

M u d L u s c i o u s I s s u e E l e v e n

[ excerpts from Aaron Burch, Alissa Nutting, Amelia Gray, James Kaelan, Rachel B. Glaser,  
Lily Hoang, Adam Robinson, Robert Lopez, Scott Garson, Joanna Ruocco, Peter Markus, Jac Jemc,  
James Chapman, Ken Sparling, Michael Kimball, Ted Pelton, & Dawn Raffel ]

excerpts from HOW TO PREDICT THE WEATHER by Aaron Burch ( Keyhole Books, 2010 )

Arizona

(appeared previously in Quick Fiction)

I'm not sure what I'm doing here – why she asked me to come; why I'm standing in a motel parking lot, transferring a car's worth of a life into the dumpster – but she asked, so I'm here.

This?, I ask, holding up a nice set of silverware in a wooden box.

Garbage.

This?, and I hold up a big glass jar full of matchbooks. She nods her head toward the dumpster. Garbage.

I stop and consider everything I grab while she moves everything in armfuls, hand over hand. For every one thing I grab and hold up and then throw away, she throws in three, four, seven things herself. I count them in my head, watching, these pieces of a life.

This?, I ask, holding up a collection of ivory elephants. I try to remember if I've ever seen anything made of ivory before, outside of exhibits. My own grandmother might have had something, maybe. I can't remember for certain.

I don't think I'd want those even if I wanted everything else, she says. I think it would be weird.

Toss it all, she says, and I lift them in my cupped hands, up over the dumpster's edge, and let go. But, in my right hand, between index and thumb finger, I pinch and hold onto the smallest figure. I bring it back up out of the dumpster and slide it into my pocket. I pat it then continue to throw out everything else, no longer stopping and asking, no longer caring about each individual item.

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Later, the car empty except for a bottle of water and some cigarette butts in an ashtray she'd made in school as a Christmas present, the one thing she didn't throw out, I'll wonder if she is keeping it for sentimental or practical reasons. We'll go upstairs to our motel room and wash our hands and watch TV in a queen bed because that was the only room available. The phone might ring but we won't answer it, and I'll want to ask something to try to start a conversation but won't.

In the morning, filling up at the last gas station before the airport, she'll throw the tray away, ash and butts and all. We'll drive the last mile with the windows down to air out the smoke and the hot, dry desert air will be almost unbearable, harder to breathe than the smoke, but I won't say anything. On the plane ride home, she'll fall asleep on my shoulder and not move the whole flight and I'll keep one hand in my pocket, fingering the elephant, rubbing my thumb and fingers over every little curve, every ridge, memorizing it.

At home, after we've retrieved our luggage and gone our separate ways, I'll keep it, that tiny ivory elephant. I'll make a place for it on my mantle, or maybe I'll toss it on the table next to my door, right next to my keys and loose change.

### Not Like a Tiger

(appeared previously in Quick Fiction)

I have stripes, she said, and he thought he'd misheard her.

Stripes, she said again.

What, like a cheetah, he asked.

No, she said. Cheetahs have spots. I think you mean, like a tiger. Or like a zebra, maybe.

So, like a tiger?

No, she said again. And she looked at him, a look he wasn't familiar with. He wasn't sure what that look meant.

I can't really explain, she said. I just wanted to say something. To warn you, or whatever. And she started to undress. She took off her jacket, unbuttoned and dropped her men's tuxedo shirt, slung her bra. She kicked off her shoes, unzipped and stepped out of her skirt, peeled off her leggings, tossed her underwear. She stood in front of him and looked at him, and he knew what that look meant. See?

But he didn't see. He didn't see any stripes, he didn't know what she could have meant. All he saw was her standing there – naked, eyes closed, clothes piled around her and thrown to the side, arms outstretched like in presentation, like a statue, like some kind of religious or spiritual being, almost – and he didn't see what she could have meant, but he nodded. He looked at her until she opened her eyes and their eyes met and he looked at her, a look that meant yes, yes, I see exactly what you meant.

an excerpt from UNCLEAN WOMEN AND OTHER JOBS by Alissa Nutting ( Starcherone, 2010 )

### Model's Assistant

(appeared previously in Mid-American Review)

My best friend Garla is a model from somewhere Swedeishy; if you try to pin down where, like what town, or if actually Sweden, she just yells, "Vodka," or if she's in a better mood, "Vodka, you know?" which seems like she's maybe saying she's Russian, but really she just wants to drink. Garla hates particulars, and is actually able to avoid them because where she actually lives is model-land. I wish I lived in model-land too,

but the closest I can come to that is hanging out with Garla, which is like going on vacation to a model-land timeshare.

We met at a party in Chelsea that I pond-skipped to. I definitely wasn't invited. I'd gone with a real friend to a not-so hot party, and then left with her friend to go to a better party where I met someone new who took me to a quite hot party. It was there that I made out with the photographer who took me to the party of Garla. She wasn't hosting it but she was there, and anywhere Garla goes is Garla's party.

I think the only reason I ever saw Garla again was because I was drunk enough to tell her the truth. She was trying on bizarre clothes—there was a shroud that looked fiercely spacelike yet medical, like a gown one might wear to get a pap smear on Mars. Then Garla put on a dress whose pleating created the suggestion of a displaced goiter somewhere to the left of her neck and she sashayed towards me. I was holding my head onto my body, carefully and by the window, so that its breeze might sober me up enough to walk to the end of the room where I might then become sober enough to walk to the toilet and land on the floor. There, hopefully, the pressure from my cheek against my cell phone could call someone who knew me and liked me and wanted to get me a cab and make sure this night was not where my life's journey would end. But for all I knew it was, and when I saw Garla I held on to my head just a little bit tighter, because she appeared to be strutting over to grab it and rip it off.

"You," she said, and I straightened up grammar-school style. I puked in my mouth but absolutely did not open my lips and let it fall on the floor. "Do you like this?" She did a turn that was so beautiful and practiced and impossible but to Garla was something that accidentally slipped out of her like a tiny fart.

"It makes you look like you're pregnant in the back," I said, and used the nose of my beer bottle to itch the middle of my back where the seam of her dress magically globed out. She scowled and pranced off. I assumed she was offended until she brought over a silver-plated bowl filled with the car keys of various guests.

"Use for vomit," she said, and then, "have phone," and slipped a miniature crystallized computer-wallet into my purse. I think at that point two large, gray wolfhounds walked up to either side of her and the three of them then headed towards the kitchen. "You love dogs and have a tendency to hallucinate them," I told myself as I stumbled towards the bathroom. Various refined guests were staring at me with horror as I pawed around Helen Keller-style, groping everything in sight to stabilize my journey into a small room housing cold linoleum and a sink. "Why am I always the nerd at the party?" I thought. "I am in my thirties and by now I should at least know how to pretend."

The thing about bathrooms in parties is they don't always stay bathrooms; they start out as such but then become make-out rooms or coke rooms or shower-bubble-madness rooms. When I burst through the door holding my abdomen, a slight and waify couple seemed to be using it as a get-to-know-one-another room; they were drinking very red wine, sitting on the side of the bathtub and giggling, drawing simple pictures with fingertips of wine onto the white tile. The "braap" sound I made while becoming sick intrigued them a little bit. They were children nearly, perhaps nineteen. I could feel them looking at me with something real and concentrated. I don't think it was pity as much as curiosity; they seemed to wonder very much what it might be like to be so uncomposed. "I don't get when people use puking in art," said the boy, and the girl said, "Well it's not like that, when they do," meaning not like me but like Garla throwing up pink paint onto a teal ceramic raccoon.

"I need a cab," I mumbled, and the boy was sympathetic but firm.

"I won't touch you," he told me.

“Of course not,” I said, “Heavens no. Just call one and I’ll get myself down to the door.”

