

PREDELLA

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A., E., & L.

“We are funny creatures. We don’t see the stars as they are, so why do we love them?

They are not small gold objects but endless fire.”

—Saul Bellow, Henderson the Rain King

WONDERLAND

Chapter One

It was nighttime. Stepping off the plane onto the tarmac, Alice realized how much she had missed walking across the tarmac to the terminal, now that all the bigger airports had those extensible accordion gates. Inside exploded the air conditioner.

She rode the escalator to the baggage claim. They were jagged like skyscrapers. A bird flew in circles above, confused by the great glass dome through which could be seen the stars.

Chapter Two

He leaned against the brick wall. His geometric body.

Alice's laugh was like a shell. So was her body.

They crawled around each other. The moon peered through a crevice.

Look, she said, and pointed. Several small white wooden balls rolled along the dark river to where the trees rose and rose up into a dense illuminated forest. Gradually they unraveled into lines of thread.

Chapter Three

Early one morning he called. Let's go to the beach, he said. Alice gathered up her things and drove to the seashore.

She waited by the bungalows, and she waited by the pier.

Eventually she got bored and waded into the shallows where the crabs were. She could see them scurrying in the tide-pools. Then a riptide came and bore her out to sea.

Hello, Mr Whale, she said, but he only nodded sadly and swam away.

She wrapped herself in seaweed and made of coral a throne. I'm not so unhappy here, she thought. The dolphins felt sorry for her and sometimes brought her fish.

One day some time later Alice found a perfect pearl had formed beneath her tongue.

Chapter Four

They had their picnic on a nest of ants.

Great crabs devoured the city in the distance, but the ants didn't notice, and she spilled the marmalade trying to get the lid off.

Chapter Five

Snow blew back and forth past the window like a galaxy. In the morning her window was a frosted white asterism. Alice put her tongue against the pane. It tasted like a slice of wedding cake kept for years in a freezer.

The snow blew all the buildings away, and when the snow was gone a jungle grew up in their place. Instead of cars there were orchids. Instead of churches there were monkeys. Instead of Alice there were still, brackish rivers where murky-eyed dolphins lived.

Chapter Six

Late one night, Alice boarded a subway train filled with homeless people.

We're not homeless, they clarified. We live here in this subway train.

They went over a bridge and into an abandoned railyard somewhere in Brooklyn. Weeds grew up between ties and loading docks rotted like gravestones.

Snow fell all night.

The world is melting, she thought.

Chapter Seven

It rained. In the zoo, stripes slid off the zebras and festered in the soot.

Taxis dripped by, and police cars, screaming, muffled.

She padlocked her rusting bicycle under a streetlight's poisonous halo. Water ran from her hands like the end of the world.

STORY WITH A BEAR

Chapter One

The boy came to his father and said,

There's something in my bed.

His father went upstairs and found the boy's bed sheets all crumpled. Inside them was a naked lady.

Who are you? his father said.

I'm his wife, she said. The boy clutched his father's leg.

But I don't want a wife, he said.

Well, his father said, you've got one.

Chapter Two

His father said he should be asleep already and kissed him and turned out the light. The boy tiptoed over to his bed. He could hear her in there, so he ran into the closet and shut the door. She said,

Where have you gone? He could hear her coming closer. What are you doing in there?

She opened the door and switched on the hanging electric bulb. He hid behind the hamper and clutched at his dirty clothes.

Come to bed, she said, and took him by the hand and turned out the light and dragged him there.

He could feel her under the sheets next to him, moving, and lay awake in the moonlight.

Chapter Three

Eventually she fell asleep and her breath was like a clock. What he wanted was to clutch his bear but his bear was gone. Instead there was just his wife.

Where have you gone, Mr Bear? he whispered.

I'm under the bed, Mr Bear whispered back. There's someone in the bed, you know.

I know, the boy said. She scares me.

She told me she's your wife, and that you didn't need me anymore. Is that true? Mr Bear asked. Don't you need me anymore?

I do, he said, I do, more than ever. Please come out.

Mr Bear slowly emerged from beneath the bed. As the boy wondered how Mr Bear could have fit under there, the noise awoke his wife.

What? she said as Mr Bear stood up to his full height in the moonlight, paw outstretched, muzzle frothing. As she was about to scream Mr Bear pounced, and ate her up.

Thank you, Mr Bear, said the boy, and curled up beside him and put his arms around him and finally fell asleep.

Chapter Four

He was awakened after a while by strange sounds.

What? he said groggily. He could feel Mr Bear tossing and turning in the narrow bed and hear him growling.

