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Casual Myths

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CASUAL MYTHS

by

David Grandouiller

A Collection of Creative Writing Submitted to the Faculty of the Department of English,
Literature, and Modern Languages at Cedarville University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Creative Writing Minor

Cedarville, Ohio

2017

Approved by

Introduction

Something I've learned about writing over the last few years is that miniatures are often the most effective way to discuss something too big to wrap my mind around. In a similar way, discussing creative nonfiction may be an effective way of discussing all my work as a student-writer, partly because I've done most of my best work in creative nonfiction, and because nonfiction informs the way I write in other genres.

I discovered creative nonfiction my sophomore year of college, in a creative writing intro course, and it felt fresh, energizing: "like finding the magical breeding ground of all literature," I wrote in my notes, before deciding that was more than the truth. Magic aside, I'm grateful for the space cleared in nonfiction by writers such as Joan Didion, John D'Agata, Lauren Slater, Mary McCarthy, Brian Doyle, (among others) in form and in fact. I'd like to inhabit that space, to write the truth in collage, assemblage, blueprints, metaphor, to add my voice to the rich conversation surrounding the definition of literary truth, of nonfiction.

As my professor is fond of saying, creative nonfiction has often been kicked around by the literary community. Why, except that it's a young genre (comparatively, I suppose), difficult to tie down? Its critics have brought accusations of navel-gazing, of playing games with the facts and calling it truth, which are not entirely unfounded. The genre does sometimes stand at the brink of these crags, frowning and crossing its arms and kicking rocks over the edge, but for (I believe) good reasons. It's digging for the overlooked truths of human existence that will not be picture framed, will never be frescoes in gilded basilicas, but maybe should be. Maybe the most important, the most telling moments are not those that circle us in fanfare and the clanging of

soup pots but the ones that pass us in the night, that stand underneath our second story window at three AM while we are unconscious and then walk with their hands in their pockets down the driveway and across the street. There are enough now that we should have noticed them. Still, they keep out of sight and mind, form little packs in the shadows of our memory. Sometimes I catch a glimpse. A shredded notecard in the pocket of my overcoat. The purple pacifier I swept up in a fast food parking lot. These form an unlikely pair, supine in a field of snow, making angels, or in a back alley, getting the last puffs out of discarded cigarette butts.

In the pieces you'll read here, I've tried to hunt the truth of those moments down, wandering, pajama-clad, in parking lots by the light of the moon. They know I'm onto them, but there are too many for them to hide. Once, I lay, wrapped in a cotton blanket, across the wide backseat of a Buick while my dad delivered Charlotte Observers by night. Why haven't I written about that, yet? Just like that, they dash across my sightline, sticking to the shadows. They know I'm onto them.

Of the pieces in the collection, "Revisited" is the longest. It explores a sense of fragmented identity I felt in returning, for a brief visit, to West Africa, where I lived from age zero to eight. I had the distinct feeling, while on the trip, that I was supposed to belong there, but didn't. The piece also examines the ways in which my relationship with my brother rubs shoulders with the fragmented identity. While I felt unhomed, my brother was reintegrated into a past that still, if time is the measurement, represents more than half of his life. This experience was unique, because it put my brother and I in much closer contact than we've had in a long time. During the trip, we were together almost constantly, sometimes with my dad and sometimes without him, often sleeping in the same bed. The piece was constructed from notes I

took during the trip, as well as family memories, and a few lines excerpted from a nonfiction short I wrote two years ago in *Intro to Creative Writing*.

“Bodies of the Catacombs” recounts an experience that ranks among my strangest. I wrote it for that reason and because it felt representative of the residence hall where I lived my freshman year (my only year) at Covenant College—the Catacombs. The hall had a rich history of semi-religious ikons and rituals, among other artistic objects and practices. Their sign was the Chi-Rho. It tended to attract a lot of non-normative characters: misfits, rock-stars, delinquents, philosophers, writers, actors. There was even a painter on the hall when I was there—Caleb Stoltzfus, whose work I reference in “Prophets and Saints.” I wanted to try to capture the strangeness and ritualism of Doris’ burial, and through the event, the strangeness and ritualism of the hall itself. I wanted to show that none of us really knew what we were doing, despite good intentions.

The other three shorts in the collection are part of a series in progress, called *New Hagiographies*. The intent of the series is to defamiliarize people (and events) in history, particularly those connected with religion, and to divest them of the abstract narratives for which their lives were appropriated, returning their humanity and flawed physicality. The goal, beyond just subverting the objectification of these characters, is to prompt readers to shed dehumanizing abstractions in favor of complex and physical reality. I’ve tried to achieve that by applying a “modern technical narrative” (in Brie Stoltzfus’ words) to history, as well as using (what I hope is) surprising and incarnational imagery. I am especially indebted to John Milton, T. S. Eliot, and Caleb Stoltzfus for these concepts and for my technique in executing them. Their works, *Paradise Lost*, “The Journey of the Magi,” and *Prophets*, respectively, informed my own. I certainly don’t claim to have replicated their success—my attempt is experimental, at best.

The first piece in the series, “Origins,” is divided into two sections: “Eden: Mornings and Evenings 1-7,” which retells the Biblical days of creation recorded in Genesis 1 and 2, and “A Selected History of Snakes, in no particular order,” a list of snake-related facts and allusions meant to hint at the temptation and fall of humanity recorded in Genesis 3.

The second piece, “Prophets and Saints: Notes Toward a New Hagiography,” draws attention to a collection of figures, usually in some of the more tragic moments of their lives. By mixing individuals across historical eras with different levels of cultural significance, I’ve tried to emphasize the equal importance of the lives of everyone. By focusing on their sufferings (which are sometimes overlooked), I want to reverse the kind of anonymity the poet, Auden, observes in Pieter Bruegel’s painting, when he says of the drowning Icarus, “[his] was not an important failure.”

The third piece in the series, “Jesus of Nazareth: History of a Sacred Body,” applies the same method of defamiliarization to Jesus Christ, perhaps the most abstracted and appropriated figure in history. In doing so, I hope to expose the self-serving narratives we’ve imposed on Jesus, and isolate him as much as possible (or help the reader to), as a body, a real and complex individual.

The single piece of fiction in the collection, “From the Memoirs...,” tells the story of a group of young, overeducated men and their interactions with one another. It’s a kind of fable, meant to show that ideas have consequences and that abstract ideals can be physically destructive.

The seven poems included in the collection are mostly imagist in design, depictions of brief, physical moments or impressions. Two of the poems are fairly distinct from the others: “Kohler’s Pig,” which is an ekphrastic poem on Michael Sowa’s paintings of animals, and

“Family History of a Voice,” which ponders the relation of my parents and my upbringing to the shaping of my identity.

Themes that could be traced through all this work are a concern with physicality and with identity. Particularly in “Bodies” and in the post-hagiographic or neo-hagiographic pieces, physicality is a means of getting closer to real identity by isolating individuals from the ideological forces that impose constructed identities on them. “Revisited” is also concerned with identity, with the way West Africa does or does not play into mine. Though the piece has less to do with physicality than the others, I still try to place my reader in scene, as a rule. All my pieces try to follow a kind of imagist aesthetic. I hope these ideas and my execution of them will stimulate the reader, will provoke thought and action and pleasure.

Foreword

My theology goes something like Montaigne's phrase, the way Phillip Lopate turns it: "What do *I* know?" Or else, it's found in Picard's silence— "everlasting Being" (17). Reality is too complex for propositional truth. Which is bad for those who want certainty (everyone wants certainty), but good for those who like literature. No one articulates sublime truth, but they can show it. It's no accident that scripture consists mostly of story.

I'm writing this on a Thursday at the end of another fall semester's finals week, trying to figure out how to get all my books and notes and drafts out of my library carrel. And which ones to keep. Which books are even mine, and which belong to the library or to friends or parents. This end-of-year stock-taking is analogous to writing and to faith. My drafts and my convictions always need housekeeping. There's never an end to the sharpening, the sifting. And there shouldn't be. The devil is a desire to rationalize a permanent home for myself. If "God is a God of beginnings," as Jacques Ellul writes, his people must be "mobile, fluid, renascent, bubbling, creative, inventive, adventurous, and imaginative."

Under the fluidity, maybe these remain: truth, love, and incarnation. And the greatest is incarnation, because it's the closest I think I get to the other two. I've seen it worked out in Paul Harding's *Tinkers*, when he says to the reader from a vantage point in another galaxy, "which among those millions of glittering facets is where you belong? Where is it you toil and drum and fall to the ground and thrash in the weeds?" Or in Thomas Merton's contemplative wisdom, "The whole idea of compassion is based on a keen awareness of the interdependence of all these living

beings,” or in Lia Purpura’s “Autopsy Report,” the love she offers in exposing violent truths, in bringing beauty even out of tragedy: the “chests of drowned men, bound with ropes and diesel-slicked...have I thought of the body as a sanctuary?” I want to love in the same way.

Truth is in the specificity, the complexity of incarnation. It gets us out of the traps of abstract idealism. Instead of writing about Christianity, I can write about Christ—at his birth: “the stump of his umbilical cord shakes when he cries”; at his baptism: “His long hair is matted tight against the back of his neck by John's left hand, some trailing out between the fingers, loose in the current.” Incarnation is true in that sense. It gets closest to the thing itself. But truth, paradoxically, sometimes means getting the impression rather than the fact. As Lauren Slater writes, “What matters in knowing and telling...is not the historical truth, which fades as our neurons decay and stutter, but the narrative truth, which is delightfully bendable” (219).