It took a great while to do this. At some point I wondered if I should try to find Garla and give her the phone back, but then I saw a great flash and there she was, the camera’s light bouncing off her translucent thigh, her foot inside the host’s tropical aquarium. Everyone wanted a shot of her leather bondage shoe surrounded by fake coral: people were holding up cell phones and professional equipment and thin digital cameras, “Tickle fish,” Garla was saying to everyone, and there was simply no way I could have that amount of attention suddenly focus over to my own body, even if I was waving a phone that belonged to the darling of their affections. I was like a turd inside someone who’d accidentally swallowed an engagement ring: I was nothing, yet I carried something uniquely special.

an excerpt from MUSEUM OF THE WEIRD by Amelia Gray ( FC2, 2010 )

(appeared previously Diagram)

There's no reason. There's no reason why you couldn't. There's no reason it's not possible you couldn't possibly finish your mild cottage cheese breakfast, buy a ticket, take that train to the edge of the world, squeeze your eyes shut, dig the wheels into moist world-edge earth and make a dramatic plunge off the side, your friends and family waving good-bye as at the end of a parade when all that's left is sandwich wrappers and the rest of a long day, sun streaming through all the windows and still a cold room no matter how much light hits every corner, even if you take the curtains and flip them over the curtain rods so there's nothing impeding the procession of light— that kind of lazy afternoon where someone in the house mutters a promise to make banana bread but you know the bananas will spoil and cultivate bacteria, becoming dangerous like the kitchen counter you washed in your younger years first with warm water and later on with the stronger stuff, ammonia making you dizzy behind your allergen-free mask, a boiling water rinse and a layer of bleach, just a bit of the stuff mixing together into what you hear is dangerous but secretly know is a chemical so powerful that certain entities don't want you to hear about it, and by "certain entities" you mean the government, these powers in power have other plans for you but you're one step ahead, you and your sleeves with the tricks in them and your special diet, the cottage cheese diet, the diet with cottage cheese, and as you eat the cottage cheese you hold very gently on your tongue the cottages and the people inside the cottages and the people are screaming.

an excerpt from WE'RE GETTING ON by James Kaelan ( FlatmanCrooked, 2010 )

[ II ]

I haven't slept all night, so I can say for certain that the rain stopped pre-dawn and that at some incalculable hour I discarded all the names. This morning she insisted that we use the bucket to bail the ditch, which was, I'll admit, more efficient than using our hands to keep the water out, and though we prevented him from drowning I hated all of it intensely. But if he doesn't die from his injuries, he might from pneumonia. He's begun coughing. She's lying on her side, her legs crossed to hide her cunt, petting his forehead. He watches her with his good eye, and even tries to speak from time to time. He said “no” at one point, and “yes” sometime later. I'm envious of his condition, even if he's in tremendous pain.

The others come down from their cave after the first light. They don't move as a single unit, but I'll confuse myself if I separate them. They stand at the edge of the hole, aghast. “What happened?” they ask. They look at her, expecting her to give some kind of explanation, but she doesn't betray me. They ask what they can do, and she says they should carry on like today was yesterday and he was participating in our activities, rather than wheezing in his grave. They aren't naked, nor do they comment on the fact that we are. She is so covered with mud that it's as if she were clothed. I'm similarly filthy.

They walk to the water tank and retrieve the coyote. I hadn't seen it lying there. Because they didn't gut it last night, its stomach has inflated. All the post-mortem gases have probably putrefied the meat. I wonder if this excuses me from my duties here. They killed an animal, and rediscovered it in the morning. I suppose that doesn't count. And besides, between killing and finding already dead is failing to kill. I will have to take care of that on my own, as I will the scavenging. They are asking for a knife, but we've never had one. Regardless, they kneel in the dirt, which the sun is beginning to dry, and try to plunge their thumbs through the hide on either side of the spine. This eventually proves effective, and they are able to tear the hair and flesh off the animal's back. The meat is mostly gray, but in some places purple. They use their long fingernails to unhook the skin from the regions where it's most secure, such as the face. The eyes protrude from the skull when the lids are gone. The tail looks like a rope tied into a line of knots. When they've denuded the thing to the best of their ability, they walk over to the scrub brush pile, where all the branches are sodden. Even if we had matches, I wouldn't allow them to build a fire. They will eat the dog raw or not at all. But they lay the wood out to dry regardless. They must be starving.

I hold my hand in front of my face and it shakes. My hunger should pass, I expect, by this evening, or by tomorrow morning at the latest. I don't plan to eat again, unless I come across an edible flower or a bit of moss clinging to a rock, or that evasive corpse.

And then to the in-mountain I hear something rumbling. An enormous machine is either rolling down the highway and that noise is traveling up to us again, or a vehicle, having left the paved road, is climbing toward our camp. I watch the low ridge by which the others exited the property yesterday when they discarded the car. The noise is getting louder, and everyone—even he—has turned to listen. At the crest of that hill below us, a bright light flashes, which I realize is sunshine refracting off the windshield of a sedan. They stand up and begin waving their arms. She stops smoothing his hair and rolls onto her side, putting one arm over her exposed breasts. I expect, once it notices that it's come across a settlement, it'll turn around, and so I get to my feet as well. But the car continues toward us. There are no markings on the doors. It carries two people, a father and a mother, perhaps. But I can't tell its sex from this distance. We are still children of someone, hypothetically.

They jog to meet it, leaving the carcass in the garden. Suffering from modesty perhaps, she descends into the pit to hide with him. His one eye rotates wildly in the socket. I run toward my cave, as I would rather abandon them than be discovered. We should be doing everything in our power to protect ourselves, but they're inviting the world to look at us. I stop at the opening to my hole, but decide better of entering. If I hide there, I'm trapped. They'll tell it where I've gone, and it will pull me out by my head. My only option is to flee. This isn't cowardice, but rather resolve. To allow myself to get captured would be to admit that I haven't changed. This is the final test of our fitness, and they're failing.

Having climbed high enough above our land to apprehend the entire expanse and everything else in the vicinity, the gray valley, the low buildings of a town, the green river of which I have no recollection, I sit down in the damp grass. Far below, the car has been parked, and it—a man and a woman—have gotten out. It is looking into the pit at she and he, and they are gesturing with their hands, as if to explain to it what has transpired. But it can't have the capacity to understand what they're saying, why we were here, why she is naked, or why he is half-buried in the ground. They point up-mountain, perhaps at me, but it can't see me. I am, for all the mud I've slathered on my skin, the color of the ground.

I can't help but wonder who is trespassing down there. Is it the realtors from Battle Mountain coming for a visit? Is it our neighbors from some other tract asking how we hooked up to the electricity grid, or how many feet we drilled before we hit ground water? I'm concerned only insofar as the situation affects me. I have to keep this going. If it intends to stop us, will it pursue me? Will a helicopter hunt me down and spot me as I scurry from rocky outcropping to rocky outcropping across this mountain range? Or will it leave me in peace? Maybe it came to say that some application just got processed, and now we are the proud owners of nothing and nowhere. But I assume my instincts are correct. It came to bring us back to the city. It

traveled four hundred miles to assess a fine of some sort, or levy a tax. And I'd forgotten that he is also injured, so regardless of its reason for coming, it can't ignore his condition. I'll have to persevere alone.

[ I ]

How many days have I been at this? Three, at a minimum, because I remember the sun coming up on as many occasions. I haven't eaten, of course. I made a vow that I wouldn't, unless I came across a carcass. The nausea has subsided, so that thirst is now my central concern. Although I'm not worried. I've been lying on my back, beneath a rock escarpment, since pre-evening yesterday. The heat has been desiccating.

If I had some sort of destination, I would encourage myself to stand. I raise my head and look at my feet, which are covered with blood. I must have cut open my toes somewhere along the journey, though I'm not experiencing pain. As I wait here, and for what I don't know, I find that I've grown tired of thinking. There's a goal. This constant revision is exhausting, or terrifying, if I'm being honest. These deliberations must eventually lead to a conclusion, and that denouement is what concerns me, or at least eludes me. During the evening yesterday, or this morning just as likely, for the quality of light is similar at both the start and end of the day, I watched a deer, or perhaps a goat, bound across a field. I've seen no other animals, unless a bird counts as an animal, but I mean nothing else on the ground. Judging by the speed at which the goat was moving, I surmised that the deer did not belong here. I'm having trouble without these subjects, but that's to be expected. I can't discard I yet. That would be too absurd. But I'm approaching. Language is the last technology I have to rid myself of if I'm going to start over. Although a new beginning seems beyond my grasp. I've gone too far in the other direction, and this isn't a circle or a cycle, but a spectrum at the ends of which are two terminal extremes. How should I go about this? Were pronouns the right parts to start with? Maybe I should have begun by paring down my vocabulary more generally. I've left myself with I, as well as that and this and these. Let me hang onto those for a moment, and those as well. The adverbs can go, but I'll retain the articles until near the end. And I'll try to extinguish the conjunctions. I'll have to think in simpler sentences, limiting my adjectives. That should concise things. Whenever possible, I'll consider objects around me without assigning them qualities. The sky, I'll think. Should I discard commas? Question marks, yes. Question marks yes. I don't need to inquire. No apostrophes. I do not need to inquire anymore. Some repetition to ensure everything gets eliminated. I lie on the ground. The sun. A single cloud. No water. No one pursued me. I must end on the right word. The deer leaps. The goat's hooves clatter sharply on the rocks and it slips, he, or she falls, down the shear face of the orange cliff, or did it? I had to. That was the last outburst. I will not again. I am prepared for this. That is the limit. Just five words. No more. Constricted. The cloud is moving. Nothing progressive. Present only. I should eliminate the past. One more memory. I smashed the clock. Another before I go. The garden arranged in rows. I lack the word. Bent pouring water. I stop there. The remnants cool. I close my eyes. Not yet. I open them. I am far from dying. Days of this. Tomorrow. A day without words. If I can manage. The day after. Silence. The third day a notion. Later an idea. Let me get to four. Words. There I am. Down to the last. I pause. For a moment. I have to pare. Strip this down. To three. That was two. The bits. The punctuation still. The last period. I omit. Now. Just two. The collapse. The renewal. If the. A cacophony. Plural. Noises. Noise. Singular. Last one. To one. Yes. I can. No I. No. The. In. Out. Final. None.