Go back to sleep, boy, said Mr Bear. But the boy could see a little of his wife moving in the sheets beneath Mr Bear and said,

I thought you ate her up.

I did, said Mr Bear. You don't have to worry about her anymore.

That's good, the boy said, and went back to sleep.

Chapter Five

In the morning when his mother came to wake him for school there was no sign of his wife or Mr Bear. His mother wondered,

I wonder where they went?

On his way to school the boy passed a shop window with a mannequin buried in a fur coat and his reflection in the glass.

THERE STILL IS HOPE IN THE BOTTOM OF THE BOX

Chapter One

Trees rise from concrete into the sky's hand. Where Alice is everything begins to converge and come apart. Into pieces, little fingers and pieces. Beneath the ground are boxes. Boxes and lathes. Strip the land from itself that the dead may be shunted aside. Into the air. That we may no longer step on them as we do without thinking. Alice was very concerned about everything that was past, and would come to be: therefore the dead. Watching each body float through the sky, entwine in trees, impale flagpoles, gaze into the abyss, Alice could not help but feel a sense of foreboding, as if each corpse carried a hidden message. They did: YOU WILL DIE, but Alice did not know that, and as long as she knew that she was alive, was alive. On the rooftops, sailors gathered with boat-hooks to snare the supplicants for evening mass, but they only floated on, oblivious to the attentions of the church. Ignore the body, they say. It is only flesh. Great columns rise up to an arched sky painted with stars. In the apse, congregants have moved boxes that they may smear themselves with space. Crouched inside, Alice does not think of coffins.

Chapter Two

Beneath the ground are boxes. Honeycomb earth plied with steel. These are the foundations for our morality, that the churches may live upon them and skyscrapers pray to the sky. But they are the kneeling hand. Each building is a prayer that we may rise up. Alice rose up and found the scabbling insects making paper of the foundations. When the buildings toppled over into the sea a great roaring and frothing of steel, the waves the color of broken concrete because that's what they were, broken concrete, Alice looked up and there were the bodies from which tourists hung on strings to watch the end of the city. Whereupon she made of her body a balloon, and was taken up.

Chapter Three

She was very disappointed with the religious content of heaven.

Chapter Four

The dreaming head is restless in its cave of sleep. Likewise the dead, who travel without moving, see without seeing. In this way they are like the living. But curtains hang over every distance, blades of sunlight through the blinds slice at the sleeper until he awakens, or is pierced in his dream. Where there are skies, there is hope, or so Alice thought, and from above dropped another dead body down onto the earth, where it landed without a sound and was sucked into the soil's mouth.

CHAPPARAL

CHAPARRAL

When he arrived in California it was forest fires and the wind. The sky tornado green and the children leaning forty-five degrees into it, their clothes billowing behind like flags. Like kites.

Why do they build on those hills? he asked.

I have no idea.

It's all chaparral, he said, waving his hands indistinctly. Didn't they go to the museum when they were kids?

In a small yellow oval room fire licked small shoots and grasshoppers crackled. Then the light in the room changed and the hillside became brown. Then the lights came up and small shoots escaped the hard earth. That was the video. Everybody watched the video.

There was an enormous shark too, in a case. You climbed a small stairway and walked its length. At one end was a flabby mouth and tiny dead eyes. It was the least scary shark imaginable.

If they keep building they will keep burning, he said.

She didn't reply. The clouds were high and moving and the moon too in the daytime.

She took him to a house and he sat in the backyard on a lawn chair, the kind striped with rubber. The pool was too shallow for anyone but her children.

So, she said. What are you doing here?

I have no idea, he said.

You have no idea.

I just bought a ticket and got on the train.

You just bought a ticket and got on the train.

Uh-huh.

She shook her head.

The wind was strong and the gutters rattled. Zeppelins bumped together in the sky and airmen fell out in their goggles. What am I going to do with you, she said, and shook her head.

At night the wind settled and fires burned on the interstate. From the balcony they could see Disneyland. The sound of submachine guns rattled indistinctly in the distance.

I heard New York was flooded, she said.

You heard wrong, he said. They're replacing the Coney Island boardwalk with concrete, that's about it.

What? she said. I can't believe that.

Well, they're putting wood planks over the concrete.

That's no boardwalk, she said, if you can't make love under it. Or buy drugs. Or sleep in the shade.

Nope, he agreed.

In the morning they drove her daughters to school. I love you, she said. I love you, she said. I love you too, they said, crunching brown paper bags in their fists. Don't trade the deserts, she said.

They'll trade the deserts, she said.

They sat in the car at a red light. Do you have any idea how long you'll be staying? she wanted to know.

All the bookstores are gone, he said.

