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*Cover Art:*  
“Go to the Zoo” by Peter Guenther
Featured Professor

Joel Eisenhower

A Dandy Good Time:
Interview with John Smyth

Professor John Smyth has been with the PSU English department since 1998. He teaches during fall and spring terms, when he is not living in his native Scotland. His ambiguously-titled courses, such as “Literature & Philosophy” and “The Novel,” do not begin to do justice to the scope and spontaneity of what’s in store for the students who sign up for them. Smyth lectures like a literary machine gun, spouting obscure references like they are all too commonplace and seamlessly weaving in anecdotes about Mick Jagger or modern fashion. He challenges his students to think critically and philosophically, and to speak confidently. He tends to eschew theory for actual fact, and is always ready to sit and talk about what is going on in the lives of those around him. His style and sensibilities are unmistakably European. Look for him strolling the park blocks in his velvet jacket, smoking and citing Theodore Adorno in a signature Scottish accent.

What’s your educational background? What colleges did you attend? How did you come to be a professor?
I went to Cambridge University as an undergraduate. Cambridge gives an automatic M.A. after three or more years if one is not in jail, etc.—an odd “moral” idea dating back, I believe, several hundred years! I got a Ph.D at the University of Pennsylvania, with a term auditing at Yale, kindly paid for by my Penn fellowship. My dissertation advisors were Barbara Herrnstein Smith at Penn (fortunately, still alive), and Paul de Man at Yale (unfortunately, dead long ago). Both influenced me enormously and were incredibly generous to me. My first full-time academic job was at the rather notorious Bennington College in Vermont, where I taught for 13 years.

What was your introduction to philosophy and literature? What made you want to pursue these fields of study?
I began, at high school (where we specialized very young), studying mathematics and secondarily physics. My math teachers encouraged me to study mathematics at university, saying that I could always read literature (and philosophy, which then I knew nothing of) in my spare time. I decided, however, that I was far too “lazy” to read in my spare time, however spare. In any case, I probably would not have been a very original mathematician. My mathematician father, on the other hand, inspired me very young, and I still retain an interest in mathematics and logic, whenever I can vaguely understand them. I remain particularly interested in the number system, and am amused by the apparently insane equation: e to the i times pi = -1.

We did not have any photos of Professor Smyth, so we have included one John Smyth Pemberton, inventor of Coca-Cola.
among other things! My father always said that philosophy, properly understood, was more difficult than mathematics.

What are some of your favorite books, authors, themes?
This is a difficult question, since it might make me very verbose. One falls in love, I notice, with a few writers (or thinkers: for me the same) about once every ten years—and that changes everything. My latest love—for the last twenty years (fidelity is much underestimated in art as well as life)—is the Italian novelist Italo Svevo (a pseudonym). I personally am associated with theories of sacrifice, religious and otherwise. Rene Girard influenced me long ago, and e.g. Sterne, Diderot, Kafka, Adorno, and Beckett. I also love the economist John Maynard Keynes—a marvelous writer who names the problems of the future: viz. religion, sex, drugs, a fourth I forget, and economics last (not very difficult or problematic, except for the others, according to him). Only a brilliant economist or thinker would dare to say that. As regards women, I love [for example] Emily Bronte—according to me one the very best stylists in the language—and absolutely incredible given her age, or any age. Somewhere I say that Shakespeare was an even better thinker than Hegel or Wittgenstein, and almost as good a poet. Enough, John!

How would you compare living/culture in Portland to that of Scotland? Do you like one more than the other and, if so, why?
My new downstairs neighbours in Scotland say one of their favorite restaurants in the world is the Thai restaurant on 23rd Street. I love the landscape—though not often the architecture—in Oregon, but it is not my own. I don’t like invidious comparisons. I naturally attack Americans when in America and the Scots when in Scotland. Also, my love, an Italian, lives currently in Scotland—though we met in Portland. So there is really no comparison! If she moves back here I shall want to be here more.

I have heard that you were the head of the English dept. here at PSU. If true, what was that experience like? Did you find that it helped you grow academically?
Decidedly no (it took time away from my work, though encouraged me to read my colleagues). It was interesting for other reasons. I like the students here—who are often as good as any at Yale, etc. and often much more interesting. A woman teacher I liked here who took a job at Cornell said the same thing. I have had several middle-aged lawyers in my classes who say that practicing law bores them crazy. One of my favourites was an old Russian mathematician who took perhaps three or four of my classes, and amused the younger students no end.

What are some of your other interests or hobbies?
Well, like almost everyone nowadays I play bad—but hopefully not entirely hopeless—guitar and very childish piano. I was recently invited to play live. I was a good golfer at one time (we all learn at three years old in Scotland). Now I am not just bad, but psychotic (as a golfer alone I hope). I hit two good shots to the green and then putt OFF it! My ping pong remains slightly better.

Do you have a favorite moment of being a teacher, either a singular occasion or some recurring instance?
Yes, the fact that I know some of my students for 25 years—if that counts as recurring. And that almost all of them (that is, hundreds or even thousands) have been extremely nice to me, mutatis mutandis.

I remember your class vividly mainly because of your lectures. I found them highly enjoyable in that they were colorful and unpredictable while remaining informative and intelligible. Did you consciously develop this style, or model it after one or more of your former professors?
Thank you very kindly indeed. I think, as Gogol says in his “The Nose,” “I am myself, Sir, for better or for worse.” Probably the latter. But I’m pleased you don’t think so.

Without necessarily getting “political,” what is your take on the direction of the world at large, and where do you see humanity going in the next century? Furthermore, what is art, literature and philosophy’s place in that scenario?
Ouch!! I like Flaubert’s line: “Poetry is as precise as geometry; induction as deduction; and besides, after a certain point one no longer makes any mistake.” One of my own lines is: “There are two main points to poetry: to be beautiful and to predict the future (that these are the same is not stated).”
Despite what the media is saying, the end of the publishing industry is not upon us.

This September, New York Magazine ran a feature article titled “Have We Reached the End of Book Publishing As We Know It?” In response, a slew of articles have been published, all with their own take on the future of the book industry.

It’s all good and well to learn about the declining profit margins of Borders or Barnes and Noble, but what does it really mean for the people who buy books, and more importantly, the people who write them? If you’re an author who was hoping to get a million-dollar advance only to find out it will now be $500,000, then, yes, I can see how that would be disgruntling. But if you’re not one of the ten authors that may happen to in a year, and are one of the thousands just fighting to get a few thousand for an advance—or any advance if you’re on an indie publisher—then who cares, right?

Trickle-down economics is a funny thing (seriously, it’s laugh-out-loud hilarious), but in this case what happens at the top of the corporate publishing world will have an effect on all authors. When times are lean, even authors on large publishers are having their books not picked up to be stocked in Barnes & Noble and Borders. This phenomenon, called being “skipped,” doesn’t necessarily mean certain death for a book, but if an author on Random House can’t get their novel into Borders, it will definitely have an effect on authors published by smaller companies.

Virtually every book published, even if it’s self-published, will show up for sale on Amazon. Because of this, Amazon is steadily growing and will soon become the largest bookseller in the world. This, of course, brings about another set of problems for publishers and authors. Amazon could eventually demand very unfavorable terms for publishers and authors, and there have been some reports of this for print-on-demand (POD) books. It’s been rumored that Amazon has strong-armed some publishers into having their books printed by Booksurge, a POD company acquired by Amazon, or risk having the “Buy Now” button removed.

For indie publishers, who may have very few titles actually available in brick-and-mortar bookstores, online availability through retailers like Amazon is essential. Mark Suchomel, president of Independent Publishers Group, says that online retailers can be especially important for indie books. “Publishers need to sell books wherever they can, in and out of the book trade, to be successful. Titles with a limited market and a very targeted consumer base might be more likely to reach a higher percentage of their market through online retailers,” Suchomel explained.

For now, reports of Amazon forcing publishers into using Booksurge have been merely rumors, according to Amazon, but the fact is that the old publishing model will in fact eventually be dead. In order for publishers to not only survive, but grow, they will have to embrace things such as POD (which is still considered a dirty word in the corporate publishing world) when selling through online retailers. Utilizing POD, whether it is through a company such as Booksurge or one of the several others in the industry, will cut down on returns and costs affiliated with distribution and storage.

Authors will also have to cope with smaller advances in lieu of a better royalty rate. HarperStudio, a newly formed imprint of HarperCollins, is shaking up the corporate publishing industry by giving very small or no advances in exchange for a 50/50 profit split with authors. This, hopefully, will allow HarperStudio to take more chances on up-and-coming authors, which would translate into a

Indie publishers are uniquely positioned to weather the storm and have been utilizing POD and equal profit sharing for years.
greater variety of books coming from the top. Publishers will also not have to worry about recouping the advance, and instead can focus on having their marketing dollars be more effective for the long term. As Linda Meyer, editor-in-chief for Portland publisher Ink & Paper group, explains, “Those advance funds are more effectively put towards generating book buzz or otherwise contributing to the book’s overall marketing campaign.”