Love is in the physicality of incarnation, which also gets us out of traps of abstract idealism. Instead of writing that God “so loved the world,” which has already been said, I can write about Christ’s body. He washes all twenty-four of his disciples’ feet, cupping each in his palm. He sweats blood in Gethsemane under centuries-old olive trees. He weeps at Lazarus’ tomb, dripping saltwater that lands “in his sandal dust like asteroid impacts, mud craters on his tarsal ridge. Wet, finger-sized, mass graves.” Love: a weeping God-man.

Ultimately, writing is a gift of truth and love: to God, to the reader, to the form itself, to the self. Writers who are willing to give wildly and unconditionally are not wasting their time.

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REVISITED

And what, after all, attaches us to the land where one is born and raised?
- César Carrillo Díaz

It's night, and the baggage claim is busy with five hundred passengers from our Airbus 380. There's a human ring three bodies deep around Carousel 1. I taste Ivoirian air for the first time in twenty years outside the international airport in Abidjan. The street clamors, too, when we step out, and my first breath of Africa is hot, sweet, like aloco, which I can smell—or imagine I can—frying, clumps of over-ripe plantains in oil, the fumes drifting on winds coming in from the sea front. Then a long taxi ride on faux leather seats, yellow upholstery foam escaping from widening rips in the cracking leather, warm air blowing in the open window, someone yelling and someone laughing and someone playing loud radio music and someone beating a stray dog by the side of the road.

The city is familiar and unfamiliar. My brother, Thomas, and I haven't seen Africa since 2003. He was 18 and I was 7, in the dry heat of Niamey, Niger. But our absence from Côte D'Ivoire is longer. I came into Africa in '95—out of my mother's salt sea, her womb, by the salt sea, the eastern shores of the Atlantic. I began in Côte D'Ivoire, in Abidjan, in Cocody, before the civil wars. My brother was ten-and-a-half.

These two weeks in Africa are the most time I've spent consecutively with my brother in almost as long as we've been away—the consequence of a Grandouiller diaspora, three states between us. It's been better in the last few years. With grandkids growing, everyone makes more of an effort. I remember writing:

When my nephew was the size of a bag of groceries, I carried him up from the garage and around the common room of the two-bedroom apartment, looking out a second-story window at Minnesota across the Red River. Now he walks and talks, climbs onto the window sill by himself. Before I know it, he will be riding his first bike, writing his first essay, driving his first car, and I will only hear it from a distance. I wonder if this is ever how my brother feels when he looks at me.

Fears of disconnection draw us together. They mean visits in the middle of the year, not just on holidays. Group Skypes on Sunday evenings. Still, sometimes it feels like we're increasingly different with each interaction. Knowing that I read, my brother recommends a biography of George Washington. He reads lots of biographies.

On this trip, he's reading a biography of Lawrence of Arabia. I'm reading *Brideshead Revisited*, by Evelyn Waugh, who writes, "Sometimes, I feel the past and the future pressing so hard on either side that there's no room for the present at all." But these two weeks are outside of time, and we're making space to discover one another. We're sleeping in the same bed.

Cocody is one of Abidjan's northern districts—a wealthy, residential section of the city, popular with expatriates, known for its colonial architecture. We stay in a circle of high-rise apartment buildings, hidden from the highway behind a screen of palm trees. There's white, embroidered iron across all the windows. We arrive in the evening, and as the night-guard helps us unload the taxi, Thomas tells me how—in the weeks before I was born—he and our sisters knit long threads that touched the ground from the top of the tenement, how they played around the lawn with a boy from the other building and waited for our parents to bring me home from the hospital. Down the street, cafes and bars with outdoor patios host the local night-life, and a

woman fries plantains and sausage in a half-globe pan, in oil, while we sit waiting under the mangroves, in plastic chairs on the back steps of a bank building. A UN Land Cruiser is parked on the corner, as if to emphasize our foreignness. Thomas points it out to me, and I remember that he probably learned to drive on a Land Cruiser. I discover an inexplicable jealousy, the vague awareness of a missed opportunity.

In the morning, there are African crows in the yard of our tenement, white aprons across their chests and around their necks. They hop and strut (they own the place), boring their favorite spots for earth worms. For breakfast, we buy beignets at a street-side shack—food for three on less than a buck—and hail a taxi across town to the hospital: Polyclinique Internationale Sainte Anne-Marie (PISAM), floor two, where I began my conversation with the world, face red, fisted hands gesticulating. I stare into the nursery, as if into the past, and there I am, asleep in a bassinet while a steady stream of visitors from other wards flows in and out—the white baby a spectacle. Some of the staff seem genuinely interested to learn that I was born here. “Ah, vraiment?!” One woman intones behind a glass booth by the elevators. She points the way. I like to imagine I'm opening doors, but they probably let anyone through.

When my family was here in '95, they visited the Cathédrale Saint Paul. Today, we revisit. The stations of the cross are painted on the wall following the steps up from the street. We stop at the crest of the hill, under the shadow of an hundred-foot-tall, concrete crucifix, leaning toward the lagoon half-a-mile away. I read an engraving in the courtyard about civilians that took refuge here during the worst of the civil war violence—truly a sanctuary. I was safer during those years, nine hundred miles of buffer across Ghana and Burkina, before I put the Atlantic between us.

Inside the cross, steps lead up to the apex. In '95, Thomas made the climb. Today, there's a makeshift barrier made of scrap metal in the entryway. It's no longer structurally sound, maybe, no longer safe to go up. Under the cross is a “flamboyant,” a Poinciana, its tight clusters of orange and white flowers ruffle in the breeze like Ivoirian flags. Under the tree, a young man—maybe my age—fingers prayer beads, faces out toward the city. Praying for his own birthplace in ways only he can because he *knows* it—knowledge for which most other languages have a separate word. In French, for example, propositional knowledge (*savoir*) is distinguished from experiential knowledge (*connaitre*).

* * *

“Il faut connaitre ou on est née¹” says Atahir, a familiar and unfamiliar face in the familiar and unfamiliar spaces of Niger's capital city. The comment is directed at me, during a conversation between him and my brother. They exchange news about their wives, their kids. They reminisce about how much the mission compound's changed, point to the ruins of a house where my brother and sisters used to carry me around in a laundry basket.

I observe and listen. I remember Atahir being taller, more muscular, when I was six, maybe seven. When he worked the day-shift as our house guard, he and I would kick a deflated basketball around the sandy expanses of what we called our street. I would fire lengths of straw from a bow of branch and twine he made me. Atahir from Timbuktu—he was almost a legend to me. Now, I return to find that he's only a human being. What surprises me most is his height—5'9", no more. And I learn that he spent some time working in Libya while we were gone, that he

¹ “One should know one's birthplace”

came back in 2009 before the Arab Spring. People still exist when you're not looking at them, when you're not thinking of them.

“Il faut connaitre²,” Atahir says. I know and don't know this place. Our old “street” is now a two-lane highway, median and all and a curb that comes almost up to the front gate. I didn't even recognize it until my dad pointed it out. Yeah, now I see it. The beige stucco walls. The white, iron gate, embroidered with decorative shapes resembling salad tongs. From the window of our Land Cruiser, I can just see the thatched awning over our front door that friends built one week when we were traveling. In my mind, now, I'm walking in. The door is glass, but reinforced with black, iron grating. The gray concrete floor is cold and I can see into the kitchen, into the cupboard under the sink where there were always cockroaches and my brother is killing them (like he trained me to do, from a young age) with a flip-flop, one of the cheap ones with the rubber wishbone stuck through a foam sole and I'm four years old in the next room, my bedroom, tripping over a cardboard suit of armor into the bookcase, waking up with three stitches and I'm overhearing my mom worry that my brother will get drafted into the French military but that's not going to happen because I'm setting up milk cartons by the front door and I practice throwing sticks at them from fifteen feet across the room and no one's going to take Thomas while I'm in this house.

But I'm outside in the backseat of a Japanese SUV, and it's 2016. An Acacia I never knew presides over it all, standing outside the property and poking its leafy arms into the yard. I could climb it, maybe, and see the strip of garden ground where I planted cotton seeds that never grew, the corner where I dug for gold and found a sewage pipe instead. Maybe the walls, inside, are

² “One should know.”

still caked with mudballs I threw after they had baked in the sun. But we drive on, back into the hybrid of memory and discovery that is Niamey.

A West-African, Temajek proverb goes, “Ǝgər-tat-in dǝffər-ək a tat-takkamme dat-ək” — “what you throw behind you, you will pick up in front of you.” Like many proverbs, it means different things for different people. My dad explains to me that, linguistically, it deals with “l'inaccompli,” the not-yet-accomplished, an action which has begun but has yet to conclude.