Pretty much.

So.

So.

He dropped her off at work and took the car into LA. He passed the airport and took the back road past oil rigs dipping and revolving like big-headed insects, or sex.

The museum had been entirely encased in a vast glass box. Clever, he thought.

Plastic fish hung from the ceiling on invisible wire. Inside a velvet curtain glittered deep-sea phosphorescence. The shark was still there in the hallway, and the partially flattened dinosaur skull.

In the rose garden all the flowers had wilted on their trellises. Cicadas insisted in the air. He couldn't tell if the opened-up airplane in the neighboring museum was an exhibit or had crash-landed there.

The parking lot was almost totally empty.

Someone's stolen your car, he informed her by payphone.

That wasn't my car, she said.

He walked to Union Station past tar pits. The fence was down, and woolly mammoths and automobiles and everything else you can think of was being slowly sucked in.

I AM STILL AWAKE

On Central Park West the doors are doctors' offices. Doctors, and dentists. The doors are low because the sidewalks are higher than they used to be. The doors are small and dark like mouths. These are the doors next to the awnings, next to the buildings' entrances with their mirrors and high desks. Doormen clasp their hands together as if trying to prevent their gloves from escaping. At night the brightness dims suddenly in the street and the park drops away beneath a rugged wall. What are they trying to keep out? What are they trying to keep in? It is farther down and darker than might be expected, but usually there's nothing there. Most of the dark things happen in the buildings where it is light all day and all night long. A man jumped off the Empire State Building the other day. It happens less than you might think. It takes some doing. He took a running start and vaulted over the fences. When a professional daredevil tried to jump off with a parachute police came and pulled him back in. Possibly he was missing the crucial element of surprise, all bulky in black and goggled like a soldier. Another tall building I particularly like is the Citibank building. I've heard the church underneath didn't want to move and sold its air rights to Citibank, so the skyscraper hovers on a huge central pylon ringed with massive square columns. Beneath there is a weak sort of plaza and the church and a vast empty space. It's probably not the original church that sold the air rights because it looks just like the Citibank building, angular and white and severe like the men inside suppose Jesus to be. It's a very popular spot for the homeless. Another popular spot is the church by the Museum of Modern Art. They have a whole temporary cardboard city there for a few minutes at a time. For a long time that weird fortress church on West End also had a homeless population, but then they got kicked off the steps for no particularly useful reason. At night you can see the moon through the bell-towers, one cubical but set at an angle, the other vaguely octagonal, but people so rarely look up. It is considered bad New York manners to look up at buildings. Tourists look up at the buildings, therefore we do not. I have lived here twelve years and I cannot stop looking up at the buildings. I think the tourists have it right, for once. Those who don't look up at the buildings aren't really New Yorkers. They just live here. They live in a big city, any big city. I live in New York, with our extraordinary buildings, and I can't stop looking at them. New York is up. It is narrow spaces and the triangle between Canal, the triangle between the Manhattan Bridge and the Brooklyn Bridge. It is the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. I get uncomfortable when the sky gets too big. I had to retreat back inside the train when we went through Montana.

The Columbia Gorge felt better, and was more beautiful. I get uncomfortable when it gets too quiet. Every time I visit my parents it wakes me up when the garbage truck doesn't empty the precinct's dumpster sometime after three. I walk at night. I am still awake now because I didn't walk. One thing I like is to walk down Park and see the cruise ship models lit up in empty windows. I like how Lever House perfectly balances itself against itself. I like to see St. Bartholomew's and the Waldorf lit up like the past, to see the New York Central Building's poster-perfect good looks crushed by the MetLife abortion's fist. Then I walk back up 5th and there is nobody else but the clothes hung with no one inside them. They don't look forlorn. They don't look like waiting. They don't really look like anything. You can walk blocks without noticing anything. It is bright like daylight, except the brightness suddenly stops a couple of stories up and then it is dark, and no stars. Where 5th Avenue runs out the Park is lit by old-fashioned standing lamps. They stand like men clutching their heads. They clutch their heads as they burn. They can see in the dark. They can see paths, and spreading trees, and the Pond is still. One night, near midnight, go down to Bethesda Terrace. Light spills through the shadowed arcades with their fantastic terracotta encrustations and hanging Moorish tiles, blue and gold creeping across the bricks and the fountain with its stranded lady, and the Lake is still. To the East gleams the white colonnades of the Boathouse, Arch Bridge equally white to the West, but the water is black. There are lovers under the elms. There are raccoons in the garbage. There are men pissing in the bushes. One year they replaced the intricately interlocking tiles on the Mall with gravel, as it had been in the time of horse-carriages. The first rain washed it all away, and now the tenor saxophonist shuffles bare asphalt. Beneath the elms, tree limbs heavy with snow fall and kill passersby.