Indie publishers are uniquely positioned to weather the storm, and have been utilizing POD and equal profit sharing for years. Mostly, they’ve been doing this out of financial necessity, since they do not have the resources and distribution to give authors advances or make initial printings in the tens of thousands. Less is not more; less is becoming the only option. Indies have also organized, and the recently-formed organization Indiebound is the center of a movement to spread the gospel about why people should buy books from independent stores. Indiebound promotes bookstores on their website, where you can also sign their declaration to “band together with like-minded folks across the country to celebrate our independent natures, our free-thinking retailers and our unique communities.”

The corporate publishing experiment that is HarperStudio will certainly be interesting to follow. Will it be profitable? Will other large companies start similar imprints? The answer, most likely, will be yes. Like the music industry, corporate publishers will have to scale down and start over. Hopefully, they can learn something from the indies and we will enter a new golden age of publishing. Profits at the top may be smaller, but as long as there are books, people will still buy them, and people will still write them. Besides, $500,000 still sounds pretty good to me. 

In April, Publisher’s Weekly reported that online retailers now control up to 30% of the consumer book market. Amazon, the largest retailer in the world, reported a sales increase of 104% over the last five years, compared to a 3.6% increase for traditional bookstores.

While Amazon’s growth can be viewed as a encouraging sign indicating people are buying more books than ever, it also comes with scrutiny from the publishing industry. In May, Booklocker, a company that provides printing and distribution services for self-published authors, filed an anti-trust lawsuit against Amazon. Booklocker argues that Amazon forces POD publishers into unfavorable terms in order to have their books listed with the online retailer—including making publishers print books through Booksurge, a company that Amazon acquired in 2005.

Amazon’s policies also affect published authors, since many independent traditional publishers are using POD technology. If Amazon is allowed to continue the policies that make it difficult for small publishers to be profitable, many authors may find their books unavailable for purchase on Amazon, and therefore unavailable to the majority of book buyers.
I n 1992, a young man named Christopher McCandless deserted civilization for the Alaskan wilderness. He was determined to live off the land without anything but what he carried on his back. He failed. Five months after his initial trek into the wild, hunters found his body and a note pleading for help. He was dead at 24. Writers are often influenced by the people they meet in their youth; perhaps this was the case with Jon Krakauer and Into the Wild, his adaptation of McCandless’s story, which Sean Penn later turned into a popular cult film in 2007. The story of an eccentric young male leaving behind the choking confines of societal norms for the vast unknown has inspired another novel—The Other by David Guterson, acclaimed author of Snow Falling on Cedars.

Guterson’s story follows an intelligent, misanthropic young man named John Barry—heir to two of Seattle’s wealthiest families—through the narration of his best friend, Neil Countryman. Aptly-named Countryman is a carpenter’s son who meets Barry in high school while running track. It is high school teacher Countryman to whom Barry later leaves his $440 million dollar fortune. The two friends form a strong relationship of mutual dependence as they go on difficult hikes together over mountains and glaciers. Melancholic Barry sinks deeper and deeper into the embrace of the malevolent way of life of the ancient Gnostics, who saw the world as an entangled battle between good and evil, and hints at suicide with his refrain, “no escape from the unhappiness machine.” When Barry retreats into living in caves, Countryman becomes his only contact to the outside world. We are never really clued in as to why he withdraws into hermitism, because we don’t ever know what he’s thinking. We only know what Neil has deduced from flash memories of Barry’s father telling him about being left alone for hours to cry as a baby by his mentally unstable mother, earplugs in her ears.

Though Guterson’s lead character, John Barry, is definitely entangled in a manic state of survival, Countryman doesn’t quite make up for his erratic behavior by becoming the conforming counterpart in the odd couple best friend equation.

Chris McCandless in Into the Wild seems to be more of a romantic—a Thoreau-like charmer easier to commiserate with than the rambling, embittered Barry. We can’t sympathize with a man we don’t like and don’t know.

Unlike the wonderfully-written Snow Falling on Cedars, this novel falls short on likable characters and leaves a flat impression of an already well-covered story. On the positive side, The Other does contain some incredibly powerful descriptions of Pacific Northwest fog and forests, metaphors for John and Neil’s disorientation in life. The most memorable scene in the book occurs when Countryman relents to the requests of his friend, bringing him a stockpile of Fritos, toothpaste, powdered milk and toilet paper—remnants of a life which Barry unceremoniously calls “hamburger world.”
Interview

We caught up with David Guterson at this year’s Wordstock and had the opportunity to speak with him about hermitry, the writing process and what inspires him.

Was there someone/something that you drew from to create the story?
I drew from myself, from the conflict I feel inwardly about how best to live.

Would you say you had people in your youth that were always in the recesses of your memory like John Barry, Neil Countryman, or Chris McCandless?
Yes. I had three close friends—The Other is dedicated to them—and I definitely had them in mind while writing this book.

You can’t deny that people have compared the film/novel Into the Wild to your book The Other—what do you say to that?
Into the Wild sits squarely in the American romantic tradition. It is a story of wanderlust a la Kerouac. It sees nature as pure and pristine. The Other is not at all romantic. It is in the tradition of narratives about spiritual hermitry. McCandless spends most of his time wandering the country and meeting people. John William spends his time in the woods.

They say writers put a piece of themselves into their characters. What would you say to that? Are there pieces of you in them? If so, which?
I feel an inward divide all of the time. Part of me lives a contently conventional existence, and part of me feels the urge to withdraw into permanent retreat mode. And there you have the two central characters of my novel.

How did these characters affect you when writing The Other? Do you look at the world through a different lens now?
I only gave full voice in the novel to what was already there inside of me.

How long was the writing process for you—do you delve right in by writing the story or do you prep by doing character sketches/bios/outlines?
The process differs from book to book. The Other is heavily autobiographical, so I was able to just dive right in.

How long was The Other in the works?
My whole life.

It’s been said that since Snow Falling on Cedars you’ve become engrossed in writing similar pieces about people that alienate themselves from society. What do you say to that?
Yes, alienation is, I suppose, one of my themes, but it takes a slightly different shape from book to book.

Are you inspired by other artistic forms such as art or film?
I like poetry. It encourages me to pay close attention to each word when I’m writing prose.

What’s the best advice you could give fiction writers today attempting this genre?
Keep your overhead low. No debt, a simple life, so you have time to write.

What would you say has been one of your more humorous moments as a writer/storyteller?
Standing directly under a large cross hung from a wire over a church pulpit while talking to an audience. The idea that I might say the wrong thing and get struck by it seemed funny to me.
Friday, November 28, 9am–5pm. Title Wave Used Bookstore, 216 N.E. Knott. Customer Appreciation Day sale. 55% off everything.

Wednesday, November 26, 7pm. Powell’s Books Cedar Hills Crossing. Powell’s Classics Book Group. This month the group meets to discuss Dostoevsky’s *The Idiot*.

Thursday, March 5, 7pm. Manor House, Armstrong Lounge, Lewis and Clark College. D.A. Powell poetry reading. His collection *Holy City* won the Gerald Cable Book Award and was short-listed for this year’s PEN/ Joyce Osterweil Award for Poetry.


Monday, December 8, 7:30pm. Powell’s on Burnside. Steve Fainaru, a Washington Post reporter, traveled with several groups of security contractors to find out what motivates them to put their lives in danger every day. He reads from his book *Big Boy Rules*.

Sunday, January 11, 7:30pm. Concordia Coffee House, 2909 NE Alberta. Spare Room presents Endi Hartigan and Maryrose Larkin. $5 suggested donation.

Thursday, March 12, 6:30pm. Psychology Building, Room 105, Reed College. Local poet Matthew Dickman.
RETURN TO WRECK AND RUIN

Richard Hernandez

An homage to the gods of destruction.

“Sometimes, I have learned, to fix a thing the best way is simply to pound the hell out of it.”
–Bill Lowenburg

RECENTLY, AFTER A PROLONGED period of physical ruin, I found myself in my small hometown at the end of the summer, and in a more or less melancholy and nostalgic mood, I decided to seek out a few of my adolescent haunts, one of which I’ve held dear to over the years, but until recently haven’t treated as philosophically significant. It involves a countryside attraction at the low side of the road and a send-off to that big scrapyard in the sky.

First off, it’s not immediately a subject that speaks to people, at least not the kind of people who speak with a serious concern for the use of language and other rational preoccupations. In fact, it’s not a subject that speaks at all—it rather roars, a crude and outrageous beast of twisting metal and fiery collisions. It’s campy and cartoonish from a distance, but the gods dare you to peel your peepers from it once you get a whiff of its peppered hide.