The source of the Niger River is near Africa's west coast, by the Guinea-Sierra Leone border. It runs northeast, through the lower half of Mali, cuts down across the cinched neck of southwestern Niger, through the capital, follows the border with Benin, then south into Nigeria, comes out in the Gulf of Guinea. We cross it in the old Land Cruiser we used to own when we lived here, in Niamey. I remember pretending to sleep across the black, leather backseats when I was six or seven, letting my dad carry me in. I ask my dad, in English, about the new overpass by the bridge. When did that happen? Thomas turns to tease me: “Don't you know Papa doesn't speak English?” It's half-joke-half-rebuke. He knows I'm being lazy, falling back on my dominant tongue. He knows it's to the detriment of my French. I laugh, or just blow air, and translate the question, but look away—at a small herd of goats by the shoreline, at flood marks high on the bank. I wonder what I've thrown, what I'll pick up. I'm so afraid that I have already lost Africa, that I left too early for it to shape me in any way that's meaningful. My heritage is slipping, and I'm afraid that my dad will speak English to my children, as he already does so often, too often, to me.

Soon we arrive at Sahel Academy, where Thomas graduated high school. He comes to be reunited with a past life. I come to discover one, not quite for the first time—a life I lived and

didn't live. It's been thirteen years, and the gate's moved thirty yards. The wall changes color where they filled in the old entrance, patched up like new skin on a burn wound. After we get in, we meet a girl who graduated with my brother, then several of his high school teachers in quick succession. Thomas brings them all up to speed. Some have been more in touch than others. He fills in the gaps: he spent six years studying aviation and business management, has flipped burgers and manned desks, has flown airplanes—for the state, the mail, the Mayo Clinic. Married Jen, a northern girl, a photographer. Balanced the books of his wife's photography business. Fathered two sons. Taught them French.

No one can believe how much I've grown in thirteen years.

LE PETIT LIERNE

There's a farm in South-East France, under the shadow of the Western Alps, somewhere between Switzerland and the sea. My father's father—Papi—lives there still, tends a small vegetable garden inside the tall hedge fence that forms a half-circle around the glass-enclosed patio of the old house. He lives alone except for his dog, Rex, who is probably as old as I am, and almost entirely blind. Last summer my nephew got to meet him, pat his scruffy black head, try to feed him rose petals. He's probably forgotten Rex already. Memory is hard to maintain.

So many of my memories from the summers I spent there are only snapshots—spitting seeds from the branches of a cherry tree behind the farm shed, waking up to the chiming of the grandfather clock in the hallway and going down to breakfast in my bare feet on the marble stairs. Hot chocolate in a bowl. My uncles smoking in the yard. My grandmother, skinny like she never was, hoarse and quiet, lying in a side room looking up at all her American grandchildren.

It's different going back now that she's gone. There's no bustle in the kitchen, no reminder to put on a coat as you're walking out the front door, just Papi and his sweater vest and his soup and his garden and his Rex and his chocolate treat for the grandkids and he won't take no for an answer.

GRAND FORKS, SUMMER 2014

If my nephew, Matias, were to ask, “Who are you?” with his big and curious eyes, then avoid mine and cling to his father's knee, I would remember—or imagine that I remember—how I clung to the same knee when I was small enough to ride on the spines of my brother's feet as he walked: my brother, who moved away when I was seven to go to college on the opposite end of the country. Not six months ago, when my nephew was the size of a bag of groceries, I carried him up from the garage and around the common room of the two-bedroom apartment, looking out a second-story window at Minnesota across the Red River. Now he walks and talks, climbs onto the window sill by himself. Before I know it, he will be riding his first bike, writing his first essay, driving his first car, and I will only hear it from a distance. I wonder if this is sometimes how my brother feels when he looks at me.

BODIES OF THE CATACOMBS

Today, I'm eighteen again, sixteen hundred feet above a "See Rock City" sign on a barn roof, see my subterranean saints, see the Catacombs: an annular corridor of dorm rooms, half-in, half-out of a hill bank at the bottom of Belz Tower, which is the north wing of Covenant College's Founders Hall, on the slopes of a mountain shadowing seven states—on a good day: Kentucky, Virginia, Tennessee, South Carolina, North Carolina, Georgia, Alabama—straddling two time zones.

Today, I fold laundry and think about bed-sheet-toga-covered bodies, packed tight like silt soil in that tomb of a dance hall, the catacommons.

Today, I research articulated skeleton retail. I find "Painted and Numbered Budget Big Tim Skeleton." Price tag: \$50. Stand and keycard included.

Today, I contact friends I haven't seen in over two years: *I'm writing a piece of creative nonfiction about that time we buried the skeleton that was on our hall. What do you remember from that?*

C: That it could still be found, and that it was... not strictly kosher... from a government standpoint, that we ever had it in the first place. There are rules for disposal of such materials.

* * *

Bodies and rituals. Bodies and signs. That's what the 'Combs are made of. Within the first few weeks of the semester, we gathered in the woods, carrying all the hall relics, which included a toilet bowl called "The Ark," filled with "The Hall Documents." In the outer darkness, we heard the calling and whooping of hall alumni, circling in through the trees, naked and carrying torches—bodies and signs. One of them arrived in a rowboat, one knee forward like a nude George Washington on the Delaware.

The place lent itself to mythology: a cluster of stories and sacred objects. She was one—an articulated medical skeleton, female, genuine. *S: I remember that we had that skeleton for the whole year until that point. Someone stole her, possibly from a trash in the back utility lot of a Chattanooga hospital. Or not. Who knows? S: I think we somehow got her from the art department.*

G: For years, it had been sitting around the hall, and various parts of it had fallen off. When we buried it, I think it was just a backbone and a neck. S: (Really it was just the torso)

A 2007 article in WIRED Magazine suggests that thousands of bodies, every year, in India and elsewhere, are de-fleshed, their bones shipped to medical institutions worldwide without the permission of the deceased or their family. Many of these skeletons are stolen from graves. Maybe one of them found its way to a small college dorm in the southeastern United States. *G: We shouldn't have had it to begin with.*

* * *

G: a body is sacred, and needs to be buried.

We had our share of sacred bodies on the hall. We had Rob Jackson, that black-turtlenecked Casanova, staring with the passion of a revolutionary from his gilded frame, who invented rock&roll and coined the phrase “I love you.” Someone had found his portrait in the dumpster. Years ago.

We had Peter Pan on a stick—fraying on a tapestry in his classic knee-bent, rapier-drawn, fairy-dust flying pose. We had twenty-one lost boys. Twenty-one bodies under the hill.

* * *

M: Wow. I haven't thought about Doris in a long time.

Doris' bones were scattered across the sagging sofas of a dorm commons. She was not man or woman, person, or even body. Image without spirit. We named her, like we named the black ceramic panther—the one with a cavity in its left hip. Our ikon. Our relic. We wheeled her around on the steel rod that held her upright, dressed and decorated her, tossed and kicked and broke her until dust began to gather as she disintegrated and we understood that she was not a mock-up. At least that's how I remember it.

C: I wanted to be respectful, and I felt that (while I think we did the best we could—for the 'combs...) that sentiment was not universal.

“The remains of certain dead are surrounded with special care and veneration,” says Cignitti.

Aquinas affirms, “Natural that people should treasure what is associated with the dead, much like the personal effects of a relative.”

C: We literally had been crushing it to fragments in the elevator room.

C: Someone put a rib in my bookbag, something about human powder in my bag made me very uncomfortable.

* * *

M: I just remember feeling conflicted because it was kind of a jovial affair, but also really somber and everyone was trying to be serious.

It might have been March when we buried the remains of a woman we'd never met. *S: I think it was cold outside but I don't remember for sure.* It can be brisk in early March, in northern Georgia—highs around 60, lows around 40, at altitudes where the fog seeps in. The coroner determined—that is, one of us, a boy of nineteen or twenty, under the tutelage of Wikipedia and other pertinent resources, determined—the skeleton was female. That she may have been between thirty or forty years of age (at the time of death). That she had borne no children. She might have been real. She might have been Indian. She might have been young. She might have been a doctor or a swimmer or a prophet or an award-winning novelist, if she'd had the chance.

M: And then C had researched who she might have been, and said that she was likely a female convict.

G: They said they wanted to do it as a way of setting things right, because "we've been treating it like it's some kind of toy,"

S: We all followed C and T down into the woods near Jackson pond where they had already dug a small hole for the bones. G: So we get out there and they started digging

C: mob mentality casts an influential forcefield. No one meant any harm, but I still think about it...we really shouldn't have had it, but there was no easy "right" way to be rid of it.

S: I remember we all took turns filling in the hole and then we all walked back to the hall.

We put her in the soil, under the hickory branches of northwest Georgia. Our ossuary. Seven of us? Eight? Standing quiet. Low eyes. Half-circle in the fractured sunlight. Someone gathered her in a blanket. Someone lowered her into the ground. Someone read statistics. About the Indian bone trade, about American women's prisons of the 1930s. Read scripture. I don't remember if we prayed for her bones. Maybe they were and maybe they were not dug up the next week by a wandering fox. Maybe her body is planted and she begins to take part in that great community of atoms called the earth, forgotten by all except a handful of dorm boys trying to love an anonymous woman. How long will we remember her?

G: It was one of the few legitimately good things Catacombs did.

M: And I'm still not positive I believe it was an actual skeleton.