KATRINA

I drove my boat down the hall in a flood. When the rain was over the roof dripped lower and I tangled the boat in a chandelier.

At the attic I climbed into voices so the rescuers could hear. Then the helicopter fell into a basket and together we flew away over the sawgrass. Below us, houses made bricks in the river like a path to follow.

MEXICO

1

Spit sex down the neck of a bottle. Orange beer staggers sunsets over Acapulco. Gun-runners dig holes in the beaches with automatic weapons. Stray dogs pick spent shell-casings out of the sand. The worm wriggles out of its drowning pool. Families on hilltop estates set the dogs loose on the gardeners. Back over the border! they shout. Where whales flee the shallow gulf. Mountains crawl into the sea.

2

I am all abandoned, say the tunnels crammed with a/c. Coyotes swim across their backs. Runoff chokes the Hoover Dam and all Arizona is backwash. Float down the New River to the New World. They offered me chiclets and my great-aunt and great-uncle bought me a wood whale machined in a maquiladora.

3

All the dolphins in unison. The unanimous sea. Cities buried in the jungle. I meant to say, cities choked by the jungle. Archaeologists armed with radar cough them up. Don't drink the water! Elaborate configurations of flesh arrange themselves around clothing. We just went down for a weekend and ended up fat fifteen years later. Did you get that waxed? Are you talking about my surfboard? Are you talking about my AK? Are you in my line of sight? Can I bring you a canapé?

4

Enormous wooden crosses on a hillside. Priests serrated by sunlight. After the hot-air balloon collapsed, he set about covering the mountainside with paint. If in distress, fly your flag upside-down. From our side it looks like a mountain. From theirs, just another hill among hills.

THE ZOOKEEPER

Eric went to the zoo. It was Wednesday. He always went to the zoo on Wednesdays.

Eric took the subway. First he took the subway underground. Parks passed over his head and airplanes. Then he took the subway on a bridge that crossed the street forever in the long direction. After a while the subway stopped near the zoo and started again without Eric.

On the walk to the zoo was a building wreathed in black fire escapes and a playground with a zoo theme. The playground was mostly concrete and probably unsafe but nobody was playing there anyway.

At the zoo he went to Jungleworld. Inside it was hot and the leaves all sweaty and outside it was still winter. The monorail was closed, the monorail that made him think of the monorail at Disneyland that used to go over the lake with the yellow bumblebee submarines. They tore down the submarines, Eric wasn't sure about the lake.

He watched the panthers sleep. He watched a zookeeper scratch the tapir's back with a long stick. He watched fish trapped behind plastic and monkeys grooming one another like old ladies in a nail salon. Beneath him was wood. The boards creaked when he walked and boomed. The animals never seemed to notice him, just like everywhere else in New York.

When Eric got back he called his friend and left a message. He called his parents and left a message. When they called back he didn't answer the phone because he felt too tired to answer the phone. He didn't know why he'd called them in the first place.

Sometimes when he did answer the phone he was sitting on the toilet and had to hold back his pee so the person he was talking to wouldn't know he was on the toilet. It hurts to hold back your pee, so sometimes he would just pee. If anyone noticed, they never said anything. Sometimes he also answered the phone when he was naked, but naked doesn't sound like anything.

At night, or during the day, whenever he finally slept, he turned off his phone. He didn't want to be awakened by people he didn't want to talk to. Once he'd missed an urgent phone call from his best friend in the middle of the night, but she wasn't his friend anymore so it didn't matter.

Eric awoke, put his phone in his pocket and went out without showering. It was early and the sun still coming up. The sky was deep blue and the trees black so that the dawn coming through looked like stars.

Shopkeepers hosed off the sidewalk in the half light. He'd never seen that growing up. In California it was illegal to hose off the sidewalk because of the drought. Here they did it every morning and the water sparkled and sometimes they didn't care he was walking by and sprayed Eric's jeans and water leaked into his boots.

Recently Eric had bought a pair of boots. He didn't take enough time to break them in though and bled all over his socks. Months later he got an enormous blister because wearing boots while building is not a good idea, and the blister never really went away so he wore the boots less even though he disliked his other pair of shoes. It was a fucking tragedy. They were nice boots, nice cowboy boots from the Army/Navy store.

Once his dad took Eric and a friend who wasn't really his friend anymore on a camping trip, and to avoid getting their boots wet they threw them over the stream. Except Eric's friend who wasn't really his friend didn't throw them vigorously enough and one was lost in the stream. Eric imagined it had been swept over a waterfall. It was possible. There was a waterfall.