Strangely, it’s often true that the most compelling aspects of our lives appear to an indifferent audience as little more than cartoonish displays of solipsism—on a badly lit stage at that. But sometimes within these exaggerated visages and cheap props resides a darker reality, one drenched in something the Homeric Greeks yearned for: a prayer for strong enemies, a relishing of existential pathos, a sugary elephant ear in one hand and a flask of whisky in the other. I think it’s obvious what thematic arena I am calling our voyeuristic eyes to look upon again in these times of terror and pity—the industrial age’s finest theater of violence, ladies and gentlemen—the demolition derby.

The ruling prejudices of the age should question my credulity when I compare the ancients and their aesthetic resolve to the spectacle of mechanized violent destruction of the rural American working class. But I would gladly be the devil’s cabana boy and invite the bearers of such opinions closer to the torch and hammer of the demolition derby’s empathetic bedlam, and ask them to be initiated upon the anvil of a late summer’s night in a Red State small town. It is there on the oil-soaked mud lake of the rodeo arena, with the twinkling lights of a carnival in backdrop where the “every crash is a kiss” ethos is made manifest. I think this is why derbies actually matter. Despite the absence of affluent fans and comfortable venues, they are, in a scrappy, resilient way, symbols of a pug-ugly American folk tradition with a lot of smoke and clanking.

Now, personally, I try to cut as much a self-respecting and dignified figure as I can in this compromised world, and I certainly don’t attend derbies expecting to find wisdom and moral example. But what most fail to see from behind the choking veil of the grandstand is all the birthing of the beautiful that goes with this delirium of Dionysian destruction. Let’s not disregard the
overtones of Bacchic desire on this beltway of wildly-painted, rumbling cars. It is precisely through that haze of carnage on a crisp fall night that we again can move away from the manicured urban temperaments, speaking with sarcasm and in jaded dualities of the world, to re-enter a sense of the berserk exuberance we all as human animals far too often disregard as irrelevant to ourselves in an age of rampant conformity.

In the derby, self-expression is on fierce display. Cars are decked out in elaborate homemade paint jobs, each distinctly marked by its unique color composition and usually by some emotive nominal sentiment, such as “Gloria, 2-nite I crash n’ burn 4 U,” or something equally Springsteenian. It might seem strange to want to make yourself a clear target, but in the crash-test dummy scenario of purposeful accidents such as the derby, aiming for your fellow drivers while simultaneously being aimed at is just part of the steam-billowing fun.

In the days of its inception, demolition derbies were known bluntly as “crash derbies,” where donated used automobiles were mechanically “customized” to fall apart easily upon impact. So when the thunder cracked and the crowd went nuts and hell was let loose at the county fair in the form of a derby, what came flying off those cars was all part of the puffed-up tradition of spectacle, an American specialty, the money shot in a land of desire.

Decades later, a more refined variation on the theme of controlled destruction as spectacle was perfected. It came in the form of a competitive arena filled with black mud, lined with industrial tires and concrete barriers—or sometimes just with felled telephone poles—and a fat man with greasy eyes standing above it all in the announcer’s booth, a checkered flag held tightly by meathook hands and dropped at the instant the crowd counts it down to bare-knuckle time. With drivers belted in and the cars lined up on the perimeter of the arena, their hoods toward the barriers and their trunks aiming at each other, the moment of truth comes with heartstopping intensity. Revving cars tear out into a collective anarchy.

Automotive rear ends now battling rams, chaos ensues for a few moments. Wheels spin out, mud flies, children cry—and then the action begins to slow and take systematic form, as each car bludgeons another into its last living extremity. In the melee of smashing metal and rubber, tires and radiator hoses explode in resounding resonance, drawing oohs and aahs from the clamorous, fixated crowd. Thick clouds of blue exhaust and white steam rise and hang ominously over the arena. One by one, the cars lurch to a halt, some due to mechanical break down, others to structural compromise. Typically, the last two cars moving are declared the winners of the battle heats, of which there are usually five to six, depending on the number of drivers entered in the derby. In the spirit of redemption, most derbies allow a third incapacitated car the opportunity for rebirth in a forthcoming heat, if the pit crew is able to salvage the crumpled beast and bring it back to life in time.

Time and entropy are logical constants of the derby; they keep the entirety of action in play. Destruction is inevitable, but there is no time for despair. Damage is to be expected, even relished, but improvised survival is the only true response of any driver worth his Amsoil—otherwise why would he enter into this crazy free-for-all in the first place? And so the colossal collision course of petro-burning machines and lubricated human desire carries itself out through the course of the evening, with the respective winners of each designated engines, punctured radiators and crumpled steel the grime visage of Shiva the destroyer god and wielder of dancing flames, which were certainly billowing out of few automobiles that night. I also thought of the dog-star god Perses, that Greek Titan known for his lay-to-waste tendencies and ask-questions-later attitude. And somehow it felt good—really good—to cast off like an old heavy coat the silly pretensions of the modulated, self-important bourgeois life that one comes to be associated with when one lives in a city for too long without interval. I counted myself fortunate to have been forced back to that smelly little sinkhole of a town to experience at least for one night a sense of elation and recklessness of the soul that every truant child within us should not be deprived of from time to time, lest we become too sensible.
When I was younger and people would ask me where I was from, I was always confused as to what my answer should be. I was born in southern California, but before I was a year old, my family moved to Israel. When I was seven, we moved back to the states and lived in a remote part of Illinois—then three years later back to California, only this time to the northern part of the state. For a while I would respond, “I’m from all over.” But now I feel comfortable saying I’m from California. This would be fine, except for the fact that some people don’t really want to know where I’m from, but what my ethnic background is. For many, a person who is visually uncharacterizable as a certain race or ethnicity can be anything from fascinating to untrustworthy. When I was a nanny, the housekeeper, who was Ecuadorian, asked me, “Where are you from?” I replied that I was from California. She laughed, “No, where is your mother from?” I told her that my mother is from Israel and that I was half Israeli. She told me that she could see that I had something different in my face, in my eyes.

This line of questioning doesn’t actually bother me. I am intrigued and amused by the fact that others have a need to categorize the things and people they see. But I wasn’t so comfortable with it as a seven-year-old going to her first American school. The people asking me questions were not smiling housekeepers or friendly Lebanese waiters that were trying to pin me down—they were cruel little kids who had never seen anyone with my complexion or features in their life. The fact that I was chubby, a foot taller than my classmates, and spoke with an accent probably didn’t help very much either. In a short time, I went from being giddy about starting at a new school to crying every morning as I was dropped off.

The town I lived in was about a two-and-a-half-hour drive from Chicago and was very small. It’s not actually even a town. With a population of 235, Kempton, Illinois is considered a village. My parents don’t even have a good explanation as to why they dragged me and my brother across the world to this god awful place. They couldn’t take the kibbutz life in Israel anymore and were searching for something more. They thought we would be moving to a commune full of spiritual, likeminded people. When that fantasy turned out to be more of a creepy cult (surprise), we moved to Kempton without much choice because our funds had run out.

The school I attended was a central school which the children of the nearby villages all attended. There were only about 15 students per grade. These children had all grown up together and their families had known each other their whole lives. I was strange and not well-received. I tried to engage the other kids and play with them on the playground, but they didn’t want anything to do with me. One little boy even asked me, “Are you a nigger or is your skin just dirty?”

This was the first time I had ever heard that word, but I knew it wasn’t a nice thing to be called and I knew I wasn’t dirty either. I told him that I wasn’t either one of those things and he told me that nobody liked me and that I was fat and ugly also and should probably stay off the monkey bars because other kids wanted to play there. So I left. During breaktime I just wandered around by myself. None of the kids...
would play with me.

My best friend was a girl named Anna. We played regularly after school or on weekends and could walk to each other’s house. Once, I tried to hang out with her at lunchtime during school and she took me aside and said, “I can play at your house, but not at school, okay?” I was hurt, but even then I understood. She didn’t want to be ostracized for befriending the school weirdo. Our friendship continued, but only in a non-school setting.

At this point, recess became a source of apprehension and distress. I asked the teacher if I could stay in and do work, but she told me that recess was not only our break time, but hers as well, and that the fresh air would do me good—“now go outside and play.” I wished that I could.

It was three years of this. Some days were better than others. The day I stood up to Dustin, the school bully or placed first in the art show were pretty good. The day that I got hit in the face with a red kickball and cried uncontrollably wasn’t that great. Neither was Valentine’s Day during second grade, in which my crush, Matthew Airhart, gave a valentine to everyone but me. I was crushed. But then one day it all ended. Six weeks before third grade came to an end, my family and I moved to California. We put everything we owned in a U-Haul, attached it to a 1974 rust-covered Pontiac Catalina and, in the middle of the night, left Kempton, Illinois forever.

