to her prosthesis.

“If you don’t have any more questions you can go ahead and sign the form.”

But she said she wanted him to look at her foot before she signed. “Maybe it’s okay.”

The blue hospital blanket sloped gently down to the rise of her feet. The nurse didn’t want to lift it and see the open ulcers, the puffy, plum colored flesh, or the crooked toes with yellow, brittle nails. He told her that a doctor was better qualified to make that kind of judgment and that her surgeon would be in to see her as soon as the consent form was signed.

“I wish you would look,” she said again, pleading. “Doctors aren’t always right. It could be one of those unnecessary procedures.”

The nurse felt a wave of relief when her husband put his hand on the clipboard, held it up for her, and she signed.

“I just thought another opinion...” she mumbled while stroking her husband’s knuckle.

The nurse offered another polite smile, said that the doctor would be in momentarily, and asked if they would like the television back on. But neither



spoke. Outside, the large gaggle of geese began honking raucously and lumbered towards take-off.

The husband got up and went to the window.

“Stanley,” she said and reached out her empty hand. “Come back.”

With his back to the room, he said, “It’s like they’re laughing at us.”

## Stanley's roast goose and stuffing

Stock: 1 one celery bunch, 4 raw onions quartered with the skins, 1 bag of carrots cut into hunks, 2 heads of garlic, whole. Cover with water, cook, reduce

Stock II. 2 onions, diced, caramelized, 1 small tub of chicken livers, 2 turkey drum sticks, 1 cup chicken livers. Cover with water, cook, reduce

Croutons: 2 loafs of Italian style sliced bread, cubed. Mix with 2 cups of olive oil, oregano, basil, salt, pepper, and shredded parmesan cheese Once all the croutons are coated with the mix, toast on cookie sheets.

Stuffing: Strain the stocks. Combine, heat, reduce. Add butter. Cool. Moisten the croutons with ladles of stock. Stuff into the bird.

Cook the goose same as you would a turkey, smearing butter between the meat and skin. Cook uncovered, basting frequently, until the skin is brown and crispy.

## Claudia Lives

The cool water of the toilet revived her. Claudia's body ached. She couldn't see—thought her eyes were ruined. She tumbled in the darkness.

Claudia tried to get her bearings, swimming right until nudging a wall going by that skinned her nose. She was moving. She came near to nudged the other side then both up and down, just brushing the rough surface with her fins. Claudia tried to hold to the invisible center, only to find the best she could do, shuttling forward in the dark, was to correct away from the walls of the tunnel. At least the water was fresh and cool. Think positive, she told herself.

She remembered hearing, back in the aquarium she grew up in, before taking to the road with the festival, that if a rock woke-up in flight, it would think it put itself there. Well, Claudia thought, I'm more than a rock and know better.

Just then, the momentum behind launching Claudia down the pipe, began to drain away and she found herself floating in the dark. She used the pause to test her parts. Ow, going left hurts and doesn't work too well. Eyes are probably shot, unless I can stay alive long enough to heal. Claudia shuddered to think of her

own death—especially a death there in the dark, in some water filled chamber, probably underground. Why do I think I'm underground? she asked herself. She just had a hunch. She felt pressure coming up from below, pressing in on her, then falling. Water gone. She tumbled through an air pocket, knocking against the sides, bluish!—swimming again and on the move, only in a much larger space.

Claudia thought her sight might be changing, or imagining it to change—she couldn't be sure. The black was more of a dark, grainy gray. Maybe this is just what happens, she wondered. That blindness might go from black, through gray, to white making it hard to sleep. She remembered hearing, back in the aquarium, that everything has its own way of seeing. Maybe, she hoped, I would turn into something else. Claudia tried to think through the stages she knew of a butterfly. There was slug phase and then flying one, where you had to hurry and make more of yourself before you die. As she continued on, shapes began to emerge in the channel. She passed through large rings, where pipes joined together. I guess I can see, she thought. It looked bright up ahead. Cloudy, but exceptionally bright as she approached. When she hit the light, she shoot straight through and had glanced back at it as she headed into darkness again. Before long there was light up ahead again and she passed through it as before. The bright spots came and went. Just as Claudia began to be comforted by the

regularity and there was an extended period of darkness. It went on for so long she think she slept, because when the next light appeared, Claudia seemed to remember a dream: *She was in a pond, under some lily pads. There were people standing on a small wooden bridge, sprinkling in food. There were other fish around her and it felt like they were a family.* The next light approached. It seemed different, had a different color, an orange tint. Next, she was falling through the air over the Detroit River.

Claudia had traveled six miles through the city's pipes and sewers to make it to the water. At Jefferson station, in testing for a storm surge, Claudia's gallons passed out for dumping, unprocessed. For a toilet flushed live pet, this is the equivalent of winning the lottery, though Claudia was having a hard time feeling grateful.

She was caught in a churning cycle of falling water. Her skin was begging to burn. She nearly got caught in a tumbling condom, the ring tugging at her gill as they spun. Fuzzy bits of paper started to stick to her scales. She shook and twisted. Crunched up her body and pulsed. She tried everything to break free from the current. Then she was clear, spat free. The more she swam away from that place, the better the water.

She found different currents—high, low, and ones that varied in force. By keeping near to the shore, she was able to pause or use currents she wanted. As

the river slid by the city, it past through wells of murky light. Debris, strewn across the bottom, appeared to have been gathering for years: pipes, concrete, sunken buckets. Claudia drifted over a cluster of submerged cars. Here and there, black trash bags fluttered in the current. She paused to relax in the upturned cage of a shopping cart and probably slept. She'd thought so because she remembered a dream: *She was living in a desktop aquarium. A skull, nestled in the brightly colored pebbles below, opened and closed, belching bubbles. There's a plastic castle in the corner that is too small to swim through. There's a crab in the tank that has taken a snip at her. Overhead, the hand appears and makes it rain food.*

Claudia was awoken by the sound of voices. There were fish floating, looking at her, on the other side of the shopping cart basket. They were wondering aloud about who she might be. Someone said to go nudge her. Another countered not to startle her.

Claudia swam to show she was awake. A fish came forward towards the basket cage and asked who she was.

“Who am I?” Claudia said. “We'll I was in Toledo but before that. Actually, the first thing I remember...” She raced through her whole story. “And then this kid wanted to swim with me and I was nearly cooked. Thought I was blind. Was in darkness, I think underground, for I'm not sure how long then ended up here and had a dream...” By the time she finished her breathless

account, some of the other fish were showing signs of being board, drifting, looking around.

“Fascinated as we all are by that,” said one of the others. “This is usually the time we go look for food.” Some of the others already began to swim away. He asked if Claudia wanted to come.

Together they swam in a group of about a dozen fish, heading out into the dark, fast moving water. “It’s not a sure thing,” one of the fish told her as they went. “But when it happens its like—jackpot!”

The school ducked into a cushion of still water around one of the massive pillar’s of the Ambassador Bridge. A pile bones sloped away from the footer, disappearing in the dark.

“Sometimes they end up here,” the nearby fish said, “We’ve been lucky before.”

## Vita

Rob Fontella Zajkowski was born in Detroit. He served in the Army as an intelligence analyst, studied comedy at Chicago's Second City, and received his Bachelors of Arts in English and Spanish from Northeastern Illinois University. He currently works for the University of Wisconsin in public health and studies fiction in the Master of Fine Arts program at the University of New Orleans.