When Eric had his friends over there was barely enough room for them all on the couch. A little while later he saw them again at a show and drank too much and was sick the next day. He'd never had that many people in his apartment before. The panthers had more room to move around, and pretty much all they had was a branch. Eric always felt a little sorry for the panthers, and he wasn't one of those people who felt sad at zoos.

Eric went to the zoo in the summer. It was Wednesday morning and he'd been up most of the night sitting at his computer, fucking around on the internet. He would look up and an hour had passed and nothing had happened. Well, he'd probably illegally downloaded a leaked album which he listened to on the subway on the way to the zoo.

At the zoo the bears were fighting. The lions were up and wandering around and the cubs were fighting. The sign said lions sleep 23 hours a day. Because he came so early he saw them that one 24th hour. Normally they were indeed asleep. He was the first person at the zoo. Actually he'd arrived fifteen minutes before the zoo opened and had to wait. When he went in he saw zookeepers still tidying up in Jungleworld and Africa and it was strange to see people in the exhibits.

He asked the zookeeper why he always saw people in that one exhibit. It was because of the birds. So many birds make an almighty mess, the zookeeper said. They had to clean it out every day. That's why there were always people in that one exhibit, and hoses. The zookeeper climbed

up the ladder out of the exhibit and rolled up the hose. There wasn't any glass or bars or anything. But why don't they fly out? Eric asked. The zookeeper said, where would they go?

TRUE STORIES

BIRDS

1

He touched her underneath her thigh where the knee ran open. She twitched a little and rolled over. She was asleep. Her pursed lips in silhouette looked like beaks, black birds with black beaks.

2

He would not say her hair was raven-black. Her eyes, though, at night.

3

I love you, he said. She was asleep. The curtains nodded and rolled over. In sleep she climbed deeper into sleep. Her dream turned over. Now it was of nests, birds in nests. A mother bird brought baby bird a worm. It wriggled and climbed down her throat. She awoke, choking. What, he said. My throat feels sore, she said. He brought her a lozenge from the medicine cabinet. Her throat put on a winter coat and the seasons changed in her mouth.

4

When she died of throat cancer, it was winter. He stood over her grave in the hard ground and shuffled his feet in the ice, shivering. All around the trees crackled and snapped. Over her gravestone circled blackbirds, round and round, and the bright crackling sun did not warm him. At night he slept poorly in his bed of sticks.

CARPOOL

1

It was summer underground and they drank mojitos as the sand rose around them. To get into the club they went through a tight restaurant that smelled of incense and down some stairs built into a crumbling adobe wall. There was a man barbecuing, and women dancing. He sat next to her and it was like when he carpooled in junior high, his neighbor brought home this girl he thought was pretty and she sat next to him, this girl, and he gripped the door handle so tightly so as not to touch her that he lifted himself off the seat entirely.

2

They talked and they could not hear themselves talking.

3

He carpooled with his friends who were brothers and their friend. Their friend's dad's car had such a dirty windshield that in the morning it was practically still nighttime inside the car. Driving to school one day their friend's dad hit a bicyclist. The bicyclist came up into the windshield which cracked in just the shape of his body. It must have loved him very much to hold him so close, so delicately in its scintillant cradle of glass.

CHURCH

1

She loved the way their fingers interlocked when they held hands. She said, you make me feel like a thousand people. Here is the church. Here is the steeple.

2

They walked past the building site. For months there had been nothing but a hole, and weeds. Then there were girders, and all of a sudden a skyscraper, empty to the sky.

3

She took a shower before they went to bed. He loved the way she looked from behind. Especially naked. The nape of her neck. Wet hair plastered against her back. The twin round globes of her ass. When she sat down it was an atlas of lust; when they fucked a planet of perspiration. He took her from behind like entering an unknown country

4

Windows appeared on the building overnight. They couldn't see inside anymore.

5

They woke early the next morning. She said, I don't know if I should stay. He said, please. Don't. Go.

EARRINGS

1

He lay awake and listened to his tinnitus and to the wind. The dog loose in the living room, pouncing on cushions. What is the wind but the air's idea of the ear? he wondered. And how can it be a ringing bell when it's continuous and solid, a stone dropped in sound?

Outside, the avenue buzzed, peopled with neon. He pulled on his pants and went out in bare feet. There was one shop still open but nobody inside. Heavy carpets hung from the walls. He wrapped himself in a blood-red carpet and fell asleep. The next day he was carted to a movie premiere and unrolled between hard concrete and movie stars' feet. They poked at him with their high heels, but he did not awaken, and dreamed of being fucked in all his little holes by beautiful women wearing earrings hung with tiny tinkling bells.