an excerpt from PEE ON WATER by Rachel B. Glaser ( Publishing Genius Press, 2010 )

(appeared previously in American Short Fiction)

Back to the discussion on David: Michelangelo has set up more than one teenage girl for disappointment. Delicate, arrogant, naturally toned, with big hands to hold, many girls fly home heart-struck, it's true! Flocking to the first curly-haired boy they see, looking more carefully at the football team, tying the phone cord in knots, failing school, settling for a prom date, etc, etc, rooting for Italy in the Olympics. One girl's experience was to fall for the David, returning home only to sculpt him out of white chocolate and melt him

(melt him!) on a hot plate. Then meeting a David and understanding the world's preoccupation with Jesus, see diary entry below:

The bluest eye proposal was met by one unknowing boy who had the bluest eyes, winning, generous, butt-perfect, pleasing, spontaneous and breathing, but shy, silly, dillied all down. If Jesus was like that, then all the more explained.

If one could suspend knowledge and judgment, consider Jesus as the kind-hearted high school sweetheart who dies tragically in a car crash (and just two days before graduation)! A dead boyfriend, as we all know, is impossible to "get over," having committed no crime besides stealing our hearts, etc. Breaking off a relationship with no one breaking it off, this kind of end is very hard to accept, leaving the left one thinking, if only I had driven myself, if only I hadn't insisted on ice cream, if only the weather had been nicer, or the road had been cleared, or my purse hadn't been lazily draped over the gear shift, etc. The world wants to meet, to speak with the tragically died-young, the perpetual. There is no old-aged Lennon, no middle-aged Cobain running amuck. To die young is to stay young, to keep everyone wanting to stay young with you, to make them afraid to approach an age you never got to, that you were supposed to get to first.

In Japan, a young girl published an essay on Cobain's voice. A rough translation states:

Cobain's voice houses more than one voice.  
This magic of voice is most clearly deciphered  
on the Unplugged Album. I could find enough  
levels in Kurt Cobain's voice to live satisfied,  
but the rest of my family wasn't as fortunate.

The text goes on to question the structural make up of Cobain's throat. Does it contain pebbles or kernels that rumble along? Would the writer try to communicate with Cobain if he had not left his body behind as evidence? Does one assist a dead musician by covering his songs?

A cover is a new rendition of a previously recorded song. Usually, the original recording is regarded as the definitive version and all others lesser competitors, alternatives, or tributes. Songs have been covered since the first melody hummed in the presence of another. Monkeys covered songs way before they lost the hair. Adam and Eve used to sing while they had sex in streams, and crickets sure sing similar, leaves have a song, birds, thunder claps are a kind, not so popular or pleasing, but everyone has their music. Different car engines sound good together. An airplane duets nicely with a lawnmower.

Newly-turned dance covers sound careless, freed from their gloom by immortal beats. These beats keep going after the song has stopped. Beat-making machines have no off button. They must be stuffed in pillows, in closets, in sheds, buried in backyards, until the beat is needed once again.

Does a cover unleash the song? One that's been called the best, Hendrix completely outgunning a Dylan original, throwing it far from Bob's scratchy so-so. John Coltrane rescues "My Favourite Things" from the original The Sound of Music version. His meandering jazz masterpiece weaves in and out of melody, trilling notes out of control, and all the while the listener has the other prim version in her head. No one sings lyrics in Coltrane's version, they are offered by the song's ghost. Coltrane's melody calls to mind the kittens and string. Then the instruments storm, there are hundreds of cats, way too much string.

an excerpt from THE EVOLUTIONARY REVOLUTION by Lily Hoang ( Les Figue Press, 2010 )

Man, Emerging

The day man emerged from water, the sky stormed big shards of lightning, but man was unafraid. It is unclear how man segued from water to air, if she, like dolphins or whales, began by breaking the surface of water for brief moments or if she simply flapped her little wings underwater, using them as propellers, until she was lifted out of out water, into the sky. Or perhaps she was more like a duck or swan, sitting on the surface with her feet maintaining equilibrium, until she became bored by the moisture slicking off her skin and so she took flight simply out of ennui. Or perhaps she used the bodies of other men like a ladder, climbing slowly upwards, until she could jump from such great heights and learn to flap her wings before falling deeply back into the water. The only thing we know for sure is that man must have worked in conjunction with other men to transition from water to air.

It was no secret that the long time rift between man and merman had become increasingly frustrating for both species. It was also no secret that man had petitioned the Evolution Council for permission to inhabit the sky, and although the council denied their proposal, they told them that even the Evolution Council cannot prevent the unavoidable, and it was unavoidable that man would take to the sky. The council offered man a loophole though. Although they could not, for unmentionable reasons, approve the petition, they would not erase its possibility. The council told man's representative if she could find a way to survive in the atmosphere, the council would ratify the petition, but only after man could prove she could thrive there. The Evolution Council knew, even then, even at this very early stage of their existence, that they had no control, that they could not escape what prophets desired.

So the day man emerged from water, it stormed big shards of lightning, but every man had practiced flight. Every man knew how to breathe the atmosphere, how to close her eyes once she broke the surface of water. Every man knew she had to fly to survive, that she was on the verge of extermination if she stayed in the water. These men, it's said they were unafraid, but the stakes were high, and if they weren't scared, they must've been at least just a little bit nervous.

#### The Truth About the Evolutionary Revolution

The truth is the Evolutionary Revolution was unplanned. It came about in a time of relative peace between man, merman, and all other beings. Yes, the Evolutionary Revolution was entirely unplanned, but just because it was unplanned does not mean it was unexpected. No, this revolution was something the Evolution Council had been expecting for centuries, but given that the revolution had been foretold more than ten centuries before it had actually occurred, the council assumed they had escaped the wrath of revolution. At least that's what they'd hoped. Still, there was always one small council member who tried to remind the others about the coming of the revolution, that they should beware and prepare, but the council members joked about the silly revolution. At every council gathering, they joked, and at every council meeting, that same small council member reminded them how the last prophet foretold it, how the storytellers confirmed it, how they all knew what was at stake here. But the other council members didn't listen. No, they just drank and laughed and guffawed, and the one member, he sulked in the corner, thinking how one day, they would understand, but by then, it would certainly be too late, at least that's what he hoped.

Of course, none of council members, not even the one dissident voice, really understood what was at stake because prophets had been extinct for more than fifty centuries. It's not clear when the last of the storytellers went extinct. They were an amorphous species, changing bodies without difficulty. It is quite likely that a storyteller or two still exists today, but because no one is able to identify them as a species, they're just as good as extinct, and have been for a very long time now. So this myth of revolution has been passed down through the centuries through whispers, the most accurate and efficient delivery method, told by relics long since extinct. These rumors of impending revolution, now a full ten centuries late, didn't matter to the opulent Evolution Council.