It took us five days to drive across the country and we spent another ten living in a motel while we searched for a place to live. The town we found was called Lincoln. It was about 30 miles east of Sacramento and turned out to be the place where we would rest the longest.

Although traumatized and jaded (at the tender age of 10), my experiences in Illinois made me hopeful to make friends and begin anew in California. At least there, I reasoned, I would find a bit more racial diversity. But there really wasn’t all that much. Instead, there were cowboys and Hispanics. I wasn’t a cowgirl, but I was mistaken for a Mexican regularly. It would often happen that someone would address me in Spanish. When I told them that I didn’t speak the language, disappointment and confusion spread across their faces. “Oh, so you’re Portuguese.” No, not that either. At this point, it becomes an irritation. It’s as if they want to say, “Just tell me where your bloodline originates so I know how to deal with you.”

I wonder what it is that makes people so eager and diligent in labeling others and placing them into racial categories. Perhaps it is because, no matter how advanced and forward-thinking we believe we are, many of us still hold very old-fashioned and even harmful views about race. Or maybe it’s just our human sense of curiosity. Either way, it’s important to realize that we are all people that descend from other people, that came from places that affected the lives of others. The best thing we can do is to be conscious of how we treat others, and before we ask someone to explicate on their ethnic background, we should ask ourselves, why do I want to know? 

The author and her mother in Israel.
I see Nolan Ryan through a sunburst halo of fireworks, walking through the eastern concourse of the airport. Those fireworks can’t be safe, not inside, fellows. This is an airport, after all, and I have places to be. I wake up from a dream about chemical warfare to find Nolan Ryan sitting next to me. Capitol guy, riding coach. Don’t worry buddy, I’m not gonna try anything weird. But listen, I wrote this haiku about you. Not interested? That’s cool. But rap at me for a minute. Anyone that can throw a ball as hard as you, as often as you, and for as long as you must know a lot about life, right? What do I wanna know about? Well, women, of course. What else? Sure, sure, you can have my Chicken Kiev. It’s not like I love Chicken Kiev, and mostly only fly so that I can eat it because there isn’t anywhere else in the world that has Chicken Kiev like that. So help yourself. Take my heart, too, and my pain.

Nolan Ryan is smoking three cigarettes simultaneously and there is no one in the world that would stop him. Other passengers—non-smokers, pro-lifers, tobacconists, anti-tobacco— are offering him more cigarettes, more lights, coughing—no problem. He says to me: “Women are vampires, son. They do whatever it takes to compel you to give up the things you care about, and then when they look at the sacrifices you’ve made for them, that gives them the strength to leave you.”

I say “Geez, Mr. Ryan…”

“Call me Lynn.”

“Alright, Lynn…”

“No, stick with Mr. Ryan. I like to be called Mister.”

“Sure thing, Mister…”

“Mr. Ryan.”

“Mr. Ryan, that’s some pretty strong language, you can’t really believe that?”

“Believe it, you sonofabitch, that’s Tolstoy.”

Somehow I don’t mind being called a sonofabitch, so long as it’s Mr. Nolan Ryan that’s doing the calling.

“Tolstoy? Where did he say that?”

“It’s the only thing he ever said. Take my former wife; she spends years getting me to give up calf-wrestling just before she up and leaves me for some French Philosophy professor. Now I can’t even look at a calf without feeling sick to my stomach. Do you know what that’s like? To have your world taken away?”

“Well maybe you should have given up cat-wrestling in the first place. On your own, I mean.”

“I said Calf-wrestling, boy!”

“I’m sorry, it’s hard to understand you with all those cigarettes in your mouth.”

“You could never understand, because you don’t know shit and you aren’t shit.”

I see Nolan Ryan wrestling calves in the red dirt after the sun and everything in the world is painted like blood, with an empty house to his back and the pastures dried up and barren and no diamond in the world to shine on that old face. His hair is wet and matted under the baseball cap that he doesn’t take off even when sleeping or showering, and his eyes are two knotted crescents that are just plain tired of seeing. The pictures have been taken down and there are dirty squares on the walls—I don’t want this burden, Mr. Ryan. I just want to fall back asleep and pretend this never happened. I was saving my money to come visit you, Mr. Ryan, but now I’m just gonna spend the money on booze.
“Bath,” Petra Horn-Keller
“Giraffe Man Eats a Cupcake,” Amber Smith
Derek Stack

There is a Bird’s Heart

inside a bird. It is the smallest object
I could summon today. In our house,
we see faces everywhere. Trees are
early statues with no teeth. Windows
with terrible vertical thoughts. If
Abraham can have a cabin then I can
have an axe. I promise to behave.
I will chop only these memories into
smaller memories. Half a sunset and
a dying bird, flightless as a bell.

Neil Nicholson

Epistemology (A Dyslexic Prelude)

Some of the words were backwards
and some of the words were upside down.
Some of the words lie in a heap of burning leaves,
compost, the texture of past allegations
and passive iniquities, the intentions that paved
the road to hell.

Some of the words made a ladder formation
of stepping stones, a pile of crushed
vocabulary bones, bodies feathered and plumed,
disseminated and passed
over the edge of their own
oblivion.

The razor’s edge of stupidity
in the ignorance of the slanted yellow dawn
and they rose in the slanted yellow dawn,
wept in the slanted yellow dawn,
and prayed for our resurrection.

And they tried to walk
the burning path of righteous men
to the house of peace
where crutches lay in heaps
of smoldering dust
in the house of incense,
in the house of right books,
in the house that bear no weapons,
no fire that burns,
no wind that whips
through the dark passage of time,

but the words were backwards
and the signs were upside down.
Behind every door black raincoats
stacked ten-thousand
dead languages high,
but they still couldn’t see God
because their eyes were crossed
and their people were lost.

For the first time in history,
humanity mourned the death
of an impoverished man, Ghandi
in the evolution of the line
in the reconstruction of psychic space,
in the dance of the sun,
in the dance of the wind,
in the dance for two bucks
and a bottle of gin.

In the dance of the sun-time,
in the Black Hills of South Dakota,
in the moon-time,
the inheritance of silver wings,
the resurrection of the hearts
that lie at Wounded Knee,
buried along a million creeks,
where the water runs
backwards
and the sky is upside down.
Patrick watched Jason tuck the butt-stock of the rifle into his shoulder. Jason took aim and fired. The crack of the shot echoed throughout the trees, off the rocks, and over the low trickle of the river. The glass of an empty Coors Light bottle shattered, falling in clinks from the stump onto the river rocks.

“See, I told you. Just like the soldiers are usin’ in I-raq.” Jason turned with a smile. The sun illuminated the outline of his silhouette. “You wanna try?”

Patrick looked down at his shoes. He’d been gone for so long that his feet forgot how to walk on the uneven river rock. As a child he could sprint across and jump in the water with ease. He and Jason had done it many times, but now, as an adult, he was unsteady and unsure.

“Ralphie, I said do you wanna fire it?” Jason asked again.

“Maybe later.” Patrick hated being called Ralphie.

Only family called him Ralphie. He had gone by his middle name ever since he escaped from the small town of Blue River. Ten years had gone by since he graduated from the K-12 school, ten years of being Patrick. Ralphie was now a stranger.

He hadn’t been back in all that time. He hardly had called. It took his father’s death to get him back. It took his father’s death to get him to talk to family again. Now, with the funeral over, he decided to go out shooting with his cousin Jason. He sighed as he questioned his decision to try and recapture the fraternal feeling he had in his youth…

Jason pulled the trigger again. This time three shots cracked, one after another. Then he lowered the rifle to his waist and inspected his target from where he stood.

“Air-cooled, gas-powered, magazine-fed, five point five six millimeter round with the maximum effective range of four hundred meters… It’s a damned shame.”

“What is?” Patrick asked, not out of interest, but because it seemed like the polite thing to do.

“I’m gonna hafta sell it. You interested?” Jason asked, not out of interest, but because it seemed like the polite thing to do.

“Seven hundred bucks,” Jason said as he removed the magazine and pulled back the charging handle. A bullet ejected from the chamber into the rocks below. Jason immediately bent down to look for it.

Patrick pretended to scan the rocks for it as well, again to be polite. “Why are you going to sell it?”

“Goddam Bushanomics is why. I’m gonna sell my plot at Starlight Overnighters too cause of Bush and his economy. I gotta find a place.” He grabbed the bullet and stood up straight.