Movie stars saw the movie they'd been in: now they were much larger than themselves.

I'm not sure what this is all about, he thought, still half-asleep, but surely there is a reason, and everything in its right place.

2

There is no reason. There is no right place.

GALAXIES

1

No one would have ever guessed she had dumped her boyfriend over the phone. If you love me, her boyfriend said, you'll understand why I have to do this. She did not call him again. That night she went to see her roommate's ex-boyfriend's band play in a basement. It had only been a few hours but she knew she would not call him again. He stood next to her and would never have guessed she'd dumped her boyfriend that afternoon over the phone.

2

They sat upstairs and ate tiny hamburgers the size of baby's fists. Her hair hugged her head first tightly, then loosely, it was brown. He looked at her shoulders. She was taller than he was, her shoulders proved it. He liked what about girls made them long: their necks. Their shoulders. Their arms. Their legs. They sat upstairs and ate tiny hamburgers and she never said a word to him.

3

He said to his friend, who was her roommate's ex-boyfriend, he said, I don't think she likes me very much. She thinks you're funny, said his friend. He was not sure what to make of that.

4

He would never have guessed she dumped her boyfriend that afternoon. He had met her many times over the last couple of years. He thought, she must have dumped her boyfriend every afternoon I've ever met her.

THE POINT AT MONTAUK

The point at Montauk is made even sharper by the lighthouse. A photograph of the lighthouse looks just like the lighthouse. Places are getting more and more like that these days, he said as they parked the car by the outhouse.

At first they went through a gate like a military checkpoint, and stopped on the bluffs. She said, it's tick country here. He said, I've had ticks before. When I was in Boy Scouts I had the record for most ticks at once. She said, there's deer ticks here, tinier than normal ticks. The kind that give you Lyme disease. She said, the only cure for Lyme Disease makes you allergic to the sun.

Can you imagine that? she said, your skin getting whiter and whiter, the daylight getting brighter and brighter, until you're like an albino, a bleached-out photograph. He said, everything's getting more and more like a photograph these days.

In the distance a huge grey radio dish wavered in the dilapidating heat. They stretched out their blankets at the edge of the grapey brown seaweed and dug their shapes into the hard cool sand. She stripped down to a bikini and put on a pair of sunglasses much larger than her head. He took off his glasses and everything turned to doughy lumps. Except she stayed in focus. She was much closer to him than everything else.

You know, he said, they don't actually clean beaches, those trucks you see just turn the sand over and bury the trash underneath. Every beach is an x-ray, he said. She didn't reply.

They lay there on the edge of the island until the sun gradually diminished, shrinking into a shiver across the small of the back. There were birds, and brush, and an island in the distance which she wasn't sure which island it was, but no, it's not Connecticut. Sometimes there was sleep, and sometimes talk, but mostly the wind and the gigantic blue sky.

He watched her belly rise and fall, her breasts rise and fall, and her sleepy, somnolent mouth. I don't love this girl, he thought. Too bad. There was no one else on the beach and they were far away from anything.

She was asleep. He pulled at a stick emerging from the ground. It wouldn't come up, so he dug and dug and the stick went deeper and deeper until it was an endless stringy plant of some kind buried in the beach. Finally he just broke off the end and with it wrote his name in the sand over and over, bigger and bigger, then her name, far enough up the beach that the tide at least wouldn't wash them away.

SNAKES

She couldn't remember the last time she'd been in his apartment. It had probably been years. When did you get the snakes? she asked. The room was filled with snakes. Creeping out of cabinets, sunning themselves under light bulbs. None of them were in cages, there weren't any cages. I've always had the snakes, he said, puzzled. He said, surely you remember my snakes. No, she said. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been in his apartment. I think you're him, she said. Aren't you him?

SWEDEN

1

She was so tall even sitting down she was taller than him. Her hair was short and dark, he couldn't place her smell. I'm from Sweden, she said. From Sweden where the winters are as long as her.

2

The lounge was filled with terrible paintings. He was embarrassed to be seen with them. I'm really into Situationism, she said. Oh, he said. There was a pitcher of sangria neither of them really touched. She was so tall she was far away even when she was close.

3

Later on he thought of her eyes as grey, although nobody's eyes are really grey. His friend's ex-girlfriend who had brought her to the lounge said, she's going back to Sweden. His friend's ex-girlfriend said, she's having a going-away party across the bridge, you should go. He thought about going, and did not go.