ORIGINS OF THE WORLD IN TRICHROME

Eden: Mornings and Evenings 1-7

1. Before the world existed, language was. Is. Verb birthing light: be. God wastes no time feeling the void for a switch. Photons oscillate on his tongue.
“There is light in every single inch of the universe,” says Richard Rohr. “Even in what appears to be darkness.” The cosmic microwave background radiation.
2. God hangs the drapes—curtain rods wedged in place from waters to waters, racked like bar bells on angels’ shoulders. Polyester sky over tent poles.
3. God lays the land, beachy tack strips and all. A few hundred billion square feet of lumpy loam shag in peaks, valleys, plains. He populates it with leafy shrubs, with Baobab trees, coral cactus, scutch grass, fescues, and bamboo. Venus flytraps. Crabapples.
4. God invents chemistry in his groundbreaking work with the stars. It takes him three minutes, according to MIT, to assemble hydrogen and helium atoms. Then he presses them together so hard they catch fire. Fusion.
5. God makes eggs. Or egrets. Whichever came first. And Moby Dick.

6. God makes legs. I mean the fleshy ones, with sinewed, stringy ACLs. And they walk along the land, beachy tack strips and all. And at the end, God makes a man and a woman out of the dust and his own inspiration, his breath, his spirit.

It's quiet when Adam gets up on the seventh day. The garden's thick with the breath of a resting God, and the sun comes cutting over the curved world like a fog light—Adam's first sunrise.

Eve's too. She rises before him and wanders under the peach trees. She kneads her toes in the mud at Eden's lake. She lets herself fall into the shallows, face supine. Parting the waters.

The pair of them is composed of dust but also of each other, an intermingling of the sixth day's first atoms, a molecular language spelling consciousness and will. Consciousness and will spelling more language. Names and names and names:

Green and golden bell frog, raspberry crazy ant, chicken turtle, tasseled wobbegong, starnosed mole, straight-tusked elephant, leafy seadragon, mustached puffbird, screaming hairy armadillo, aye-aye, naked mole rat, irrawaddy, gerenuk, dugong, babirusa, sunda colugo, platypus, snake.

A Selected History of Snakes, in no particular order

The world hatched from a snake egg, Ophion's scaly tuber coiled around it. Snakes may have evolved from burrowing lizards, such as the varanids (or a similar group) during the Cretaceous Period.³ There are no snakes in Ireland (blame St. Patrick). "The serpent subtlest beast of all the field" – John Milton. Snakes can still bite after decapitation. Naturalist Paul Rosolie was voluntarily swallowed by an anaconda in 2014—the only human being ever to survive a similar fate (as far as you and I know). "The serpent if it wants to become the dragon must eat itself" – Francis Bacon (whatever that means). The serpent made Chanakya's⁴ list of seven creatures that ought not be awakened from sleep. "Vote for five snakes in one pantsuit, vote for President Snakes" – The Doubleclicks ("President Snakes"). When snakes shed their skins, they also shed spectacles from their eyes, which turn a semi-opaque aquamarine. At this time, snakes are said to be "in the blue." Isaiah's word for the angelic beings, Seraph, refers to a "burning one" or a serpent. "What father among you, if your son asks for a fish, will give him a snake instead" – Jesus. "Those who give you a serpent when you ask for a fish may have nothing but serpents to give" – Khalil Gibran.

³ "Snake," Wikipedia

⁴ Indian philosopher of the 3rd and 4th century BC

PROPHETS AND SAINTS: NOTES TOWARD A NEW HAGIOGRAPHY

There is no mud-dousing or bleach-soaking in **Caleb Stoltzfus**' series, "Prophets," no victims and culprits. Only human beings doing human beingy things. His wife, **Brie Stoltzfus**, writes, "In narrating these stories with a modernized technical narrative, this series argues for their relevance today and seeks to engage a twenty-first century audience." I hope to do the same.

Excerpt from the diary of **Ham, third son of Noah**: *Daddy's drunk in the yard, again. Forty days in the bottle, and it's a habit. We left the ark rotting on Ararat, but you can still see it across the valley, and Dad sips and stares from the hillside, before passing out naked under the vines. The soil is rich with organic matter. His grapes grow fat and dark.*

We don't think often of **Moses the writer**, who sat and thought about the Hebrew oral poems he'd recited to himself in Midian, about the Egyptian stories he'd read in Malqata. He's entering that conversation when he writes, בְּרֵאשִׁית, *In the beginning*. Can you hear the nostalgia in those words?

Isaiah walks naked for three years, a vulnerable figure, a cut of muscled flesh stumbling his way across the plains of the river Jordan. One-hundred-eighty pounds of brutal obedience, a symbol of the coming judgement.

“I’d rather die than be forgiven,” says **Jonah**. “I’d rather die than forgive.” He practically throws himself overboard. I’ve never been under the surface of seawater in a storm, but I imagine it’s a terror, a dark, swirling blender, a rushing hell.

Icarus would know better than I do, kicking his white legs in **Bruegel**’s bay, hot wax burning sores on his arms, his back. There’s no whale there to swallow Icarus, to spit him back up. As Auden writes ironically, his is “not an important failure.”

In the ninth century, **Sābūr ibn Sahl** wrote **القرباني** a 22-volume work on antidotes. Later, **Genghis Khan** burned Iranian libraries.

Hours before he was executed by guillotine, **Maximilien “The Incorruptible” Robespierre** shot himself in the head, missing his brain, shattering his jaw. His brother, **Augustin Robespierre**, jumped out of a third-story window from the Hôtel de Ville, breaking both legs. The brothers were beheaded, along with fourteen of Maximilien's followers, on July 28th, 1794, buried in a common grave in the Errancis Cemetery, moved to the Paris catacombs in 1848. Robespierre's last words were, “Thank you, sir,” to **the doctor** who bandaged his jaw.

Princess Élisabeth of France, sister to the king, **Louis XVI**. Buried in a common grave in the Errancis Cemetery on May 10, 1794. Moved to the Paris catacombs in 1848. Last words: “In the name of your mother, sir, cover me,” to **the executioner**, when the shawl fell from her

shoulders on the guillotine board. Also: “From the depths, I have cried out to you, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplication.”

It's illegal to be homeless in Dayton, Ohio. Squad cars follow **Trish and Micale** around daily. They follow Trish's brother, **Bradley**, who just spent seventeen days in jail. Bradley's girlfriend, **Renee**. Waiting for a chance to nail them for anything—jaywalking, loitering, trespassing on private property. However minimal the offense, it usually means jail time for the male offenders. Micale spent a night in jail for trespassing at the McDonald's between Jefferson and Main, where he and Trish had been banned for loitering. He missed work, lost his job.

Because they are haunting and I have read them too recently, I enlist **Denise Miller**'s words here: *for **Tamir Rice** (A Black Male, camouflage hat, grey jacket, and black / sleeves at or near the swing set waving a gun and / pointing at people), born brown & biologied into body...then bulletted. And **the officers who shot him**: we were trained to tap-tap / a hole as round as an open mouth— / trained to watch as nickel-tipped teeth tear through a torso of grown flesh / to leave an openness all clean-edged / —and gaping*

Kurt Cobain played with his two-year-old daughter for the last time in drug rehab at the Exodus Recovery Center, shot himself a week later. He left her thirty-seven percent of his estate and a distaste for grunge rock. He left us the phrase “I’ve been drawn into your magnet tar pit trap...forever in debt to your priceless advice,” echoed in **Tasha Golden**, “The gift is, after all, none / but the terror that was taught me: / an Excess swallowing / the Byss and the Abyss,”

echoed in **Ezra Koenig**, “I took your counsel and came to ruin. Leave me to myself,” echoed in **Sufjan Stevens**, “There’s no shade in the shadow of the cross.”

JESUS OF NAZARETH: HISTORY OF A SACRED BODY IN THIRTY-SIX FRESCOES

In the Convent of San Marco, Florenceⁱ, are Gabriel and his technicolor wings, angel and Mary both with arms crossed, like they're cradling a football. The football is Jesus. He's a single cell now, shaking fallopian dust off his sandals, dividing and dividing again, a trinity within a trinity.

The Baptist is doing high dives in his mother's uterus. Good form. Very little splash. Hear the sound it makes: *Blessed.*⁵ *Blessed.*⁶ *Blessed.*⁷

Forty degrees tonight in the city of David. Three miles out, nineteen-year-old shepherds wrap thin cloaks closer, fold on fold, making artificial layers, cross their arms to consolidate blood-flow, chew tea leaves to keep eyelids open and heads clear.

Mary and Joseph never made it to the stable. They got lost in Bruegel's painting, "The Census at Bethlehem."⁸ But if they had, maybe the place is warm, "(you might say) satisfactory,"ⁱⁱ heat rising from the animals' bodies with an earthy scent. You know the one. Something to do with manure, but it's a clean, hardy smell. The baby, when he comes, has no light emanating directly from him, as some would have you believe. The stump of his umbilical cord shakes when he cries.

⁵ Are you among women.

⁶ Is the child you will bear.

⁷ Is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her.

⁸ So many faces. So much frantic activity. No one knows them. They hardly know themselves. You have to understand: Mary, especially, is used to being more celebrated. Think of van der Goes. Of Duccio.

What a two-year-old can do with gold, no one knows. It's the thought that counts. But the latter two gifts, Frankincense and Myrrh, are aromatic resins. Mary will rub them on Jesus' stomach for digestion, his chest to help circulation, to keep his skin healthy, his lungs clear. Other aromatic resins: balsam, benzoin, sandalwood, spikenard, patchouli.