“Dad ain’t letting Darla and me live with him this time and shit. Darla’s parents are worse off than we are. A man’s gotta live…”

Patrick felt his cheeks getting warm. He was embarrassed because he rented a nice apartment and had a decent paying job in Portland. Jason chose to live way out here in the middle of nowhere, Patrick told himself. He didn’t care about Jason’s money problems, but he tried to look as empathetic as possible. He opened his mouth to show clenched teeth and squinted his eyes and sighed, because that was how a compassionate person would look.

“What’s wrong with you? You got gas?” Jason walked past him toward the trailer park with his rifle on his shoulder. He called back, “Let it...
out, it’s okay—we’re family. You know what, if you don’t like rifles, I got a pistol you can look at…”

Patrick searched for steady ground as he stumbled back to his cousin’s home.

Jason and Patrick parked in the gravel lot outside Frontier Tavern. Jason jumped out of his car. Patrick opened his door and arduously pushed himself from his driver’s seat. He looked up to see the famous Hamm’s Beer mascot over the front door. A three-dimensional representation of a four-foot cartoon bear for cheap beer drunk by loggers and trailer park miscreants. Patrick couldn’t believe he was doing this.

“Ha,” Jason slapped him on the back, “You remember that ol’ bear? Our dads would come here almost every night. Remember playing in this lot waiting for them ’til late, throwing rocks at it or catching frogs over by the crick?”

Patrick put on a smile, “Yeah, sure. The bear.”

The two walked in. Patrick had played outside the place most of his childhood, but he had never actually been inside. He looked around, thinking maybe he could find out what his dad and uncle loved about it so much.

A long red-stained bar ran along the back of the tavern. The imperfect wood was probably cut from a tree somewhere close to town when the place first opened. The leather of each barstool had a rip in one place or another. At least one out of every five bulbs didn’t work on string of holiday lights that hung over the huge mirror behind the bar. Video lottery machines flashed and rang on the right, beyond a lone pool table. A permanent layer of stale smoke hung in the air.

As they sat down, Jason waved at the bartender. She was a woman in her mid- to late fifties with hair the exact color as the perky blonde on any dye box. She tried to have the same smile, but came nowhere close. Her voice sounded like a cinder block dragged over asphalt.

“Jason Dagget. You won’t be startin’ any trouble tonight, will ya, hon?”

Jason laughed, “No, Suzie, not me. You think I’m a hell-raiser, you should meet my cousin. When we were kids you couldn’t believe what we used to do, Suzie, this is Ralphie.”

Patrick cringed at the introduction, but he stood up and put his hand out. “Hello, nice to meet you.”

“You’re Ralph’s boy.”

“Yes, ma’am, the oldest.”

“I’m sorry about your father. He was a good man.”

“When we were kids,” Jason continued, “Well hell, you remember that big snowman on Highway Twenty and Rainbow Road back in, hell, I guess it was ‘89? Remember, the snowman? You could tell he was a man because we gave him a big set of balls and a huge hard-on!”

Patrick heard laughter come from unexpected sources. The whole bar listened as Jason continued to tell stories. Drinks kept coming. Hours passed.

“Didn’t one of Ralph’s kids go huntin’ deer with an uzi?” someone asked.

Patrick shook his head with a dumb smile, almost slipping off his barstool and spilling his drink.

“No, no, that was me! THAT WAS ME!”

Jason stood up with his hands over his head, the victorious champion of nostalgic deviance. The crowd cheered.

“I stole the goddamn soda machine from the high school!” Patrick yelled out. The bar broke out into riotous laughter. “I beat the hell out of that thing with a baseball bat I took from the locker room.”

“Yeah, I remember, for like five hours!”

“Yeah, yeah, five hours! And you know what I got?” He let the question hang over the room for a couple seconds. “Two dollars and thirty-five cents!” The men roared and shouted with joy.

“The Pepsi man musta emptied the thing right before we loaded it into his ol’ Bronco!”

Jason yelled.

The room fell into hysterics. The night roared on.

The next day, Patrick drove back to Portland. He marveled at the beauty of the endless trees and roaring river. How he missed it on the drive out to Blue River didn’t make any sense. He also marveled at the size of his headache from the drinking the night before. A decade had gone by without him really thinking about where he grew up. It was surprisingly easy to forget. Now all the reasons he had for forgetting had somehow slipped his mind.

This time it would be different. Ten years was a long time—he had changed, matured. The death of a father marks a chapter in a person’s life. Where and how a person is raised does not define him. He wasn’t going to forget this time. Not only had he come to peace with all this, he had also taken a souvenir. He looked over at the Hamm’s Bear sitting in his passenger seat and smiled. It would make a great centerpiece in his living room.
Shaun McGillis

The Problem With You

Is that for all those lectures about listening, you never once left anything open for discussion, so I could never point up and say: there is the sky, here are these rhododendrons, looking at me, growing wild, radiant. Colorfully bound together.

And while you went on enumerating this and that, I couldn’t tell you how much those flowers captivated me.

Cassie Ridgway

The Craft

There are too many ladders— boundless steps and wood, shrinking and stretching, rejecting the nails we’ve trusted for years.

I am the builder of these conjunctions, I believe in rooftops and the sun projected through glass.

Enclosed in materials masculated, here, I sit, alone mourning the solitude of the ladder beneath the light.
Amtrak

Tony LeTigre

We laughed ourselves hoarse that night
like drunk, homeless hookers at a five-star buffet,
as those around us tried to sleep—
frail nursing-home zombies
vexed by persistent music from another room.
It was worth the morning after.
I remember.
Remember Independence Day, 1995?
Waiting for you, eating Grandma’s dumplings.
After work, you got your red fishing pole
and your nightcrawlers and took that snakey road leading nowhere.
Then your Jeep did somersaults, dirt and sky juxtaposed like a painting.
Back at home, a hungry monster ate my nervous insides,
and the firecrackers were like bombs of war.
Your Jeep was a giant pretzel.
And you didn’t call.
I remember.

I stared.
Stared at the wall,
Shredding every fiber of every fingernail.
After hanging upside down from the seatbelt,
you scaled your Jeep and punched numbers with bleeding digits.
Then Uncle Tim answered, and his voice cracked open like an egg.
He was gone for hours, looking for your hidden ditch.
Finally, you saw two spheres of rescue light
and arrived, coated in glass bits.
A walking, breathing mosaic.
I stared.

I knew.
Knew there was more
than a negligent hit-and-run.
Your eyes met the carpet in guilty brainstorm,
and the fiery flush of your face was guilty, too.
You were fishing for a holiday trout to bring for Grandma’s dinner,
But the road was winding and the sky was dark,
and you saw firecrackers like bombs of war.
But I could smell your breath.
And while you slept,
I knew.
When people see Deborah, they stop to talk to her. Such are the perks, and curses, of being a chili-wife—or chili-widow, as they sometimes refer to themselves in moments of grim jocularity. They are the wives of Schilling’s Chili™ executives. Deborah herself is top widow, the ne plus ultra of chili-wives. It wasn’t always so; she could have been a soup-wife, or even salsa-wife (there was that strange night on the veranda with Don Pancho). But Deborah is a chili-wife, and proud. She is a chili-mother, as well, with four partially grown chili-kids.

See Deborah maneuver her new Chrysler Sebring convertible around the familiar curves of the neighborhood, the dull brown greens of August lawns and faded roofs framing the hastily-constructed houses with their walls of tracing paper, each one a simulacrum of the previous, or vice-versa. Deborah watches herself giving it maybe more gas than necessary out of the turns, the wheel sliding silkily through her fingers; certain liberties in technique are to be expected—it is a Chrysler, after all. Deborah watches the houses grow and recede on the screen of her windshield, palpitating through the goalposts of her hands and sliding away behind her as if they were moving and she were still. Soon, she realizes that she is no longer looking beyond her hands but right at them where they rest on the steering wheel. Her fingernails don’t quite match the red of the car’s exterior.

Outside the car, the air swarms with late summer life, and is fraught with the consequential annoyances: bees, mosquitoes, children not sent to one or another of the many summer camps designed to accommodate their unique abilities, or lack thereof. Deborah’s two boys are off at lifeguard camp for the summer. Like many women, Deborah knows from experience the special dispensation afforded lifeguards in the way of female relations, and providing that for her boys is just one of the many kindnesses she dispensed upon them that they knew nothing about. The boys take after their father; they could use the help.

The girls, 13 and 15, are disposed to refusing absolutely everything, so, naturally, they were doing nothing but sitting around the house all summer, stalking the hallways like ghosts. At least they seem miserable doing it, Deborah considers with some satisfaction.

The Schilling’s neighbors are mostly older couples who have apparently chosen to spend the little time left to them hosing down their driveways. Often, for hours at a time, they
Deborah grips the wheel tightly out of habit as she approaches the shopping district; the public’s din all around her even with the top up. She takes the long route to the store, driving back and forth past the shops before pulling into the parking lot, working to achieve the cheerfully inattentive yet resolutely concerned expression she likes to wear while shopping.