4

He walked with her down into the subway station. The train arrived like television, flickering and noisy. For a second he thought about grabbing her and kissing her, right there in the subway station. He had known her for about an hour. He thought about kissing her, and did not kiss her. Anyway he might not have been able to reach all the way up to her lips.

THE TOURIST COUPLE

So he went out with a girl wearing knee-high boots and a dress even higher. If you can even call it a dress; is it still a dress if it's just a suspension bridge for her ass? Either way, he thought, this will be a nice change of pace.

He'd met her through a friend of a friend. She was rich. Rich enough to eat at the classiest, most overpriced restaurants in town, buy him dinner and movie stars. Just ridiculously, inappropriately rich.

She took him to the Olive Garden.

Already high on pills, she nearly missed sitting down. He could see the jitter in her eyes. She said, I'll have the appetizer. The waitress said, which one? She said, all of them.

They covered the table, her fingers jumping at one or another. Eyes the color of pigeons, blinking erratically. She said, I'm going to steal this fork, and put it in her bag. The waitress called the manager and said, we saw you take that fork. The manager said, we're going to call the police. She made a little scene. Some diners ignored her, but mostly they were tourists and said, what did you expect, in this city? He couldn't believe the Olive Garden cared if she stole one of their forks, but there you go.

Outside, they ran into a tourist couple who asked them directions to the Olive Garden. He said, you've come all the way here to see the sights and you're going to eat at the Olive Garden? I can recommend a great Italian restaurant right around the corner, he said, two or three of them.

The tourist couple said, we just wanted to know where the Olive Garden was. The tourist couple said, we didn't want a damn lecture.

TWO PHARAOHS

MENES

He doesn't know what it is but kills it anyway. This is not his first mistake. Clouds wait for him to finish, hovering. What they bite hardly notices. He strings it up on a pole and mounts it in the earth. The earth swallows and the pole catches in its throat. Choking, the earth spits small seas. From that spring he draws water and waits for what's next. Is this what's next or is it another thing? he wonders. How can we separate what's next from what's next? The King-Lists know, strung up on temple walls. There he saw a fish in an empty cartouche and went to the river for a sign. Birds picked pieces from the backs of hippos. A model boat floated down the river. He thought perhaps the tomb-models were not models but the boats themselves. That people had been much smaller in the old days. He measured himself and drew no conclusions. There on the bank of the river is where he killed it. The river flowed but brackish. This spring cool and clear, drinkable. Cupping his hands to his mouth to drink, he sees his hands beneath the water, as if he had not drawn water from the river but immersed his hands in it. Nearby, mountains melt to baldness. What succor the plants have comes from this new spring only, and walk toward it on insincere roots. As if afraid to leave the ground to come and drink. They have grown down out of the dark, burrowing into the land in roots to surround the oasis where palm trees grow. And there were many dragons, but he soothed them, saying it had always been thus, and always shall be, as the eternal King-Lists show. The dragons backed away and palm trees knelt at the water. That was before the weather changed. The sky became hard against him, and because the pole was wooden did not draw away the lightning which struck and smoothed him against the earth. When everything abated he saw he was blind. All the spring turned to steam, and now everything complains of summer. He mats his hair against his head and smoothes his skin until it comes unpeeled. Hanging from himself in strips, he curses against the river, staggering forward clutching the pole. When he trips and falls into the mouth of a hippo the birds do not remove him. Instead the hippo closes its mouth and inserts its tusks into his eye-sockets. The hippo is female, but bears him no children, and he drowns after a while under the water.

AKHENATEN

In arid lands is where he puts temples, for you cannot farm a temple. Once he tried an experiment, laying arable soil inside a great system of pillars open to the sky, but the crops turned out sickly and it was a failed experiment. Anyway, if it succeeds it is no experiment but a harbinger. The prodigal. The past never attains the heights of the present, he thought. His predecessors all thought the present never attains the heights of the past, but they were wrong, or so he said. He said that all the temples should be erased and new ones built in another place. From above the sun came down and spoke to him. The sun said sunlight and so he said the sun was sunlight. Without sunlight there are no crops, he said; without crops there are no men, he said; without men there are no temples, he said; without temples there are no gods, he said; without gods there is no sun, he said; therefore the sun: is god. It was unimpeachable logic. He placed a bar of gold in his mouth and spoke a stuttering sunlight. Pressed shining foil into his mouth and with silvered tongue ordered invasions of his own lands. Nevertheless, his generals were not impressed. They said an ibis, or a crocodile. Sometimes they said ladies had lion's heads. It all depended on where they came from. In any case their heads were bulbous now, swelling from intricate flower collars like new bulbs emerging from the ground. And such long fingers! Fingers that strangled ducks, that emerged from the hand like smiles. Every eye, too, seemed to smile. Along the river he built a fantastic city where there was no city to build. In the river they fished stalks, peeling them open and beating them together at right angles, squeezing out the paste to dry in day's oven. Then it became possible to spit words onto them, that they may curl up as the beetles do in the desert, pushing their dung sun toward a desiccated tree. We have worshipped the scarab that buries the sun, he said, but they are the night. He held his head in his hands and the throne legs beneath his actual legs moved less than his actual legs. His neck clutched a system of beads. Such intricate metalwork! Gold like a thousand bees buzzing about his neck. He wishes he possessed their industry. After commanding a thousand statues buried back into a thousand rocks he sat on his throne and wondered himself better than the man who would eventually break what now is his. Who destroys is vilified, yet is he not more powerful than those who came before him to build? Not the bees but the honey we steal from their hives. How we break them open and they sting, but stings heal, and bees die having stung. Do you hear me? he cried out. Are you deafened by my brilliant golden headdress? Does the snake on my chin snatch your words away? We *can* escape history, he said. Then his generals killed him.