Anna and Simeon have waited a very long time for this. Their faces are bulldog faces. Their necks are tortoise necks. Their hands are of elephant hide, a leathery grip on the child's swaddling cloths in the temple courtyard. Which smells like goat urine. Like the blood of doves and pigeons.

Christ among the doctors: Jewish religious tutoring revolves around a dialogue of questions. Such as, "Son, why have you treated us like this?" To which the student may respond, "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my father's house?" *Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.*ⁱⁱⁱ

In this one, Jesus is held perpetually underwater in the hands of the Baptist, his cousin. This is the particular moment when water rushes backwards up his nose, burning his nostrils, trickling into the sinuses. His long hair is matted tight against the back of his neck by John's left hand, some trailing out between the fingers, loose in the current. John prays. His breath—if you could smell it—smells of wild honey and rotting teeth.

After two weeks, the symptoms associated with extreme hunger—dizziness, exhaustion, the inability to stand up—often begin to take their toll in earnest.^{iv}

This thiamine deficiency is also the cause of problems after four or five weeks without food, which can include vertigo, uncontrollable eye movements, and double vision.^v

Man does not live by bread alone, Jesus says. Now there are two scaly Lucifers in the desert wilderness. Three. Five. A dizzy, eye-twitching pentagram. Now a vertiginous view from the temple parapet. The composite, rising scent of benzoin, pigeon blood, goat urine doesn't help. Now the thought of a long fall. Headfirst. Swan dive into the Place of Slaughtering.

Consider, for a moment, a thirty-gallon stone jar, like the ones at the wedding of Cana. Thirty gallons is four cubic feet—capacity: two-hundred-and-fifty pounds of water. Add the weight of a stone jar of that size, and you'll soon see the Renaissance master-painters clearly underestimated these jars. Maerten de Vos and David, even Tintoretto.

Jesus and a Samaritan woman cross bows at Jacob's Well, at Shechem in the West Bank—where Abraham “built an altar to the Lord,”^{vi} where Joshua erected a memorial stone.^{vii} He's talking about *water*. She's talking about water.

Jesus requires so little. And so much. Light burden. Easy yoke. Go your way. Stretch out your hand. Your son lives. Your hand is new. Your faith has made you well. But I can't help thinking of Judas looking for the tallest tree, pocket full of silver, despair setting like cement in his stomach—bursting and spilling. “When He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd;”^{viii}

“dipping the piece of bread, he gave it to Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot...And it was night.”^{ix}

“He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.”^x “Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”^{xi} In your reading.

Jesus sits on a mountainside to teach. Blessed, he says, are the poor, the mourners, the meek, the hungry, thirsty, the merciful, the pure and the peacemakers, and those persecuted for my sake. They will have what they need, and that’s enough. So, love your enemies. Offer them your other cheek, your tunic and cloak, your time and labor. Love everyone. Give everything.

Jesus sleeps on a cushion. It presses into his face, leaving red lines on his cheek and brow when he rises to quiet the squall.

Jesus heals a demon-possessed man—his name is legion (“For we are many”^{xii})—and sends his demons into a herd of two thousand pigs. Picture these pigs stampeding into the Lake (or Sea) of Galilee. Two thousand pigs. Five hundred pounds apiece. One million pounds of hog flesh splashing and sinking, wet mass suicide muddying the shallows. One man sheds his demons, many lose their food supply. The Lord takes and the Lord takes.

Jesus feeds at least five thousand hungry mouths. That’s probably a lowball estimate.

Jesus walks on the Sea of Galilee. A sea of dead swine.

“When he took the three disciples to the mountainside to pray, / his countenance was modified, his clothing was aflame.”^{xiii} Jesus stands, burning hot and bright in the nuclear fusion of time and the timeless, “between the hither and the farther shore,”^{xiv} between Moses and Elijah above, with the voice of God in a cloud, and Peter below, gathering materials, ready to hammer together three mountain shacks.

Jesus tells a story to answer the question, “Who is my neighbor?” Later, the Roman Catholics will look for the inn featured in the story, and not finding it, build one.

Our Father, who is in Heaven, don’t be. Stick around. Your name is holy, but so are your fingernails—chipped, bloody, black. What I mean is that we need your kingdom and will on earth, all compost and raw skin, as in Heaven. We need those not to be different places. We need bread—the kind that offers itself open-crumbed in fat slices, but also the kind that offers itself chap-lipped on bare brows and cheek bones, the kind that offers itself wet-eyed, hard-knuckled, red-faced. We need our debts paid in sanguine currency. We need our feet dusty from following. We’re all yours.⁹

Blind man, what did you feel in the moment of healing, with your eyes lathered in divine mud (is all mud divine?). There’s the shape of Jesus, the Nazarene, squatting in the dusty street, the heels of his sandals coming slightly off the ground as he leans forward, rubbing his fingers in this elemental paste—dust, heat, spit. When it touched your clouded eyes, what did you feel? Only

⁹ Amen.

the cool grit of wet earth? Did you try to blink it away, like it was a speck of sawdust or a fruit fly?

Jesus is still crying. Saltwater dripping into the corners of his mouth tastes like humanity, like incarnation, before it lands in his sandal dust like asteroid impacts, mud craters on his tarsal ridge. Wet, finger-sized, mass graves. Lazarus, come out.

Zacchaeus leaves his sandals at the base of the sycamore-fig tree, better to grip the bark, footing sure on the thick, sprawling roots. He crouches along the end of a far-reaching limb to watch for dust rising on the slopes of craggy Jericho, over the heads of the crowd.

Jerusalem looks like a war zone. The residential blocks are abandoned. A stray mutt explores the empty street, a new spring in his step. He sniffs at an open door, glances around, walks carefully inside. Every branch on every palm in the city: stripped. There's a new kind of palm forest at the eastern gate, fronds waving in the wind of what might be political change. There's a revolution coming. Hosanna? Hosanna. In the highest pitches possible, the crowd makes themselves heard. The collective sound is a thick whistle, somewhere in the 200 hertz range. Everyone's shedding their cloaks for a makeshift red carpet, under the hooves of a donkey that the Lord had need of.

They're selling God all over the temple grounds. Jesus is ready to clean house. He's in a corner of the courtyard, coiling a tea towel into a rat-tail. He's in a corner of the courtyard, tying cord strands together. He's taking off his belt. He's fetching the wooden paddle.

Before it's broken, Jesus is breaking his body. Before his bloodshed, Jesus is pouring it out. Remember this, he says to the twelve. Remember me. To seal their memories, he leads them in a Jewish hymn, maybe the Eliyahu HaNavi, and they carry two swords to ensure his arrest.

The water is black silt—already at least ten or twelve of the twenty-four feet have touched the bottom, the rough, baked skin of a ceramic basin. Jesus cups each in one palm. One at a time, he scrubs them. Hard. Scouring layers of Galilean grime like an ancient archaeologist, discovering, underneath, something both old and new—leathery calluses and tender, pink flesh.

Like most sane individuals, Jesus doesn't want to die. He's sweating blood. Hematohidrosis.^{xv} His heart rate is high. Really high. He needs a Benzedine test. He needs an atropine transdermal patch. He needs friends who don't fall asleep when he asks them to watch and pray.

Judas “Kiss-and-tell” Iscariot is with the Roman patrol. “Sure, I'll show you where the Jews are hidden,” he says, simultaneously founding an archetype. See Benedict Arnold. See Phillipe Pétain.

Peter is thinking, “An ear for an eye.” He's already forgotten what Jesus said about outer garments, about other cheeks, about second miles.

“What is truth?” (Pilate asks a fair question. All knowledge is part of a cosmic silence, said Max Picard. “Even the results of inquiry and research pointed rather to the silence behind than to the thing itself.”^{xvi} But “It is a sign of the love of God that a mystery is always separated from man

by a layer of silence. And that is a reminder that man should also keep a silence in which to approach the mystery.”^{xvii}) I am the mystery, says Jesus. I am the truth.

“Ghezzi’s . . . countrymen and not mine invented . . . our religion. A quartet of them, soldiers of the ninetyseventh infantry regiment, sat at the foot of the cross and tossed up dice for the overcoat of the crucified.”^{xviii}

Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus the Pharisee come to take Jesus’ body down. Rembrandt paints this moment twice, and beautifully—the body pale as a plucked pheasant, folding limply, held on one side by an outstretched arm and under the thighs on the other. As they wrap him in spiced linen, Nicodemus is remembering, maybe, what Jesus told him one night in Jerusalem: “Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up.”^{xix}

The tomb is empty when the Maries arrive, except for an angel who says, as angels always do, “Don’t be afraid.”

Homily’s “The Resurrection” gets (maybe even unintentionally) so much of the joy of that event. Jesus is leaping. *I am the dance* he says, with a Medieval sombrero-halo thrown back on his head.

The Israeli novelist, Yoram Kaniuk, calls cemeteries “grave gardens”—or that’s how Barbara Harshav translates it. Mary Magdelene, too, evidently, and mistakes Jesus for the gardener. Isn’t it fitting, though, how Adam-like he is in that moment? Grave gardener.

Jesus is sucked up into the sky. “Peace I leave with you.”^{xx} “Fare forward.”^{xxi}

FROM THE MEMOIRS OF GREGORY P. FRIESEN: FALL 2015

I heard the kettle whistling before I came in. When I did, Donahue (Donny) didn't look up. He was sitting alone, taking an X-Acto knife to Webster's Unabridged, the kettle still whistling, the lights off except for a lamp in the corner, its transparent base filled halfway with kerosene the color of cherry kool-aid.