So yes, the Evolutionary Revolution was unplanned, but it was so powerful, so life-altering, because it was, or should have been, expected.

excerpts from ADAM ROBISON AND OTHER POEMS by Adam Robinson ( Narrow House, 2010 )

### Brahms

He was friends with Robert Schumann  
Probably better friends with Schumann's wife Clara  
It was an exceptional time of likeability  
They all got together in Germany or wherever  
And played five-handed piano

See Brahms only had one hand  
But he was exceedingly generous with it  
Brahms was the kind of guy  
He drove through toll booths  
He'd ask the attendant to apply his change  
To the fare of the carriage behind him please  
And he traveled a lot

He insisted on strict realism  
He protested excess  
He scorned the work of Magritte  
Clara shared with him amusing French anecdotes  
Still he disdained the man's paintings  
Objecting that they were "too gay"  
Or "perhaps interesting but dishonest at their core"

At the time gay meant frivolous  
No one knows what frivolous meant

I can't remember the first name of Brahms  
But everything else, this all, is true  
I might have the words wrong  
Maybe in the wrong order

Brahms died in 1897

### How We Continue

There is a baby in a stroller in the library  
His mother is typing with heavy fingers

He is not moving he is sleeping with cake  
Dirt on his face and his hand is clutched tightly

### In on itself

This boy dozes fatlipped in his lap is his  
Formula and softpack of menthol cigarettes

Right next to him is his mother whom  
I cannot see because we are each in a cubicle turned

In on itself

an excerpt from ASUNDER by Robert Lopez ( Dzanc Books, 2010 )

The Indian from Indiana

(appeared previously in New York Tyrant)

Everyone was afraid of the Indian from Indiana because he was drunk and from Indiana. We were afraid he would embarrass us in front of everyone. We were afraid he would ruin our evening. None of us were sure where Indiana was and so we didn't know how the Indians from there behaved. Some of us had heard of Indiana and one of us said out loud that it might be somewhere in the middle of the country. Then another one of us said they do a lot of farming there and they play basketball and the country is flat as a sheet of paper. We didn't know if all Indians from Indiana were drunks like this one but one of us said he didn't think so. He said they wouldn't be good at basketball and wouldn't be able to farm if they all were drunks like this Indian here. We didn't even know if that's what you called someone from Indiana, an Indian, but it made sense to most of us. We were gathered together for a celebration but I forget what we were celebrating. There wasn't much to celebrate then so even the slightest victory, a morning without incident, for instance, would be grounds for a celebration. None of us knew how the Indian came to be where we were. None of us had seen him before. Eventually this Indian from Indiana cornered me into a discussion about language, specifically the English language and where it came from. I don't know what made him think this was something I'd want to discuss. There is nothing about me that says I like to talk about the English language and where it came from. Maybe it was because he was an Indian that he thought otherwise. Maybe this is what goes on in Indiana when they're not farming and playing basketball. He seemed to speak English like he'd been speaking it his whole life but he was drunk so you couldn't tell for sure. The rest of us were at the bar when he cornered me so I was on my own. Had I known this was to happen I would've accompanied the rest of us to the bar. I wouldn't have let myself get cornered by an Indian had I known better. I almost never know better beforehand and this is why I often find myself in these sorts of fixes. At any rate, this Indian went on to say English derives from the languages of love. This is when I took the glass of water beside me and drank from it. I was hoping it was gin in the glass or vodka but it turned out to be water. I looked down on this Indian to see if maybe he'd fallen or had decided I wasn't the one to discuss this with. He was drunker now than he was before. His eyes were halfway shut and there was spittle on his chin and beard. It was good he was short so I could drink a glass of water and look down upon him at the same time. I felt like I needed to keep an eye on this little Indian. He was still there beneath me by the time I'd finished the water. I waited for the rest of us to get back from the bar. I didn't know what was taking so long but I figured they'd be back soon. This way the Indian would be distracted and skulk away. I'd seen him skulk away several times that night. His habit was to approach someone on their own, do some talking and gesturing, then skulk away when others joined them. I was waiting for this to happen when it occurred to me he was referring to Romance languages. In his drunken Indian head you can see how he would get from there to there and for a second I was filled with something, a feeling, I cannot describe. It was almost like love, maybe, or awe, for all Indians everywhere, their complexities and foibles. So I told him he was right, that English comes from the languages of love. I figured there was no harm and the Indian might appreciate it. I don't think he heard me, though, because the rest of us were approaching and the Indian was already in retreat and like that he was somewhere else. The Indian stayed on through the night but we never saw him again and none of us knows what became of him. Whenever the rest of us gather to celebrate something these days we'll take turns telling stories of that night and the Indian from Indiana. Almost none of these stories are true but that doesn't stop anyone from telling the stories or listening to them. It is embarrassing is what it is, that we find these sorts of tales amusing. The rest of us know this full well and the ones that don't suspect it.

excerpts from AMERICAN GYMNOPÉDIES by Scott Garson ( Willows Wept Press, 2010 )

#### St. Louis Gymnopédie

Classes were through, and we drove all night. I woke up at my god-brother's crib. He was taking a shower, and he had no coffee. So I scooped up Ray for a walk. The morning light on Sarah Street made jewels of the broken glass, and the trees looked tired, like they'd rather not hold up their leaves, and the windows in most the apartment blocks looked dark and frankly depressing. Ray was texting his woman. I remembered everything here. It was like I was holding a secret.

#### Salt Lake City Gymnopédie

I was walking through trees in the Horseshoe toward my office in Gardner Hall. Into the space of my mind as I walked may have come any one of the usual number of minor, passing concerns. A bird made a sound. I heard it belatedly. I was aware of what it did with its voice, that's to say, because I wanted to hear it again. I shaded my eyes. I see there is no definitive way to argue that what I experienced then was not in fact epiphenomenal. But I tell you. There in those trees, the light gathered itself. I stood in the presence of God.

#### Flagstaff Gymnopédie

How did you get this number? Never mind. You seem like a nice young man. You may have what the bank hasn't taken. You may seize this straw hat. A boater, I believe it is called. Its silk band sails in the wind! You may have these low heels, if you want them—if you're that kind. I don't judge. I'd kneel to worship with even the man who stole my livelihood. Meet me tonight by the doors of the church, in the scent of potted geraniums. Aspen Avenue. I'll give you—this I pledge—my time, my fullest attention.

#### Sandusky Gymnopédie

The sun was behind him and brightened the road. When sleep rose into his head, he pulled off at a Service Plaza and lay on the hood of the car, looking into his eyelids. The day was fair. He reached for his skateboard and found a way out, by the lot for employee cars, ducking low to slide under the gate. And here was a town. Tin pinwheels in gardens. Hanging white benches on verandas swept clean. Tulips everywhere, moist as whispers, brilliant yellows, whites and reds. Here was a place that the morning had breathed. He scratched at the sides of a scab on his elbow. He zagged through flickering shade.

an excerpt from MAN'S COMPANIONS by Joanna Ruocco ( Tarpaulin Sky, 2010 )

#### Flies

I am looking for a cake recipe. The cake must be special but also simple. I think lemon is the appropriate flavor. Lemon reminds us of the subtle grieving we do even while eating cake. In the middle ages, the wives baked hollow cakes in which they put small personal items of the dead. I read about a French girl, Dominique, or Little Mirelle, who was buried, bald-headed with a white cake on her breast filled with her long hairs. The pâtissier decorated the cake with edible gold, a gold leaf lamb with gold sugar flowers all around, this kind of decoration being very popular among the aristocracy, for weddings. The French girl died too young to have entertained any marriage proposals, and in the end, her sickness wasted her face and made her pretty curls come loose from her scalp, but she wanted to go sweetly, celebrated, to the Virgin Mother, who suffers the sick girls, the sad, despised virgins, unlovely with chancres, and so her parents entombed her with a cake, very white, lacquered to keep out the worms, and on the top, the shining lamb, and flowers, and crosses. Could I have read this in a cookbook? I am not in the habit of reading books about Europe or plague, and so it seems that I read it in a cookbook.

I used to scour cookbooks, in the library, copying cake recipes, the more unusual the better. I enjoyed the tips on shaping swags and bows and buttons and lace, all with fondant frosting, which dries shiny and hard, and I always touched the large pictures, close-ups of cakes shaped like hearts or tiered like castles, filled with custards, nut-creams, and mousses, covered with tea lite candles, sugared fruits, candied flower petals, the cakes surrounded by rills of fabric, lilies, or plated on wrought-iron stands, outdoors, by blooming bushes or bodies of water. I did not attempt these cakes myself. No tricks. I baked a plain cake every weekend, the same cake, unvaried, a rather dry chocolate, and I never ate more than one piece, a crumbling wedge, no frosting, just powdered sugar and a glass of milk.