Parked in an obscure corner of the lot, Deborah pushes a button on the car’s console, causing the top to slowly open. She fishes around in her red leather purse until she finds a pack of cigarettes, with a book of matches tucked into the plastic slip. She hadn’t smoked for ten years until recently when for no particular reason she found that she physically could not keep herself from buying a pack. Walter doesn’t know that she has started smoking again. The secret is like a little shroud of comfort she wears around herself that no one but her can see. And it’s not like she’s cheating on him.

She takes a cigarette from the pack and lights a match, not wanting to leave evidence on the car’s built-in lighter. The first match nearly doesn’t notice the two recently-augmented breasts practically popping out upwards, reaching, in an attitude of escape. It is Sally Haines, the wife of one of Walter’s colleagues. She has clearly been to the salon recently, her graying bob reborn as a piece of Sally’s shirt fabric.

Sally fills Deborah in on the widows’ plan to have cocktails at her house later. “Wow,” Deborah says, “your hair looks great. Where do you go?” She reaches out and pinches Deborah’s car. Within the hermetic confines of the carwash, she is filled with something like solace.

Deborah speeds past, barely missing the automatic gate, which isn’t quite as responsive as she would like. This is a gated community. Gated meaning a tangible, physical barrier between Deborah’s daughters and the kind of guys she used to date before Walter. The kind of guys she might have married if they hadn’t been incarcerated. The kind of guys who subsequently mailed their bad poetry from prison, where it collected in a cer tain drawer.

Deborah strolls across the parking lot, answers, already in motion, feeling an intense desire to get away. She has something in common with Sally’s breasts, she thinks. A sheepish-looking teenager carts Deborah’s purchases out to the car, haphazardly stacking them in the trunk. Struggling with a body he doesn’t understand and distraught by something he is just beginning to, his obvious lack of post-adolescent ardor for her is a source of some consternation. She imagines herself with bigger breasts.

People wave to Deborah through a wind shield glittering with crazy life. Fractal glimpses joined through reflection into a hazy kind of
coherence. Trees, cars, other people; a world whispering by—stray pets whose insouciance enrages Deborah. Get a job!, she wants to scream at everyone and everything. Am I the only one who’s afraid?

She curses at herself for shopping before going to the carwash; Walter’s ice cream is going to suffer. Though once within the hermetic confines of the wash, she is filled with something like solace, these brief moments of meditation. Nothing bad can touch her here. Sometimes, Deborah wishes the wash would malfunction, keeping her here forever; an endless cycle of cleansing.

Deborah thinks of her husband, Walter Schilling, CEO of Schilling’s Chili™, a decent man, patient father and bona fide chili vivant, even if not especially dangerous or powerful about the chest and arms. Walter had been there for Deborah, giving her a dream when she had none of her own. That dream was chili, and all that it entailed.

“Mom, you don’t understand the kind of pressure I’m under as a chili-wife,” Deborah is telling her mother as she puts away groceries, realizing that out of everything she bought there still really isn’t anything to eat. Charlotte Darling calls up every other day, essentially, for no reason; roaming up and down stairs and hallways, visually reclaiming anything she had none of her own. That dream was chili, and all that it entailed.

The groceries put away, Deborah paces the house on a cordless phone while talking to her mother, looking into closets and under chairs for no reason; roaming up and down stairs and hallways, visually reclaiming anything she might have forgotten. Unlike most middle class homes, theirs is absent the usual flotilla of family photographs. There is something about pictures that Deborah finds morbid.

“You think you can talk to me about pressure? I lost your father to extension cords before you were even born!”

Deborah has to cede this point to her mother, for the thousandth time. Harry Darling’s devotion to the extension cord trade had seamlessly crossed the border from enthusiasm to mania, causing him to have only a sporadic presence in Deborah’s childhood. Toward the end of his life, while writing his soon-to-be self-published memoirs, A Life by Extension, Harry would rarely emerge from his “study,” and when he did was willing to speak only on cord-related topics.

“It’s just that he’s been so distant lately. He says it’s nothing, but I know in my heart that it’s the chili. Mom, I think it’s killing him. Maybe it’s killing us.”

At the mention of death, Deborah’s mother perks up considerably, but can no longer be trusted to focus on the subject. Rather than offer wisdom or consolation, as Deborah had hoped, Charlotte summarizes the many travesties taking place in her neighborhood, including some minutia involving the Widow Crabtree and her stepson that Deborah could easily have done without.

After hanging up the phone, Deborah has just enough time to perfunctorily clean up the bathroom, that ground zero of peer derision, and change into a pair of lightweight gray slacks and a white cardigan. Looking at herself in the mirror, she gets the impression of having a lot of loose ends. She smooths down her hair and her clothes, but still there is something un Kemp that bothers her. She considers changing again but then the doorbell rings.

From the moment they arrive, suddenly all conspiracy around them. Sally’s new breasts blurts out. Mary is Walter’s younger sister, and though she is not technically a widow, she likes people, even if not especially dangerous or powerful about the chest and arms, looking into closets and under chairs for no reason; roaming up and down stairs and hallways, visually reclaiming anything she might have forgotten. Unlike most middle class homes, theirs is absent the usual flotilla of family photographs. There is something about pictures that Deborah finds morbid.

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From the moment they arrive, suddenly all conspired about them. Sally’s new breasts blurts out. Mary is Walter’s younger sister, and though she is not technically a widow, she likes things at the patio table, the canvas deckchair creaking the way it always does after getting wet and dry again. Martine was already criticizing one thing or another, flipping her little boy’s haircut in staccato punctuations of whatever she was saying.

“I told Larry, if you’re going to insist on driving that heap around, at least park it in back so people don’t see it. I mean for God’s sake, the mailman drives in better style. The fucking mailman!”

“You know I always had a thing for mailmen,” Sally is saying, “those little shorts…”

“What about FedEx? They have those darling vests.”

“UPS…”

Deborah looks around her backyard, the grass dying under the pretense of conservation, the ants swarming over everything, the almost complete lack of plants. She always meant to do more with the yard, get some flowers or an herb garden at least, but she never seemed to have the time. Why didn’t she have the time? What did she do that precluded her from having the time to plant things? She couldn’t figure it out.

“Pithza delivery boysh!” Martine exclaims, nearly choking on margarita in what seems a calculated effort, her short hair never motionless. “You are so funny! Sometimes I wonder what on Earth could have happened to you to make you so funny, so poor thing.”

Cont. on page 27
Deborah rocks slowly in her seat, feeling the creaking of the canvas, listening for certain tones, trying to sustain them. She has already finished a drink and is halfway through her second. She hadn’t planned on getting drunk, but sometimes the news is good, as they say.

“Deborah, what on earth are you doing?”

asks Martine, suddenly noticing Deborah’s experiment. “You look like a crazy person, rocking back and forth like that. Should we get you a nightgown and a journal, or would you rather stay here with us?”

Deborah laughs and pulls a cigarette from the pack she has in her cardigan pocket. Martine reaches out for the pack after Deborah and shares the flame of Mary’s lighter.

“Cigarettes are vile,” Martine says, drawing deeply on the smoke and forcing it out in a burst through pursed lips, as if blowing an acrid kiss.

No one seems to notice that Deborah has started smoking again, as if the last ten years were like a piece of fabric folded up and sewn down the middle, the two halves joining while the middle is still there but hidden from sight. It’s a pleasant feeling. While she smokes with her right hand, Deborah smashes ants with her left, feeling them crush between her fingertips. Afterwards she smells her fingers, that singular smell of smashed ants, sickly sweet like certain foreign foods.

At 5:30 p.m. she meets her husband at the racquet club. If volatile in the boardroom, Walter is a menace on the tennis-court, his anger and vulgarity reaching a level of absurdity, considering his beginner status. He lurches across the court jabbing his racket, his body violently out of control, spewing epithets of a character unknown in his off-court life. For most club members, the sight of Walter Schilling playing tennis is a thing to be feared and despised, but Deborah is continually surprised to find herself charmed by it. Deborah, who more or less grew up at the country club, plays with practiced ease; approaching adroitly, passing unreachable lobs over her husband’s shoulder, firing overheads down the lines, all exacerbating Walter’s mirthless rampage.

Though today something is different. Her shots are going into the net, serves are going wide and she’s missing overheads altogether. She realizes she is drunk, drunker than she thought she was. Walter doesn’t seem to notice, too distracted by this rare success on the court—which Deborah imagines he is probably thinking of as his “relentless onslaught” or some such aggrandizement. She is getting frustrated, not just wanting to win but mortally afraid of losing. She loses the first set in straight games. Anyone but Walter would realize that something aside from his own will was determining the outcome of the match, but Deborah can tell from the look on his face that behind it, someone or something thinks it’s in control.