I walked through to the kitchen, which adjoined the living room. “‘I was going to get that,’ said Donny, reportedly,” I called to him from the stove.

“I was.” The reply came about thirty seconds late, followed by the long stroke of the box cutter on old paper.

“Where are you? No. Let me guess. Predilection.”

“Close. Orthography.”

“How appropriate. Where's Matt?” I was back, leaning on the wall that only half-separated the rooms, creating a U-shape. “Also, what kind of tea do you want?”

“He had an audition. I think only the orange one is left.”

“Is that the summer touring company he talked about?”

“No. Some local writer's debut. A friend of a friend of Matt's. It just came up last night.”

“There's Earl Grey, too. What's the role? Do you know?”

“I don't. I'll stick with the orange one. Thanks.”

“You got it.” I walked back into the kitchen. “Did you hear Peter was in the hospital? St. Agnes. I went to see him.” I came back again, with the tea. “I went to see him. They told me he

had checked out, so I went over to his place, which was open. I don't know why he never locks it. And I waited. For six hours.”

“What did you do there for six hours?”

“He has Netflix. Did you know all the Firefly episodes are on there? I watched like five of them. Anyway, so he comes home, finally. Donny, his face is meat. I mean, literally—bruised, swollen, cut, dried blood. It's pretty horrific. So of course I'm like, 'Peter, what the hell happened?' Then he says, and I quote, 'I am the canvas.' And then he tried to laugh and his lip split, so there's fresh blood running down his chin and dripping on his collar.”

“So what happened to him?” Donny was still mostly absorbed in his “work,” chewing on the box cutter, like the back end of a ball pen.

“I don't know. I'm gonna go back tomorrow and try to squeeze it out of him.” I sat down on the adjacent couch, which probably had once been a clean, creamy beige color, long before Matthew (Matt) Day had carted it back to the apartment from a dumpster downtown. It smelled vaguely of onions and cigarette smoke.

* * *

When I went back to Peter's house, the door was unlocked, as usual. The house wasn't his, of course. Everything was too manicured, like you might imagine a dentist's house to be. The hardwood floors in the entryway, the marble countertops, the bamboo palm by the staircase—they were lent to him by a relative who had wanted a change of scenery. The television was his, surprisingly, and the kitschy *Live. Love. Laugh.* wall decoration in the hallway, but he'd left them upstairs and made a home in the unfinished basement. The concrete floors and exposed fiberglass insulation made it ideal as a studio. He didn't have to worry about ruining anything.

I found him on the first floor, cross-legged on the kitchen island with a bowl of cereal and a cigarette. His face was duller, but still grotesque. A bloody mess. His nose: fractured. He was starting to hide the damage by letting his beard grow, but his face still pulsed like a big, hairy artery. A cut above one eyebrow bled the glue that joined his eyelashes. They poked from the clot like sloppy stitches.

“How'd you do it?” I was referring to his face, but I gestured to my own.

“Guess.”

“...Car wreck.”

“That's plausible. We'll try it. Go on. How did it happen?”

“You were texting and driving...”

“Ah, we're hitting a snag in the story here. I don't own a cellphone.”

“That's right. Ok. You were doing your make-up.”

“That's interesting. Am I a drag queen?”

“An actor.”

“Ooh. Matt's gonna get territorial.”

“Perfect. Now we've got conflict.”

“Alright. So I'm hiding my acting career from Matt. What do I tell *him* about my face?”

“You were mugged.”

“Yeah, the streets are dangerous these days for two-hundred-pound men.”

“You crashed your bicycle?”

“I like it. Close enough to the car wreck theory, still far enough from the truth. Enough about my face; come on.” Setting the bowl aside, he hopped down and led me out of the kitchen, down the hall to a door that opened into the garage. Two aluminum bats were leaning against the

wall by the door, and he handed one back to me. “I’ve been meaning to get rid of my TV, and then I read about Rauschenberg’s ‘Erased De Kooning’ and I fell in love with the idea that destruction can be a form of creation.” He led me back down the hallway, stopping to straighten a picture frame that was tilting to one side. “So I said to myself, ‘Ah, Peter. Don’t sell your TV. What a waste! Smash it to pieces.’ So I was going to do that today. And then you came over, which is great. Now we can do it together. It’ll be like a communal act of destructive art.”

“You know, I was watching this TV just two days ago.”

“Ooh, the plot thickens. So here I am pressuring you to murder a friend. Or better yet, if we consider the television to be a manifestation of the self, then we’re killing a part of you so that you can be reborn from the... hard plastic and cracked circuit boards. It’s like baptism.”

I’ll always have that image in my mind—of Peter holding the bat over his head as he grinned at me across his own armpit. There was nothing sinister about it, then. He was maniacally playful, and that was all. The barrel came down hard with the force of both arms, splitting the black casing. His next swing was a golf putt at the screen, all thirty-seven inches, with a barefooted hop and skip across the carpet to gain momentum. Then I joined in, and every contact of the metal with the machine, sending shock waves into my wrists, felt more cathartic than the last. We were the Boondock Saints of the HD world, judgement for technology’s role at Deltona.

* * *

I was working part-time at my aunt’s used bookstore, for which I was grateful. No one was lending me four-bedroom houses. But Matt was working 40 hours behind a register at Lowe’s. I didn’t envy him. My employment was really more like charity than anything. I would sit in the back of the shop, pretending to organize a shelf into sections: *Communist Russia and*

Histories of Eastern Europe or Religious Nonfiction: Siddhartha. The whole room exuded the glorious, musty smell of yellowing pages.

Peter would come visit me, I suspect mostly for the smell. He never bought anything. Sometimes we would compete at trying to find the book that most deserved to be burned: usually Christian fiction set on the American frontier or particularly tasteless romance novels (the books he called “bodice rippers”). We would hide our selections behind other books or on top of the bookcases, out of reach.

“I visited a church,” Peter confessed to me one afternoon, leafing through a volume of Bertrand Russell.

“Did you really? Today? What church?”

“Yesterday. That Presbyterian place on Jefferson...? I wanted to get in the belfry...for the view, to paint. They didn't have the key, at the time, but they were having some sort of mid-week service, and I stayed.”

“Why? ...Sorry, I mean, what was it like?”

“Pretty much what you'd expect. They're going to give me a key to use the belfry.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

* * *

Thursday night tradition was for the four of us—Peter, Matt, Donny, and myself—to go driving in Matt's stick-shift Corolla. It was nine when we left Matt and Donny's apartment. Peter had his head out the window behind the driver's seat, Donny in the seat next to him reading Wendell Berry aloud.

“*“The use only of our bodies for work or love or pleasure...”*”

I rode shotgun, asked Matt about his audition.

“or even for combat, sets us free again in the wilderness, and we exult.”

“I got the role. It's an interesting script...,” Matt was telling me.

“But a man with a machine and inadequate culture...”

“...a two-man show. A lot of monologues. I'll read it to you later.”

“...is a pestilence. He shakes more than he can hold.”

“Who is that?” Peter had reentered the car to hear a few lines of Donny's reading.

“Wendell Berry. What Are People For?”

“Greg and I had a Wendell Berry moment the other day,” Peter commented.

“Did you?” That was Donny, disinterested as usual.

“It was almost religious.”

“It wasn't religious. You say that about everything.” I tossed my comment without turning.

“Whatever. It was semi-spiritual. We were fully human, ‘free again in the wilderness.’”

“We smashed a flat-screen TV with baseball bats.” Matt and Donny laughed.

“Fuck you, Friesen. Don't act like you're over it. You looked like you had found god.”

“I didn't find god. I was god, for about ninety seconds. It was mildly therapeutic.”

“The grace that is the health of creatures can only be held in common,” Donny began.

“Alright, don't start another essay. We're here.” Matt had pulled into the gravel lot. We were thirty miles from the city. Ripening corn fields blocked our vision in three directions, but the full moon hung in a wide, cloudless sky. Matt left the car running and the headlights on so we could see. We all got out.

“Who's up first?” Matt liked things to be organized.

It was Peter and I. We stripped to the waist. There were bruises on his sides I hadn't seen before, and I remembered his other injury.

“Shit, Peter. I forgot about your face. How are you gonna fight?”

“Oh, come on. Just hit me.”

“You need to sit out this week, man.”

Matt had a solution. “Why don't you guys keep it to body shots.”

“He's got bruises all over his ribcage.”

“I'm fine.”

“He's fine, Greg. Just be careful. Seriously though, Pete, what'd you do to yourself?”

Peter shrugged. “Destruction is a medium for creativity. Sometimes I'm the canvas.”

“That's absolutely ridiculous. Are those self-inflicted?”

Peter ignored him and turned back to me.

“Hit me.”

“This is stupid. I'm not gonna fight someone who's already half dead.” I had barely gotten the words out when Peter's fist connected with my head and I went down. I felt the grit of fine gravel between my teeth, and then I smelled blood and tasted it, warm and thick in the back of my throat. I saw nothing, heard nothing, for a moment. Then it all started coming back: head pounding, tongue swelling, Matthew shouting profanity. He was in the corner of my vision, his arms wrapped around Peter like a straight jacket.