I bought basic equipment, a springform, a sifter, and cake-testing straws. I bought the cake testing straws in a pack of twenty for one dollar and seventy-nine cents at Trade Fare. In the checkout line I almost reconsidered. Butter-knives work fine for cake testing. When you open an oven door the hot air comes out in a rush and blows back your hair. Hot air has velocity compared to colder air. That is what gives it lift, like an airplane.

I felt as though I were doing something strange, or even dangerous, buying straws to use in the oven. Isn't straw a kind of tinder? Even quickly—in and out—it's not safe. Behind me, a girl and her mother, in saris, yards of polyester georgette, the color of old pennies, staring. The girl held a clear bag of tamarind pods. Remember if your house is on fire, drop to your hands and knees, and crawl along the floor. Your head up there high will turn into a torch. If the smoke makes you sneeze, the swift intake of air will stoke the flames on your face until the flesh wears a blue, self-consuming mask. The firemen will find you on your back, a skull above the collar of your shirt.

Inside the oven, the circulation of hot air currents is always accelerating, circling around the cake batter again and again, irritating and chapping the batter in the same way air irritates and chaps moistened lips, damp noses, eyes, any exposed membrane. The cake gets dry at the corners in a square pan, or if the pan is circular, at the outermost edge of its circumference. What you do is push the butter-knife through that slight, skin-like resistance at the very top of the dome and work it down until the blunt tip raps the cake tin. Then you pull it out, sit back on your heels with your crouching body close to the oven door, and interpret the blade. The blade mists with the condensation so it will never look completely clean even if the cake is done. Often a crumb or two will cling to the blade, or if the cake is still cooking, a long wet line. If the line is short, or interrupted, the cake is almost done. Depending on the thickness of the continuous line the cake has a few or many minutes left inside the oven.

In a cookbook, it must have been, I read about houseflies. A century ago, or more, English marmalade manufacturers conducted studies. They found that houseflies prefer white light to colored light. Red in particular disturbs them. Flies don't want to settle on a red cake. If you are taking a cake with you to the hospital, or on a picnic, to the woods, and the cake has to travel, out of doors, for many hours, you should color the cake red, no matter the cake's flavor. Red repels many creatures, whose reactions are instinctual, but people are able to divorce the color red from danger, sex, and fever. If a forkful has the look of clotted blood, but smells of citrus, people understand the distinction. You can bake Easter cakes like little white lambs and cut inside. Each child gets a curly-topped wedge of red velvet and it makes the children gasp. They poke their little haunch. They are happy. They eat sweet lambs and sugared almonds. Outside the window, snow and early crocuses.

Or in Africa, when English hunters had banquets. They set big tables on the veldt, between budded jacarandas. Hunters in high boots ate elephant steaks, piled flaps of blackened meat on trays. Their English wives labored in the kitchens, lead-glazed bowls on every surface, servant girls beating eggs and milk. The English hunters' English wives thought zebra cakes were darling, tiny, round cakes, boldly striped, but cakes don't rise the same in Africa. Nothing turns out right. Even a good English oven won't keep temperature in Africa. The servant girls dirty red batter with their fingers, and the English hunters with their African machetes cut the zebras and the meat inside is dull, nothing like a kill.

It is still too cold for flies. They are hibernating in the wall voids. I can make a white cake, yellow cake, a red cake, any color cake, as long as the cake is bright. The frosting must be as lustrous as possible, even if it cracks when you chew it, like eggshell. I am reading about "taste blindness," which is common when radiation targets the mouth and neck. If you are taste blind, the most important thing is the cake's appearance. The cake must look like a cake, like the memory of cake, like the way you once imagined some other cake tasting, the cake behind glass in the bakery. You remember the reflected light on the glass, the shining cake, the feeling along the sides of your tongue, wanting it. It's hard to make this kind of cake, even though you could mistake the salt for sugar, or forget vanilla, and the cake would be exactly the same.

an excerpt from WE MAKE MUD by Peter Markus ( Dzanc Books, 2011 )

### We Eat Mud

(appeared previously in Dislocate)

Us brothers, we kept reaching down, with our hands, down into the mud. We kept on with our hands reaching down, into the mud, and when we did, us brothers, we kept on pulling up mud. But then once, when we reached with our hands down into the mud, us brothers, we pulled up Girl. We pulled Girl up, out of the mud, until Girl became a tree. Us brothers, up this girl tree, up, us brothers, we climbed. We climbed up this girl tree that used to be Girl, this tree that used to be mud, until us brothers got up to this tree's top. Up here, at the top of this tree, us brothers, out of tree branches and tree leaves, all the color of mud, we made us a nest. In the sky above our heads, there was a cloud up there in the shape of a bird. This cloud, it was so shaped like how a bird is shaped that it became, it turned into, it was: a bird. This bird, it flew over to where, us brothers, we were standing up watching with our heads lifted up to see. When this bird that was once a cloud was close enough for us to touch it, us brothers, we reached out with our hands to touch it. We touched it. We touched this bird that was once a cloud once shaped in the shape of a bird, and when we did, this bird, it started singing. Then, this bird, this bird that, it was singing, then it and its singing, it flew away. When it came back, this bird, a little while later, like a good bird that always comes back, its bird mouth was filled with mud. This bird, with its bird mouth filled up with mud, this bird, it wasn't singing. What this bird did, even though it wasn't a bird singing to us brothers anymore, it flew back up close to us brothers above us our boy heads. Us brothers, looking up at this bird, we opened up our boy mouths. When we did this with our mouths, this bird, it opened up its mouth too, it started back up singing. And like this, with mud dripping down from this bird's singing mouth and down into ours, us brothers, we began to eat.

excerpts from MY ONLY WIFE by Jac Jemc ( Dzanc Books, 2012 )

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Later in our time together, my wife would wake in the night.

She was not a light sleeper, but there was one sound that could wake her without fail.

When it was warm out, we left the windows open. If it was quiet and if the traffic was slow, we could hear the faint sound of a tin sign swaying down the street.

The sign was very lightweight. It didn't take more than the slightest of breezes or a car driving by slowly to start it swinging.

I could sleep right through this sound, but I know my wife would wake often in the night because of it.

I could wake and play music loudly and she wouldn't so much as twitch while she slept soundly.

But at night, in the warm silence, she would wake to the cool squeak of that sign below.

She knew there was no use tossing and turning. She couldn't try to ignore it. Closing the window wouldn't be enough of a barrier.

She would simply stand quietly from her side of the bed, silently open the bedroom door and soundlessly pad to the kitchen where she would flip on the light and lean against the counter, arms folded patiently, waiting for the breeze to subside.

I would wake and find her side of the bed empty.

I would stumble into the kitchen blindly and stand in front of her smiling a just awakened, droopy-mouthed grin.

My sleep swollen hands would find their way to her hair and as my fingers began to thread through the soft tangle on her head, her eyes would shut and her chin would lift and she would bask in the light of the overhead lamp like it was the warmest of summer afternoons.

Eventually she would lift her arms in a stretch, yawning, like a cat in a spot of sun, and then she would place her hands on my shoulders to still me. Her lips would form the shape of a "sh" but no sound would come out and I would watch her listen, afraid to breathe, afraid to blink.

The sign had fallen into silence outside.

Her hands would slide down my shoulders, down my chest and abdomen, onto my hips and she would push me gently away so that she could walk back to our bedroom and climb back into bed. Her hand would hit the light switch on her way out of the kitchen, just a moment before it seemed like an afterthought.

I would stand in darkness for a few moments and listen to the rumple of the linens as she climbed into bed. Then I would run the faucet, letting the water get cold, as I pulled a glass from the cupboard. While downing the glassful in a gulp with my right hand, my left hand would tap the faucet off with measured accuracy. I would set the glass in the sink and count the steps back to the bedroom where I would find my wife already fast asleep.

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When the stories stopped, my wife's smoking started again. My wife sat on the windowsill to the fire escape rather than the couch.

She hadn't smoked in ages.

I knew I was supposed to be angry that she was doing something so bad for her health.

I knew I was supposed to look at her perched on the windowsill half in the apartment, half out, with disdain for the cancerous scent she was exhaling all over our things, into the cool night air. I knew I should think it was ridiculous that she opened a window so widely, multiple times a day in December when the snow was beginning to accumulate.