“Motherfucker!” Deborah cries, putting the final point into the net, the ball striking the tape squarely and popping like a gunshot heard from far away.

“That’s match, Deb,” Walter says sprightly, bounding toward the net.

“Don’t you think I know that?!”

Afterwards, walking to their separate cars, the parking lot is a miasma of rotting leaves that have fallen prematurely. Sickly human, faintly of urine, the smell fills Deborah with the sense of foreboding she feels whenever the seasons show signs of converging. The thought occurs to her: you could just go away. It was possible. She could just disappear—start all over from scratch. As the reality of that idea set in, she nearly jumps, so startled she is by her train of thought. Then she starts laughing, softly at first, but then hysterically. Then she realizes that someone is looking at her from the car with which she was parked nose-to-nose. It’s Walter. He looks strange and suspicious. He probably thought she was making fun of him; maybe she had let him win just to torment him and now she was having a good laugh about it. Deborah decides she will let him think that, if he wants. She starts the car and backs up, giving her horn a light tap as a signal of something.

Summer dinnertime draws a striking departure from the usual junta of hungry teenagers, and the peace is nearly stifling. The girls are both lingering in their rooms, refusing to eat, and Deborah is too tired to do anything about it. Besides, it means she doesn’t have to make anything Walter, too preoccupied to care, picks through the fridge for leftovers while Deborah eats a salad in the living room. Contrary to the popular opinion that there is nothing on television, Deborah finds nearly everything on those hundreds of channels interesting. She isn’t sure if it’s her or everyone else that’s wrong.

Walter comes into the living room with a beer and a sandwich made up of Deborah can’t tell what. He’s still wearing his sweaty tennis clothes, almost certainly to antagonize her. The pale blaze of a summer afternoon fades languorously through the windows, splashing the sofa with autumnal hues.

Walter nearly has a fit when he suspects that his wife, while flipping aimlessly through the
channels, has skipped over a James Bond movie. Walter, who apparently had never seen a movie until meeting Deborah, missed out on James Bond when he was younger, and now he is more or less obsessed. He forces her to retrace her steps only to discover that the program in question is a made-for-TV movie about a Cold-War-era assassin who suddenly finds himself a single father. Walter and Deborah agree that the movie, which is airing incongruously on the Lifetime network, couldn’t possibly appeal to anyone. Over an hour later, they realize that they have watched the whole thing, and that they both liked it.

After dinner, Deborah tries to entreat her husband by discussing his work. Initiating a dialogue on bean chili, she asks the fatal question: how many beans are too many? It is Deborah’s opinion that four is the optimal number, anything more being excessive and possibly immoral. This opinion makes her something of an iconoclast in what is largely a five-bean community.

Where he once would have become animated, Walter is totally unreachable but for the demonstrative shudders which overcome his entire body whenever an unqualified mind extemporizes itself on the subject of bean chili.

After showering and putting on pajamas, they read silently in bed while the girls bicker upstairs, the cold scent of vapor rub wafting prodigiously from Walter’s chest. Walter, who has suffered from an unidentifiable ague all summer, has just shut off his bedside lamp and completed his arduous routine of settling into the covers when Deborah pokes him on the shoulder.

“Baby?”

“…Yeah…”

“Baby, are you awake?”

“Deb? Yes, what?”

“Baby, we need to talk.”

Walter reluctantly sits up, loath to entertain any discussion that begins with those words.

“Oh, God. Is one of us having an affair?”

“No, dear, nothing like that. It’s just that, baby, are you listening? It’s just that, ‘cause I know something is wrong. I just want you to tell me, is it the chili? Is it the Stagg people? Are they bothering you again?”

“Goddamnit!” Walter erupts, his apprehensions finding a home in domestic outrage. “Fuck the Stagg people! Ya, I said it. Ya, I said it. Why does everything have to be about the chili? Did I bring up the chili? Why talk about chili?”

“But the Stagg people…”

“Fucking the Stagg people! Yea, I said it. You know what? Maybe I’m sick to death of chili! Maybe I don’t ever want to see or hear about chili ever again!” Walter himself seems shocked at the ballot of his conviction, and seems to be softly crying.

“But, baby, your whole life has been about chili…”

“Don’t say it! Don’t say the word, I mean it. If you so much as utter that word again, I swear to God, I’m getting up and walking out of here.”

“What about the kids?”

“To hell with the kids!”

“Walter! How could you even say that?”

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that. But really, Deb, don’t ever say… it… again. In fact, I signed the paperwork this afternoon, if you really want to know. I sold our shares. We’re out of the business.”

“You did all this after tennis? Were you even going to tell me?”

“Before tennis, and I did just tell you.”

“Not the Stagg people?”

“Baby, seriously, please don’t mention the Stagg people.”

“Well, what are you going to do then? What are we going to do?”

Walter sits up and switches his lamp back on. In the spectral glow of 80 watts, Deborah can see the look, as if beamed from the far shores of ecstasy. The look is a dangerous pouring-out of the old mortal tonic, an invitation to chaos through abstract thought as a means of domestic and spiritual renewal. It is the look she married, but at the moment it is terrifying.

“Now, baby, just hear me out,” Walter pleads.

Deborah’s mind is quickly succumbing to the entropy of a life uncategorized by manufactured consumables. What was she if not a chili-wife? Just a plain wife? Just a plain mother? What were their dreams if not chili dreams?

“Deb, are you listening?”

“Yea, sure…” Deborah mouths breathlessly.

Walter climbs to his knees and faces his wife, holding her shoulders with firm, chili-tempered hands. It is the closest thing either one of them has experienced in recent memory.

“Are you ready? There is just one word, one word, and I want you to hear it with an open mind. Do you want to hear it?”

Deborah nods, her mental state hovering near total apoplexy.

“Plastic.” Walter says it smoothly, the hissing vortex leading from the pliant grounding of the word to the punctuated tic of its finale—pl-a-a-s-tic—massaging Deborah’s mind with its slick durability.

“Plastic?”

Walter climbs to his knees and faces his wife, holding her shoulders with firm, chili-tempered hands.
“Plastic.” Walter repeats, the even gravity of his voice leaving no further room for confusion. Deborah is quiet, and Walter is quiet waiting for Deborah to stop being quiet.

“Baby, don’t take this the wrong way, but did you just watch The Graduate for the first time?”

Walter’s face tightens, half-masking a guilty expression whose superlative innocence Deborah finds moving, despite herself. Somehow, there is a quality in that innocence that is so much more than palliative.

Plastic-wife. Plastic-mom. Plastic-widow? Deborah allows a surging to fill her breast, an impression of movement. As if she, the room, the house, the whole world were gaining momentum, moving away from the darkness and toward something bright and forever. Plastic. It really was such a strong word, resounding of power and permanence.

“Deb?” Walter looks his wife in the eyes, which are twinkling with moisture either from joy or vapor rub, possibly both. “What do you think, Deb?”

Deborah allows several moments to pass quietly, merely nodding her head the way people do when they want to give the impression of thought, pretending for some reason that she isn’t consumed with joy.

“Okay, baby. If that’s what you want, then of course I support you. And I’m glad we had this talk, but I do think you should go upstairs and apologize to the girls.”

“Apologize? For what?”

“For what? For saying they should go to hell, of course.”

“I didn’t really say they should go to hell, merely that they could go to hell. Besides, I’ll bet they didn’t even hear me.”

“Wally…”

“Oh, okay.”

Walter plies himself from the bed and walks to the door of their bedroom. Pausing as if having made a decision, he turns quickly around and walks back to the bed and takes Deborah by the shoulders, hoisting her somewhat, kissing her deeply, squeezing her breasts, their eyes as he pulls away meeting as if for the first time.

“I love you, Deb.”

“I love you too, Wal.”

As Walter goes upstairs to apologize to the girls, who always hear everything, Deborah lies back and allows one hand to submerge beneath the blankets. Soon her boys will be back and everything will resume its chaotic normalcy, but right now she is young and quiet and in love.

This could last forever, she thinks. 🌺
Shaun McGillis

Entropy

Indeed, he was young once, but that was a long time ago.

Running when an earthquake rattled his classroom—he remembers, returning, how they all laughed at him.

He woke the morning after the American dream, took his pills, dressed and drank his coffee.

His hair thinning, skin wrinkled. The name on his library card nearly worn off.

The vast majority of the universe at this exact moment cares not how cold and hungry he is.

His arms bloody: not life-threatening. His head unclear, not awash.


Playing as a boy, he was a great leader of imaginary men. No one else had wanted to play with him.

Certainty is not gaiety of heart, he wrote in a letter.

He sorts the weekday’s bloated mail advertisements with chagrin, discount cigarettes, a box of merlot.