The ride back was quiet. Matthew was angrier than I was, cold and silent. He didn't like his world disordered. Peter slept with his window down. Donahue read to himself. When we pulled up to the apartment, Matt and Donny went inside. I paused to watch Peter unlock his bike.

“Peter, hey... no hard feelings, man.”

“Yeah.” He grinned at me. “My bad.” Then he was pedaling away with his arms stretched out to his sides, whistling Beethoven's fifth.

I entered the apartment to the music of the boiling kettle and Donahue pruning verbiage, a familiar duet. I caught Matthew red-mouthed, drinking from the kerosene lamp.

“Don't move. I swear I'm gonna get it in two seconds,” Donny struck preemptively. I was still fixated on Matt.

“What are you doing?”

“It's kool-aid.”

“Unbelievable.” I walked to the kitchen.

“If I don't hide it, everyone drinks my stash.”

“Greg, I said I was gonna get it.” Donny feigned irritation.

“You want the orange one, right?”

“Yeah.”

Matt joined me in the kitchen to finish his kool-aid.

“You know Donny was burning that lamp the other night?”

“Oh yeah? It was still kerosene, then. I switched it out this morning....Do you think Pete went home?”

“I watched him leave.”

“No, I mean, do you think that's where he was going, when he left?”

“I don't know. I hope so. But I wouldn't bet on it.”

“Hey, check out my screen.” Matt's phone was catching the reflection of Donny's Springsteen poster around the corner. Somehow, the light was bending around the U-shaped room, carrying a warped image of the object we couldn't see directly. Soon his mind was back on Peter. “Everything he does is like some wildly twisted version of a normal person's life. He's a fun-house mirror. How long have we been doing Thursday Night Fights? It's just like him to turn it into his personal masochist ritual.”

“Nice object lesson. Did you prepare that?”

“He spiked the kool-aid,” Donny laughed.

“Shut up... I've just been thinking a lot about reflections. There's this short monologue in the script. I'll read it to you.” Matt grabbed a binder from the coffee table and flipped through the pages until he found the scene he was looking for. “Here it is... ok... quiet down Donny.” He laughed—it was unclear at what—and cleared his voice. “The bus ride home was inevitable. But it was unexpected. Not like a moth to the flame. Not like the completion of a circle. More like reflections on the bus window. I looked out, ready to see the highway shoulder and my own face in it, my hair line dissolving into the tall grass, roadside. But I didn't. Either because of the warp of the glass as it interacted with the rearview mirror or because of the angle of the light, or both, I saw only the bus driver. I saw only his face, and it was set. He knew where he was going, where we were all going. ”

* * *

And then it was a Sunday, and Peter was burning little sores in his wrist with the lit tip of his cigarette. Matthew kept looking over at him from reading the script.

“Why don't you smoke that?”

“Alright.”

“Outside.”

“Alright.” In the course of one Thursday night, Peter had become an outside dog. Now you could find him sitting, some evenings, at the top of the stairs by the apartment, smoking his Marlboros, the butts scattered around the first floor sidewalk or the patchy, bald lawn, or wherever the wind would blow when he dropped one between the stair steps. Donny sometimes would go down and finish them, one by one, dragging the last puffs.

“You can have a whole one...” Peter would say. But Donny was “trying to quit.”

So it was Sunday, and Peter went outside on command. I came into the living room and Matt looked at me and said, “What?”

I said nothing.

“I don't want him smoking in the apartment.”

I wanted to say, “I smoke in the apartment.” But I didn't. It wasn't the smoking that bothered him, anyway.

“Wanna read for me?” He handed the script over. “You're Man #1, I'm Man #2. You can start...there.”

“Do you think it's our fault?” I read.

“What?”

“It's my line. 'Do you think it's our fault?'”

“Oh right...”

“And then you say, 'It's no one's —’”

“Yeah, I got it. I got it. 'It's no one's fault.’”

Donny came out of his room. “I'm gonna get some air,” he closed the door behind him.

“You should talk to him,” I said, interrupting the reading.

“...Is that the line?”

“No...I'm saying you --”

“Oh, I should talk to Donny, you mean.

“No...talk to Donny about what?”

“The smoking...he said he was going to quit.”

“No, I meant you should clear the air with Peter.”

“I did clear the air. I told him to smoke outside.” An absurd little smirk appeared on Matt's face.

“Quit playing stupid, man. You know what I mean.”

* * *

Migrant clouds found a seemingly permanent home in our skies. The wind started blowing and didn't stop. Donny started smoking in earnest. Matt didn't talk to Peter. Peter stopped coming around the apartment. He sold his car. He wouldn't leave the house for days on end. Sometimes, if I wasn't working, I would go and spend the day with him, sit in his basement studio while he shaped a new sculpture, his hands wet with the clay. He liked to talk: about Gertrude Stein, E.E. Cummings, John Cage, about the mother he'd left in Colorado, about the time he tried to plant a garden, about a dive bar on the east side, the fist fights and police raids, the stories he'd heard and the ones he'd lived. “People are so different,” he'd say. “When we all act the same, it's only because we've been taught to act that way. But outside of all the systems...there's almost no commonality. It's fabulous.”

When he wasn't talking, I'd walk to the back of the studio and lie on the floor, lay my arms flat to feel the cool concrete on my skin. There were brown, tinted windows at the top of the wall, and the house was so close to the street that I could see passing, disembodied shoes of

all kinds, colored sepia and blending, in a strange combination of movements, with Peter's hands and the pale taupe of the clay face, which almost disappeared in the window's shades of brown.

What a world, I thought. A whole other world, and we're missing it.

“Hey, did you ever go back to that church on Jefferson?”

“Yeah, I've been using the tower.”

* * *

A Thursday night, I was at Peter's, and he had lost motivation for any kind of exertion, so we played two-handed Euchre on the hardwood floor of his entryway. We were in our third game when the door opened and Matt walked in—Donahue behind him—almost stepping in our laps before he saw us. He looked wild. The wind had blown his thick hair into tangled curls. It had watered his eyes; they were wide and red. He grabbed Peter by the shirt and stood him up, then hit him hard across the face. Peter bent, but didn't fall. When he straightened, he came at Matt with two quick shots to his side before Matt threw him off. The fight lasted about two minutes, and when it was over, both of them leaned against the wall, holding each other up. Matt patted Peter's shoulder. Peter leaned over and kissed Matt's forehead, leaving some of his own blood there. And that was the end of it.

* * *

The four of us spent a lot more time together after that night, going to art shows and poetry readings and dressing up and dressing down and getting into fights and getting drunk (and sometimes all at once), and we would spend hours in the apartment just talking. Matthew would tell some story, “There's this lady who works at the post office on Main... Worst. Employee. Ever. You'd think it would kill her to sell you a stamp. I get her death glare every time I ask a question she thinks I should know the answer to—which, as far as I can tell, is any question.”

And Peter would invent some scheme, “You should do a psychological experiment where you go there every week and ask her the same question as if she didn't give you the answer last week.”

“You'd be publishing my research posthumously if I did that, and you'd only have about three weeks of data... actually, the sad thing is that's pretty much how it goes.”

“I can see why she hates you.” That was Donny, who never seemed to put more than ten or fifteen words together unless he was reading aloud.

Sometimes the conversation would turn to art, and we would mock all of our idols: “Yeah the Walden idea is great, except that Thoreau spent half that time drinking Emerson's beer and playing video games in Emerson's basement, or whatever the nineteenth century equivalent was.”

“Kind of like Rousseau presuming to be an authority on education after he abandoned all his children to the orphanage.” It was almost tongue-in-cheek, but we really felt like giants on the shoulders of giants. We were always on the verge of toppling.

“We need a pet,” Matt said one day, to the ceiling. He was lying on the couch—the dumpster treasure, the smoke and onions couch—whispering his lines from memory.

For a while, there was no answer, and then I said, “Like a cat?”

“Cats are too mainstream. And too independent.”

“A turtle,” Donny offered. “We could have a really conspicuous turtle.”

“Why conspicuous?” I never found out why conspicuous, but we bought a turtle (and he was conspicuous)—an ancient-looking creature, wrinkles and all, who had a Chi Rho carved into his shell and took half an hour to move anywhere—and named him Henry James.

* * *

Winter struck early and hard. A foot of snow in one October night and a twenty degree drop in temperature. The blow was so unexpected I forgot to wear my coat for three days after the weather changed. Kids down the street from Peter's were out of school, building mini snowmen in the yard, and if they hadn't been children I would have resented them for it. The season should be defied, not celebrated. Man in winter is a picture of Sisyphus.

Peter and I would go to the apartment together to feed Henry (Matt was like one of those kids who wants a pet, but doesn't want to take care of it; Donny was almost a non-entity. The question, really, is why Henry was at the apartment at all, and not at Peter's). So it was a weekday and I found myself at the apartment with Peter (Donny and Matt were both working), ripping up lettuce leaves for old Hank, piling them on one side of his box. Peter disappeared into the kitchen.

“What's the word, Henry? You get up to any mischief yesterday?” Henry was a silent eater, and like the wise, old creature he was, he always waited for me to ask the right questions.

“What secrets are you keeping from us, Henry? What have you heard?” Henry was unmoved. I leaned close to his box and whispered confidentially, “What do you think Peter's doing in the kitchen?” Henry stopped eating and looked at me knowingly. A cabinet slammed, hard, and I walked into the kitchen, where Peter was reeling from the counter, a shallow gash on his forehead.