I knew I was supposed to be even more disgusted by this in the morning.

But I wasn't. I liked the way she looked.

I liked the broad inflations of her chest on the inhale.

I liked the collapse of her shoulders, heavy with all that weight, on the exhale.

I liked the delicate poise of her hand, wrist balanced on a bent knee, the limp bend of her fingers.

I liked the contrast of the white smoke to the night sky and I liked the silhouette of her form against the morning sun.

I liked the flick of her thumb on the lighter, the Popeye grimace with which she sucked in the first gulp of air.

I liked the little slivers of cellophane I found glinting around on the carpet.

I liked the ashy flavor of her.

Her mouth tasted of urns and volcanoes.

I liked the butts I found in the cheap ashtray we kept for smoking guests.

I liked the rings of her bright lipstick decorating the filtered ends.

I know I shouldn't have, but I supported her. When she put Marlboro Lights on the grocery list, I asked for them from the cashier without any moral hesitation.

When the clerks asked if I wanted them in the bag or with me, I held out my hand and pocketed them so that I might hand them to my wife personally.

I pocketed them so that I might receive some of her gratitude immediately, a kiss on the cheek, as she pulled the loose end of the cellophane and unwrapped the package, eager for the soothing relief.

After she took her first drag, I kissed her mouth, in love and happy to help.

an excerpt from THE RAT VEDA by James Chapman ( Fugue State Press, 2010 )

The one who puts a concrete barrier between Rat and Lilla, let him be destroyed.

The one who disguises herself as Lilla and berates Rat using angry words, let her be destroyed.

The one who disguises himself as Rat and bites at Lilla, let him be poisoned, let him be burnt.

Let the misunderstanding-demon be exploded, be wrenched out of the air and flailed.

Let the liar who says there's no love be mocked at and made powerless.

Let the fraud who can't answer immediately any question about love be pitied and forgotten.

Lilla built the house, she filled the house without entering it.

With desire she filled every room.

The roof's so high above Rat's cellar, he can't even understand what a roof is.

He doesn't aspire to the roof, but to the bottoms of Lilla's feet.

Rat, you love.

Fill a dipper with love and pour it upward, drench the world, flood the garden, float your beloved on a deep-hulled ship, drown your misunderstanding, fill your basement with water, swim to her, fill the air and the heavens with water, float to her.

Can't you feel?

Is it love if you're so reasonable?

Do you pretend when you dance?

You do?

Then do you pretend when you dream?

What if we notice you and mock you?

What then?

Will you deny your beloved, to win back our good opinion?

Lilla exists, yet you're just sitting there.

By your law, girls stifle their laughter; by your law, children sit in rows; by your law people marry to please their parents; by your law men commit suicide because of embarrassment; by your law half the world won't dance; by your law animals are caught for food; by your law a girl tears up a drawing of herself; by your law a boy talks to himself in a whisper; by your law a man who's never sung out loud dreams of impressing people he knew thirty years ago by singing for them; by your law all persons stay safe from embarrassment above all; by your law a wealthy man dies politely, hiding his terror.

Now you sit in a basement seeing the face of one who can float in the air, and no other rat knows what's wrong with you.

But why would she love you?

What's the joy for her?

You're already the best of dancers, if you see it.

You're already as far beyond the outer light as the outer light is beyond your tunnel, if you see it.

You see round lights passing, you see lights move through the tunnel, the slate of the walls: you see.

You're not slate, you're not a moving light, you're not light itself, you're the receiver.

You can't prevent any color from entering your eyes.

Lilla spreads herself across the ceiling of your tunnel, she opens the ceiling and creates every color light, and that comes from you, that's you.

Rat's drunk.

Why, what has he drunk?

Saffron's floating down, filtering through the air, where's it coming from?

He's eaten a grain of saffron, and now he's drunk, he's dissolved into his dark like dark.

The dark is annihilating, he runs at it, he's a black rat, he'll destroy his habits, he won't remember standard phrases, he'll be hated by anybody who ever found him useful, he'll be no use.

And if he dies in the dark, his fur won't be used to make a gunpowder pouch, his teeth won't be turned into gears.

He won't be immortal, even his existence will disappear, he'll never be an important rat.

He's drunk enough to talk to every aspect of the dark.

He's a rat, rats're famous for stealing food, for nervous destruction.

He'll eat his way through the planet and sit on the moon, his mayhem won't stop till he gets what he wants.

Give him his beloved!

He's free, he doesn't need hope, he's got no path to climb, he's with the beloved, he's with her.

In dark he's without a shadow, he chases nothing, he sees her with his eyes closed, and in dark he opens his eyes asleep and she's here.

When you attain your beloved, what then?

Then you are her.

You're the one who brought winter to the ovens, and coals to the snow.

You poured water over the desert and spoke to the snakes in warning.

You crushed the mountain tunnel to rescue the red owl that was lost in the dark.

You soothed the god of the islanders so that he stopped shouting and rested.

You made the sophisticated man relax and laugh normally.

You made the jaded woman look carefully at a blackbird.

You took wind and passed it through colored minerals so that the world we see regained its colors.

You taught falcons to sit and think, you taught sweet water to rise from the ground.

When your family turned against you, you showed them dance.

You protected your family when they tried to hurt you.

You relinquished the company of amusing men without ever realizing it.

You drank honey alongside the bee.

All this you did without noticing or speaking of it.

Lilla, I don't want to understand you.

Pour out unreasoned light into this tunnel, pour everything light can touch, from metal statues to living horses, from colored ornaments to my own grandchildren.

Wake me, wake me.

Your dancers I praise, I hear their footfalls, I don't know anything except the sound of what dance must be.

You created dance, you piled your hair high to show the delicate ears and you made an art of footfalls.

The beauty that every dying man has left behind, you drew it into a cloud of motion and that was dance.

The beauty that died in the memory of every dying woman, you gathered it into a mist of honey and fed it to your dancers, and anointed their feet with saffron.

Saffron falls through the floorboards and filters onto my head.

I close my eyes and touch the saffron that first was touched by your mind.

an excerpt from BOOK by Ken Sparling ( Pedlar Press, 2010 )

#### I Realized I Wasn't God

Once I saw a shoe. I didn't want to go over and pick it up. I'd seen shoes before. Never one that small, though. This was a very small shoe. My feeling was, I shouldn't go over and pick up that shoe. But it's my job to pick things up. So I went over and picked it up. I held it in my hand. Turned it over. It was size zero. I imagined the baby who this shoe belonged to. I wondered if I should keep the shoe. I wondered if I should take it home. Put it on the windowsill in the kitchen. Beside the plant above the sink. I get sun mornings through that window. The shoe would be there when I did the dishes before packing up to go to work.

Scattered throughout the castle were spaces where sunlight pooled. On the floor. Across the ceiling. On the rugs. The chairs. The tapestries that hung on walls. In the early morning and the late afternoon. It was early autumn. The days still seemed long. The sun came for hours and seemed like it would never stop. Then dusk fell and the sun was gone. People came to the castle. They sat in places where the sun would arrive. The people inside the castle hardly moved. There was something cooking in a large pot. Steam rose. Someone stoked a fire. No one in the castle knew about the man on the bottom of the steps outside the kitchen. The evenings were warm. This bode well for the man. If he spent a night out in the cold, he would die. He was damp. A small girl watched him. Silent. The courtyard within her expanding. This girl sought warmth. She craved light. But light of a particular slant. But how is this a story? the boy queried. Say nothing, the woman told him. Check to see, she said. Sit still, eyes closed. Head tilted. Mouth slightly open. Intone words. Find words that seem not related to one another. Words that seem in no way a story. The light should be like something new. Something unexpected. The girl was glad. The queen was requesting an audience. Where would the girl go for lunch today? There was no direct sunlight in the corner where she slept. She was glad the queen could not see her when she slept. Generally the girl's presence in the middle of the day was an animal thing. She glanced about nervously. The kitten skittered about. Someone

approached. The girl's hair was tangled. Dirt smudged her face and bare legs. Her dress was a rag. She owned no shoes. She spent her days searching for light. Objects sprung out at her. Because of this, when she found such light, something inside her sprang out. Whatever it was she'd discovered that day, among objects she'd encountered countless times, she found herself, at night, feeling powerless and afraid. Her dreams were not quite nightmares. They filled her with dread. Left her flying in her bed.