He leaves for work, leaves for home—morning comes and goes, and comes, bringing no day.

Lemmings, he read, swim circles in the Atlantic until, exhausted, they give up and drown.

Waking most nights during his childhood, he wondered who turned out the lights.

Skirting a mental health facility, he leapt from a moving car, resolved to sleep in the cold after limping through the moonlight.

Sitting between strangers in a crowded movie theater, it occurs to him: no one knows my name.

Arrows point him in every direction.

He finds comfort knowing one day his remains will be blown like dust throughout the galaxy.

Before despair, there was want, hope, he had read. That he’s not yet midway through life’s journey terrifies him unequivocally.

Remembering his grandmother’s hour-long prayers before she settled into bed. She died in her sleep.

He’s compelled to look both ways before crossing a street, but the cracks and his mother’s back no longer concern him.

I am real! Said Alice, and began to cry.

Reading that on average 1.8 people die every second, every day, he asks himself what it means to be the son of a suicide.

They ripped his shirt and threw him down the muddy hill. He never even tried to guess why.

Over 150,000 people a day.

If there were no god, he would fear him still.

On a scrap of paper in his wallet: You could miss your path, Perceval, warned the Angler.

He cannot now imagine that boy, but he still remembers the fear.

A centripetal perspective replaces a centrifugal one, he read once in a book about reading.

People fill the room with boisterous Spanish and laughter. When he enters, what does he hear? Nada. Silence.

He writes: It’s difficult to begin at the beginning. And not try to go further back.
“Portland,” Priscilla Phitsanoukane
art is the act of making. making anything. a date, a rake, a lake, a cape. art is a trap but a tarp is a mat. art is tart when it’s tart, you can be null when you’re full. nullity... fullity... art and the heart. it makes it all go round. round and round.

american wedding

I, a lazy butterfly, and you, a mongoose.
No, no... we are turnips. Our garden is perpendicular to the heart. The old farmer with the bearded spectacles wants to keep us apart, ‘bad ethics,’ he says with a twisted smile. A twisted smile? You old farmer bastard! How dare you twist your smiles. I’ll twist your liver!
American weddings are in our dreams today and tomorrow. We love each other, like salty turnips should do, so why does he forsake us? Forsooth, forsooth, forsooth! Forsaker bastard.
I am a bad apple. There are worms that impregnate my feet, but you spit on them and rub the soles. This little piggy went to the market, this little piggy stayed at home... this little piggy had roast beef, this little piggy had none... and this little piggy cried life’s wife! and swallowed all his bones.

Let me feel your roots, baby, I say to her. She lets me feel them... they drive deep into the ground... they steer this way and that way under the pines... beautiful, I say... beautiful.

undead peoples

I don’t need broken jaws to tell me what to wear. Comb your shoes and spit on your hair, die in a tomb.
I can’t listen to these people with their big heads and their big mistakes. I do not trust anyone that dies!
They keep dying in waste baskets like dead penises!

alabama nights

Ever kissed a queer?
Kissed a queer! Cocks titans I have!
I got kissed by a queer once. He kissed me with a big set a big old queer lips.
Oh yea?
Yep, and then I called him a good-for-nothin ho-mo-sexual.
Shoot ya did!
Then I kissed him back with a big set a big old heterosexual lips.
Mm yeah! Queers bears! Hot damn! Tell me more!
Yep, then I touched him with my pussy-touchin finger touchers right on his big gay penis.
Oh yea, did ya blow on it then with yer manly man’s mouth?
Nah, that’s for ho-mo-sexuals. I just kept pettin him like so with my woman lovin hands and then we
kissed a bit more to seal the deal. Make sure it’s all heterosexual.
Hyuck hyuck! Boy I’d sure love to kiss one of them good for nothin queerboys… right on the ass!

aphorism

You’re either inside… or you’re outside!

moistnessess

My heart drags along like a listless deaf guitar. The swell of it drops to the ground and before hopping
like a grasshopper it opens its mouth in disgust. Shut up! quiet! you are a tameless beast! I cry before
the wind. But my heart does not listen. It is all loving her and nothing else. I must befriend my heart’s
whispers if I am to know his secrets. That is what the trees tell me. Though I am not a confidant of the
heart, I am a friend to the wood, and I love them and they love me, forever and ever.

before

Along time ago before there were guns, cockfights, republican national conventions, or bestiality, there
was an island, an island so pristine and in the middle of the earth that it inspired awe even in mother
sky.

friends of marx

The friends of marx meet every thursday at 4 o’clock to knock around sickles and hammers and radical
ideas. Bring your kids and your revolutionary elan, and baked goods if you’ve got em. As long as they
haven’t got the fat hands of the bourgeoisie in them!
Anarchists welcome.
Make sure to wipe your paws.
Beatniks, peaceniks, romantics, proletariats and libertariats welcome also of course.
Even if you’re a blockhead you should come.

THEM

The raspberries are very good in heaven, but I ate a raspberry in a meadow and it tasted very good too.
The raspberries there were blooming off the teat they were growing so much. I snatched one up with my
mouth, and looked like a flying fish. And I did fly for a moment when I dipped that woman of a fruit
into my mouth. Three raspberries. It was a feast like you’ve never had before. Like a feast that I’ve
never had before I mean. The raspberries tasted like cream and the meadow tasted like a lark. They say
that you’ve got to pay your bills if you want to get into heaven. They say the raspberries are very good once you’ve paid em. They also say that mickey mouse is dead. If heaven’s anything like a lily pond then I’ve already been there.. just give me one raspberry and I’ll climb the stairs into uranus’s clit. They’ve said that god will swallow us whole if we don’t listen. God’s got a big mouth, and a big ass. I wonder if that’s all he is.. a mouth and an ass to swallow us and turn us into dung, to be swallowed again…? But then I wonder about a lot of things.. and I’ve wondered about a fox with no eyes, a fox with no biscuits.. a biscuit with no butter.. a lover with no mother.. They say you can’t fix your own eyes but they can if you let them put their hands all over you. I don’t know what to do anymore about these guys, they’re all a bunch of turkies. Turkies and goldfish. Turkies are nasty birds. They gobble gobble gobble at even the babies… They are very nasty animals.

epigram

The warmth generated by the breast is reusable energy.

montana

It’s indian summer this year boys, he says, spittin out a cow. That cow was for eatin, you heathen.
This cow?
It don’t rain cows, I say. You gotta be precious with them or else they’ll fall on your spleen and soak out all the money.
He stares and spits out another cow like a flute-fiddlin flapjack flayer. And that makes me real bittersweet. Like an abandoned pussy.

joke

What do you get when a walrus and a peanut sodomize, fornicate, masturbate, lactate, ovulate, until there is jissom everywhere?
A WALNUT. hAW hAW

aphorism

The stars don’t look so pretty when the clouds are out, but they’re still shining.

churning the butter, picking the raspberries

Maybe yes, maybe no. Maybe rain, maybe snow.
Lynette’s going to the ball tonight, aren’t you Lynette?
With a gentleman. A very fine gentleman without any whiskers… whiskers are for pussycats!
There will be music, and dancing, and lots of compliments… and maybe if you get lucky you’ll be
swept off your feet Lynette.

What would you think of that Lynette? Wouldn’t you like that? Lynette?
Hey! Wake up sleepy head! Tonight you’re going to be a lady.
Look at you! You’re all covered in curly cues and whiskers like a pussycat. That’s no look for a lady.
We’ve got to shave it off. I know how you like it Lynette but we don’t want the gentlemen kissing you with whiskers in their mouths. Gentlemen with whiskers in their mouths? Not for you Lynette. That’s for pussycats.
See how fine you look?
You look like a beach of sand, or a French baguette, Lynette!
All the gentlemen will surely love to play on so nice a beach, don’t you think so Lynette?
Maybe the men will like to shake their bottoms at you Lynette?
Oo.. I bet you’d like that Lynette! He he! And kisses from the misters?
Lynette likes kisses from the misters. You’re smitten from all the misters’ bottoms Lynette. I can see you blushing. He he! Oh Lynette. I like you Lynette. Even if you are crazy over the misters and their bottoms.

Other words for female masturbation: tunafish casserole delight, pruning the petunias, brushing the cat, taking virginia to the movies, birdwatching, fixing the remote, tuning the harp, supper, hopscotch, brunch, siesta fiesta, feeding the turtledove, tending the hearth… have fun at home and make your own!
Try it with your eyes closed!

poemetry

I’ve got no friends
I’ve got a paltry life
I’ve got little choice
but make a cardboard wife

sexigram

A french kiss is when you use your tongue, a german hug is when you use your ding dong.

kids

kids is a very funny word! like skittles! weeeeeee!!! look at those kids! tot tot tot tot! hop on pop young tater tots! hop like chickadoodoo00000000000000

Afterword