“What are you doing?” I asked, and when Peter only smiled at me, I decided I didn't want to pursue the conversation any further.

* * *

Matt's play was an ill-attended event, in the middle of the day, a Saturday, in November. I'm not sure the crowd would have been larger in the evening. But parts of it were worth seeing. In the middle of the show, Peter leaned over, whispering, "Greg, wanna get coffee after?"

"More like reflections on the bus window."

"Yeah. The little place on Fifth?"

"...my own face in it, my hair line dissolving..."

"Yeah. I have to run home, but I'll meet you there."

"...and it was set."

"Sounds good."

"He knew where he was going, where we were all going."

Peter left at curtain call, and Donny, too, back to the apartment he said, but we both knew he was going to the alley outside to smoke without being watched. I was left to wait for Matthew to emerge from a back hallway, and while I waited, I surveyed the city out of the floor-to-ceiling windows. The little auditorium was on the third floor, and my eyes were level with the spires of the Presbyterian church on Jefferson. They still used the bells on Sunday mornings. I wondered how much Peter hadn't told me about his visits. The street lay in that sleepy state of a weekend afternoon, in thick clouds and a cool breeze and the isolated sound of one pedestrian calling to another and a passing Greyhound and an ambulance siren, somewhere.

Matt was home, I found out from a text. He had left the building by another door, hadn't known that anyone was waiting. So I left the auditorium last, but still made it to the cafe first.

The rows of Italian sodas in glass bottles held the light in them, which they drew from the window facing the street with its gutters, covered in old snow like coffee dregs. But the light was pure and clear, filtered through an overcast sky and it crossed over the road and settled at the

bottom of a few green bottles of Torani soda. I knew that what Matthew had said was true—that reflections really do inhabit a world completely of their own, that they pay no mind to the responsibilities we give them of one to one representation. *Hark, a ghost* says the steel back of the espresso machine, and every curvature in the letters, SIMONELLI, haunts me with hints of a seventh or eighth dimension, with images at once strange and inevitable.

Peter didn't come.

* * *

Matthew found out before I did. And when he called to tell me, all I could think was, *Yes, of course. Of course.* Peter's last months had been one long, elaborate performance piece, and here it was: the finale, the scene to which all things led, to which they had always been leading, a long fall from the church tower, the crowning, concluding act of destruction, and Matthew's hollow voice on the other end of the phone, Donny's silence in the background. Of course.

* * *

Peter's door was unlocked, of course. Everything was the same. He had never moved the pieces of his television. They were scattered across the otherwise spotless living room, like children's toys.

“Peter!” I called to him without knowing why, as if he were just in the other room. Picking up a long shard of the TV screen, I watched my face in it, warped by wrinkles in the separating film. Melting. I tried to smooth the plastic film, and cut my hand on the jagged edge. And then blood, running down my finger into my palm and pooling there, languid. I tipped my hand and watched the blood change course, finding the lowest point, opposite my thumb, and dripping off. The sound it made hitting the aluminum bat seemed amplified in the silence of that house. Each drop rang like a church bell.

I took the bat into his studio. Face sculptures filled the room on display risers or half-finished on crafting tables. All of them red and scarred, all of them self-portraits, and at the back I found one grinning that psychopathic grin of Peter's, like a loose stitch in the fabric of his reality.

“People are so different.” I echoed his words. “What's wrong with you, man? Who are you?” I grabbed the face with both hands, threw it against the floor. It shattered, red glaze flying. I took up the bat and began smashing each sculpture systematically, one by one, row by row of them. Twenty versions of Peter, at least. When I finished, the studio was a graveyard. And I had no answers.

GONE GALLOPING

“Gone galloping,” I write in wet pen,
On wax paper, on the storm door.
Down the steps, down I go walking,
Half-skipping, sidewalk black with
Linden leaves, sticking thick
With dew and yesterday's rain.
The neighborhood strays
Head to bed, slabs under porch awnings
Or driveways sheltered by
The mangled, steel underbellies of automobiles.
Asphalt cracks in the bright sunlessness
Before the morning.

I have an appointment with Church Street, with
Trash collectors riding truckside, and the late tenant
Dragging gurgling bin wheels to the curb; with
The corner house, shadows in the folds
Of curtains on its double hung windows--
They move to the blowing of a box fan
In the frame; with the North alleyway
Where someone laid tar
So the gravel sticks.

SATURDAY MAKES SUN

Drip through, in strips,
Honeycomb blinds in a high window,
So I sit, half-on, half-off a plush
Shag throw rug, red, on a scuffed
Hardwood floor, and catch a strand
Of light, languid on my forehead, warm
Across my earlobe, vascular and translucent.

WE, SKY-DEEP IN

Wooded bluffs, Wisconsin
Scored by ancient glaciers
Or by divine thumbskin,
Calloused forefinger—scoop and
Pinch together loam-stone soil,
Hemlock leaves, evergreens. We,
Waist-deep in lake and
Black algae blooming slick,
Dark on Bullhead Catfish.

HOW TO EAT HALF AN AVOCADO

Bite your paring knife clean through the fruit's lizard skin. Put salt and olive oil in the pit crater, cradled in green flesh—tender now, ripe from where you've kept it on a sunny patch of kitchen counter, by the back screen door. Scoop with dessert spoon. Green meat gives like pistachio ice cream. Now, when the brown husk is empty, scraped clean—a turtle shell—fill the dish sink with water. Fold a strip of paper into a triangle. Tape it to a toothpick. Pierce the husk.

Homemade sailboat.

KOHLER'S PIG

Michael Sowa doesn't know what people look like.
He draws them with dorsal fins
In suburban shark waters.
He draws them with white down
On their long necks, with
Rostra, sharp, yellow,
Posing in pearls. He draws them,
Cloven hooves stretched to the sun,
Pink skin taut and lean muscled.
He draws them with brown, floppy ears,
Black noses, tight collars, low growls
In the theater, at a flower-mouthed phonograph.
They mat their fur with automatic paws.
They put another record on the gramophone.
Without the bias of humanoid bodies,
Sowa exposes our stoop to folly.

COLORADO

It seemed like when we crossed the border the terrain changed. Maybe I hadn't been paying attention. But suddenly there were low, brown hills, not rolling, but jagged, geometric. Irregular triangles jutting out to cast long, slim shadows as it got dark. Over the hills, on one side, scattered city lights under a gradient sky, strands of fiberglass condensation. On the other side, cumulonimbus sea, night. And the steady crackle of how many bugs on the windshield, I don't know. I thought it was rain at first. Then, a lightning storm—panning, hopping around the sky, whipping its half-light, in sections and moments, across.

Later, at eleven thousand feet, I stripped.

While you were watching Greenback Cutthroat Trout, I
Slipped, shivering, into Big Crystal Lake—while
Your bespeckled fish went flitting over the
Scattered multitudes of their own offspring, in
The rocks, and when the cold had numbed my body,
I felt I was a part of Colorado,
Disembodied marrow of the mountain's rib.

FAMILY HISTORY OF A VOICE

Mom's affirmative tones
On the telephone meet
The stretches which
Imply my father's voice. He is
A couple thousand miles away.

Somewhere in the meeting
Of the voices, in the Atlantic
Distance, I am. My voice
Made up of theirs,
That is, made up of central Illinois'
Rockford, Peoria, German Valley, names
Like Manby, Smith, McCarton,
Made up of Quakery, spirit-filled silences.
Made up, also, of southeast France,
Of Le Petit Lierne, froth
At the mouth of its brooks,
Snarling forest roots,
Low lavender in the shadow
Of the Swiss Alps. Made up, also,
Of clear-ringing calls to prayer:
A release, Sahara's exhale
In the dim evening dust –
Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar.
So I have sand and snow and starch
Swirling, aural (oral) seedlings.
And who knows when or how
They'll sound.

ⁱ The Annunciation, 1437-46, a fresco by Fra Angelico

ⁱⁱ T. S. Eliot, "Journey of the Magi," line 31

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 2:47 NIV

^{iv} Muscle atrophy can begin to grow serious at this point, and control over those muscles can be hampered by ataxia, a condition resulting in a jerky walking gait and loss of motor control. A slowed heartbeat, known as bradycardia, is also typical during this period. The sensation of thirst can be dulled, and many strikers report feeling cold constantly. This is also when thiamine deficiency sets in on many hunger strikers, further damaging muscles and often causing vomiting and difficulties with vision. - The Mary Sue, "What Happens to Your Body During a Hunger Strike"

^v *ibid*

^{vi} Genesis 12:7 ESV

^{vii} Joshua 24:26 ESV

^{viii} Matthew 9:36, NIV

^{ix} John 13:26,30 NIV

^x Isaiah 61:1 NIV

^{xi} Luke 4:21 NIV

^{xii} Mark 5:9 NIV

^{xiii} Sufjan Stevens, "The Transfiguration"

^{xiv} T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages," line 160

^{xv} Hematohidrosis is a condition in which capillary blood vessels that feed the sweat glands rupture, causing them to exude blood, occurring under conditions of extreme physical or emotional stress. - Wikipedia

^{xvi} Max Picard, *The World of Silence*, p. 75

^{xvii} *Ibid*, p. 227

^{xviii} James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, p. 249

^{xix} John 3:14 NIV

^{xx} John 14:27 NIV

^{xxi} T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages," line 170