I like to go to sleep at night, he said – and, again, he had his hand down his pants, and, again, his mother swatted him, cursing him to get his fucking hand away from where it shouldn't be.

Whenever I see Jerry, I feel better. More alive. Less pained. I get on my bike in the rain. I'll see him next year again. The dark clover of the sky covers me over. The suffocating dew. Will felt encrusted in dew and the smell of pine was like the final nail in the coffin.

What happened then was that Mary became suspicious of the porter. Why me? Mary asked. You must have had other people come up here before me. Thousands, said the porter. Some of them must have asked to go through the door, said Mary. Almost all of them, said the porter. And you told them all no? Mary asked. This seemed ludicrous to Mary. Somebody has to be the first, said the porter. But what makes me the right person? It isn't that you're the right person, said the porter. It isn't that at all. It's that there is no right person. Am I changing my mind? No. I'm just accepting it as a thing that is going to happen now and it will happen and be over. I've never wanted to let anyone in here. I still don't really. I'm just offering you this opportunity. As though I were a computer programmed to make an offer.

an excerpt from HOW MUCH OF US THERE WAS by Michael Kimball ( New York Tyrant Books, 2010 )

The Birds, the Light, Eating Breakfast, Getting Dressed, and How I Tried to Make It More of a Morning for My Wife

(appeared previously in Open City)

I had fallen asleep, but my wife hadn't died. I had woken up, but my wife hadn't woken up too. She hadn't moved either. I whispered into her ear that it was morning, but she didn't seem to hear me either. I nudged her at her shoulder and touched her upper arm, but she still didn't open her eyes up, so I opened the blinds on the windows up. I turned her head to face the light coming in through the windows.

I whistled bird sounds, but she didn't open her eyes up or put a pillow over her ears or turn her face away or roll over away from the light. My wife hadn't shifted her body since she had been in that hospital bed. She hadn't kicked the bedcovers off of her feet and her legs or pushed the pillow onto the floor. She hadn't tossed or kicked or thrashed or turned over in her sleep like she did when she would sleep in our bed at home.

She didn't wake up for the morning as she had on every other day of our marriage, but we ate breakfast together that day anyway. One of the nurses brought a tray of food into the hospital room and placed it on top of the table that swung over the hospital bed and my wife's body. I told the nurse that my wife couldn't eat or drink or swallow or chew, but the nurse didn't take the tray of food out when she went back out of the hospital room. The nurse came back in with food and water for my wife that was inside iv bags. She hung the iv bags up on the iv stand and made sure that the drips worked. I watched the iv bags drip for awhile before I took the tray of food off of the table and set it on my lap and started to eat too.

We ate breakfast together, but it still wasn't morning for my wife, so I tried to make it into more of a morning. I decided to try to wash up. I pushed myself up out of that chair and tried to stand up, but the blood seemed to rush out of my head and I couldn't really breathe right either. I had to use the armrests of that chair to hold myself up. I was bent over but standing up until I got my breath back. I tried to stand up straight again and my head cleared up. I took my hat off and left it on top of the back of that chair. I took my

jacket off and hung it around the shoulders of that chair. I pulled the sleeves of the jacket around to the front of that chair and left them resting on its armrests. I wanted to make it look like I was sitting there, or at least make it seem like I was nearby, if my wife woke up. I didn't want her to wake up without me there with her. I didn't want her to be awake and alone at the same time.

I went into the bathroom inside her hospital room to take however much of a bath or a shower that I could. I smelled like sleep and I wanted to wash the sleep off of me. I took my clothes off and hung them up on the back of the bathroom door and laid them out on all of the handles and bars that are supposed to help people to get up or to stand up inside a hospital bathroom. I turned the water faucet on and washed myself off with wet paper towels, and I dried myself off with dry paper towels, but it didn't really make me feel clean. I felt dry and tired. I felt like I had somehow shrunk.

I turned my underwear and my undershirt and my socks inside out. I wanted to have the clean side of them touching my skin when I put them back on. I shook the rest of my clothes out. I tried to get the sleep off of them too. I tried to move some air through them too. I got dressed again, but my clothes felt sticky and thick on me and it was difficult to move in them. My pants could almost stand up on their cuffs on their own and my shirt seemed to keep its own shape around my shoulders. My clothes looked stiff and wrinkled and so did I. But my clothes also helped me to stand up. I was trying so hard to stand up straight then. I needed something else to hold me up then.

I stood over the bathroom sink and looked at myself in the bathroom mirror. I looked smaller and older too. I turned the water faucet back on and splashed water on my hair and on my face. I pushed my hair down with my hands and combed it back with my fingers. I wet one of my fingers again and brushed my teeth with it until my teeth felt smooth to my tongue. I straightened myself back up and stood back away from the bathroom sink and the bathroom mirror. I tried to straighten my clothes out some more, but they didn't seem to fit right anymore either. My clothes and everything else seemed bigger than me. I tucked my shirt farther down into my pants and tightened my belt a notch. I took a long breath in and tried to fill my clothes out with myself. I was going to need all of me for this morning.

an excerpt from BARTLEBY, THE SPORTSCASTER by Ted Pelton ( Subito, 2010 )

I picked up the paper and passed the time until the broadcast. I'd handle it once we got in. But by game time he had me so flustered with his other-worldly lack of expression and emotion that, after 50 years in this business, I made a rookie mistake. No sooner had I started to say, "Joining me in the booth today as our color man . . . ," than I realized I didn't know Bartleby's last name, or if Bartleby was his last name, his first. All I knew him by was Bartleby. "He's the one who's been pounding out the new numbers you fans have been hearing from me and he's also designed our new team website, Arcturions.com. Head over there, fans, and tell 'em Ray sent ya." I was covering for time trying to recall some mention of a second name for him. Nothing, my head was blank. "The new site has lots of great new features and let me tell you, friends, if you haven't seen it for a while you're in for a very pleasant surprise." A lot of these new guys, they only go by one name. Like Ichiro, for Seattle. Set a new hit record and all anyone knew him by was the one name, Ichiro. But then we all knew that his full name was Ichiro Suzuki, or Suzuki Ichiro, as it would be if he were still in Japan. "Yes, and he's going to add a whole new level of excitement to our game calls, that's sure as shootin'." But the rap singers today, they often go by one name usually and put it with some letters, they're all MC This and 2-Shaq That. Could I just give him some letters to make him sound hip? What did I know about hip? "So let me hand the mike over to my partner in the booth for Arcturion baseball." I paused, not quite sure what would come out of my mouth next. Gary Carter, the Hall of Fame catcher, always said he didn't have a theory of hitting, except that he hit best when he forgot all the theories. Just do it, the commercial says. "Here he is - D.J. Bartleby."

By the time I had gone through all of this I thought for all the world the next words I'd hear would be, "Thanks, Ray. What a wonderful evening for a ballgame . . ." But Bartleby didn't say a word.

“Trouble with your mike, eh, Bartleby?” I said, on air, chuckling nervously. “I mean, D. J.?”

Nothing.

You can’t stall forever in leading up to a ballgame. The Arcturions were in the field and I had yet to set the defense. Our pitcher was into his final warm-up tosses. Now we had dead air. So if what I did next seems extreme, keep all this in mind.

I screwed up my throat into the most unnatural position I could, a higher-pitched but still masculine-sounding false voice, far removed from my own deep gravely one, closed my eyes and let out, “Thanks, Ray. What a wonderful evening for a ballgame.”

Now, I’m far from the most famous man in the history of baseball broadcasting. Only once in my life, as a fill-in, did I ever call a major league game, and that was during a player strike, when replacement players came in and a lot of the regular broadcasters took the opportunity to claim sick leave. But that evening in New Bedford, in a game hardly a soul heard, and two nights later as well, I did something that no other sportscaster in my knowledge ever has. I partnered with myself. “Redburn got a 3-1 fastball, D.J., and he drilled it into the corner, scoring the Long Doctor, who’d reached on a leadoff walk,” I’d say in my normal voice. Then, in falsetto, I’d reply, “As Eddie Stanky used to say, ‘Oh, those bases on balls!’”

“And that’s going to be all for Pierre tonight.”

“He didn’t have his best stuff. ‘Lucy, we can’t get married yet.’”

“Lucy?” I replied to myself, laughing. Where had that come from? Somehow, in adopting this strange voice and having no time to prepare what I was saying, just going for broke, things were coming out of me that I had no idea were inside me to begin with. “Who’s Lucy?”

“All the pitchers have girlfriends named Lucy, Ray,” my own strange voice answered, deadpan. “It’s a Union rule.”

“And then of course there’s Lucy and Desi. Charlie Brown and Lucy.”

“Yup, and Wordsworth’s Lucy poems.”

“What if she should be dead!” I laughed. “Yes, and Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds.”

“Isn’t the original woman, the origin of all mitochondrial DNA, posited to have been born in Africa some three to four million years ago, called Lucy?”

“If she isn’t, she should be. But wherever she is, Lucy is crying now, because Pierre got roughed up tonight, allowing five runs in only two innings and a third, and responsible still for the runner on base, Redburn.”

Back and forth like that, with no one the wiser. Truth was, I had always kind of wanted a partner, or thought about having one, and had done dialogues in my mind a million times without realizing it. Now I just let go. Don’t get me wrong – I was terrified the entire time! But terror became a kind of edgy excitement, and soon I felt like I was like I was in a place and mood that was comfortable and easy – and brilliant! I was having the time of my life!

Bartleby, the only witness to this strangeness, kept feeding me numbers, his face betraying no emotion.

an excerpt from FURTHER ADVENTURES IN THE RESTLESS UNIVERSE by Dawn Raffel ( Dzanc Books, 2010 )

## Our Heaven

(appeared previously in Mississippi Review)

"A fluke, an infection—in the lungs," our mother said.

"God," our mother said to us, standing by the telephone, confirming arrangements.

Roses in the garden, a finger in the dial. You could call out a window just as well. Where we lived were starter houses, latticed and treated, each house alike in dimension and plot.

The child who had died used to follow us home, a little brother we could already scarcely remember—neighbor's boy.

This was the way that we learned about heaven.

A woman in her sweater used to shiver on a porch. She was out in the evening, a house away from ours. Her boys were who-knew-where—in the bushes, perhaps, where we were known to play war. Or in the street, kicking cans, and, on occasion, each other, and us, too. They had soundalike names.

Germs, she saw. "Bacteria," she said to us. Duck, duck, goose and doctor with those downy boys of hers. Show and don't tell. Scraped, we knocked. She would give us a bandage for anything cut.

She had lost the children's father. "Marrow," said our mother.

We would lie on our backs and watch the birds race south. Maple and elm leaves: bags full, we saved—till we threw them away.

The gunner on the corner took to aiming her rifle.

"Dinnertime," our mother said. Her watch was in the shop again. "Crazy," she said.

And as for the shuddering mother, who had once been a nurse, "She wouldn't be so cold," our mother said, "if she would eat. Now eat."

\*

My mother wants to tell me where the car is being serviced. "If something should occur," my mother says. She says it's at the Crystal-something and I ought to pay attention.

The telephone is beeping.

Someone has a mass, she says.

"The key to the house—"

Call-waiting turns out to be my long-distance carrier making an offer.

When I click back, my mother isn't there.

\*

Up to the tower was 420- something steps, one of which was broken.

We could see us from there—our house, almost, or think we could, or someone's house, or fake it. We could squint there as if we could see ourselves playing, whacking a ball or skipping rope, unparticular children. Sometimes we could barely even tell ourselves apart.

Chicago was not visible.

The lake was an ocean—to us, it was.

\*

"Guess where we're going?" our father said. "Cessna," he said. "A Piper Cub." He had been in the air corps during the war, of which we did not speak. A master of circuitry, he'd wanted to fly. The uniform hung in a bag in the cellar.

"Tell us," we said.

They had bitten him bloody, the insects had.

He had rigged what was airborne, readied it for discharge.

On display, the tea set from Japan—red cups.

A job in Chicago had fallen through. It was a problem of faith, our mother said. A trained engineer, he'd flipped a room of furniture (the family business, an issue of fallback) for hours of flight.

There was a medal on the premises.

Stuck in the plane, our faculties roiled. The royal us, sisters, doubled up in back. We vomited—takeoff. The whole world tilted, in a slant, through a windshield, beautiful—and down at last, reeking of puke.

Our mother was waiting on the ground for us.

\*

We were taught to spray the telephone for reasons of hygiene.

\*

Our grandparents drove up the block, and the world came to look. That car a boat, our mother said, after so many lifetimes of never enough.

Down on the corner, the gunner fired shots.

The bachelor uncle—our grandfather's brother—was in from Chicago. He sat in the back. Most of them had died by then, the siblings they'd had. TB and such. The complications of a bris, in one mortal instance. We did not observe. The uncle was rich from betting on something. He spoke about people we had never met—the kid who had crashed in the air, in France.

My sister and I piled in for the ride.

The brother of the child who had died had been haunting the bushes.

Horses and futures, bellies of pork. He lived alone, the uncle.

Into his nineties, our grandpa continued to drive that car. He would enter people's driveways, thinking they were streets to someplace else.

\*

"Run past the corner as fast as you can!" The gunner was out, or so we had been told, and did not abide children. Dared, we gawked: the soundalike boys—whose mother occasionally raised her hooded head, the boy who'd lost his brother, the girl who in a few more years would be killed by a bomb that was meant for someone else.

The neighbor girls said, "Shut your eyes."

We peeped, of course. We scouted containers from in back of the drugstore. Redeemed illegally: a coin in the palm.

Our dad was working overtime. The miracle was Herculon, the fabric indestructible, and also—save your investment!—Scotch Gard; spray it and no stain was ever absorbed. The family store was decked out and festive: Orchids for ladies on Mother's Day, a dozen to a box, plus pins. We helped to hand them out. At Christmastime a glittered tree, not home, but here, as a business decision. Ashes in glass, the angel on the door.

They poured water on our heads so we wouldn't go to hell.

It was sweet as a stolen candy in our mouths.

\*

When our father died, there was no one who knew where the car was parked.

The day the boys' mother, colder than ever, rang our bell to complain—Tim, Tom—we were listening in. It was true, what she said.

We were not to play doctor again, our mother said.

\*

Our father offered everyone who pulled up the dandelions a penny a pop. Our lawn sprouted children, some we did not know. Scattered by the fistful. Kicking up daisies. Our father in the doorway stood there and laughed.

The roses were in bloom.

He had his wallet in his hand, and the intent to make good.

The elm trees had their limbs sawed off.

A shot was heard.

Heads, stems: Everything uprooted on the lawn began to turn.

\*

My mother cannot climb so well, a problem with a tendon. She also, I can hear it on the phone, has a cough.

"Do you remember those boys who ran away?" she says. Our fellow transgressors. Stealers of things that were already empty. "Listen," she says. "They came back home. But maybe that was years ago." There is something she is taking to reduce the inflammation. "Didn't I tell you?" my mother says. "I want to say they're living somewhere else."

\*

We would fly on the lake—the brotherless boy often giving us chase—stunned with the pleasure and brought to our knees.

"Smell the flowers," said our mother.

He pummeled us, gently.

Our father would take us off to the air shows. See the pilots' figure-eights! Full-steam ahead, they had military know-how. Hop on a wing!

Our fingers were stained.

Precision was the issue.

When we wiped them down again, our skate blades gleamed.

\*

Our father would sometimes speak of the bris, a handed-down tale from before he was born, the infant too fragile. Not a slip of the knife, but a cold in the room, contagious. The boy, our father said, had no resistance in him.

"Religion," he said.

\*

There was a name in the sidewalk, written in cement.

\*

Our father one Sunday drove to Chicago.

The bachelor uncle had saved too much. Papers and papers: currency, insurance. News, old news. The records of the cousins who were killed back in Poland. "Mass grave," our father said, and never spoke of this again.

Down in the cellar, the bagged clothes stank. No one had touched them. "Except," our father said, "they were buried alive." Were they breathing in the earth? We went down to sniff.

Nights we had nightmares.

The uncle was interred, of course.

I have no idea where the papers have gone.

\*

My sister and I like to drive past the house whenever we're in town, which is rarely together. The elm trees have vanished.

The rifle on the corner, which should, by all rules of convention, have fired to a logical dramatic effect, to the best of our knowledge never did.

There is no one who knows us—what did we expect?

\*

My mother is telling me what's left, to be divided when she's gone. "Certificates," my mother says. "The medal, your father's—"

Someone is trying to break in on the call.

"Prayer book," my mother says. "You know that he kept it? The watch set with stones—are you with me?" she says. "Listen," she says, "with a little repair, it could still tell time."