SAUL & ALICE

THE BLINDS

After Alice was gone all he had left was a table and chairs. He sat on the chairs and put some vases on the table but the table always felt empty, the chairs always felt empty, and he could not bear to get rid of them so they sat there, the table and chairs, under the window with the broken mini blinds.

It had been awhile since the blinds had stopped working; they went up and down less and less and the strings within hung down like lace. Finally he cut the strings and though the blinds remained they did not work anymore.

THE TUNNELS

Tunnels opened up like eyes before him. Seeing, themselves unseen. For many years he did not know the color of his eyes. Brown, he supposed. Most people's eyes are brown. He shaved in the mirror every day and it never occurred to him to look and see what color his eyes were.

One day he went downstairs and Alice had disappeared into one of the tunnels. Saul knew she was there because he could hear her footsteps receding into the distance, but as all the tunnels went in the same direction he could not tell which tunnel she was in. She'll come back, he thought, but she did not come back.

When they'd looked at the house, their real estate agent said, and behind the living room you'll find the tunnels. He did not know why a house should need tunnels, but in every other respect the house had been ideal so they placed the down payment and moved in. They had lived there for almost a decade and he had never been in the tunnels. His wife may have; he wasn't sure. Now she was in one of them, or had gone through one of them and emerged on the other side.

The next morning as he lathered his face he paused a moment and looked at his eyes. They were brown. In the middle of each one nestled small black tunnels, opening and closing ever so slightly, which were his pupils. He looked and looked but never found her there.

THE QUIET SUBURBAN HOUSE

They went out on a date and afterward he pressed her for her phone number, but when he called the next day a voice on the other end said, I'm sorry, I think you have the wrong number.

Saul went to the house where he'd picked her up. It was a quiet suburban house in a quiet suburban neighborhood. Someone had drawn the shutters, which were white and chunky like the fingers of a very fat man poised over his dinner plate.

He walked up the steps and rang the doorbell. A rather plain woman answered the door. It wasn't her.

Do you remember me? he asked.

She said, how did you find me?

THE WEATHER

She was like weather. Sometimes she was tranquil, and other times huge storms blew between them. When she slammed the door it was a crack of thunder, light through the crack underneath spilling like lightning across the apartment floor.

Summer came and went, and autumn. In the park, trees slipped on the daintiest white garments and tiptoed across the meadows to cluster together a millinery of sticks above the wooden benches of which they seemed to be the extension.

Saul put on his jacket and walked in the park when the sunlight had gone from their apartment. At night the trees became slinky in their black evening dress.

Beneath that velvety bower he felt as if he should have been wearing a tuxedo instead of the furry grey parka that covered him the way it used to cover some small furry animal, now stripped of its skin. He imagined the skinless animal running through the park, how the wind would feel across its exposed nerves and tendons, become a shout where before it was only whisper.

THE CRAMPS

Saul felt incredibly sick to his stomach and made it to the bathroom in time to be violently ill. Better for a few minutes, soon he began to retch again. This time he coughed her up.

She lodged for a second in his esophagus, doubling him over, but with a final heave Alice fell into the toilet headfirst. Coming up for air, spitting water, she said, oh, oh. That's disgusting. She wiped herself off with a towel and left without another word.

He fell into his recliner with a cold compress on his forehead. Lying there nauseous he wondered, what the hell did I eat?

Oh, he thought. That's right.

THE AUTOMATON

When he returned home for dinner Saul found Alice replaced by an automaton. It resembled her enough that he recognized her features without being entirely convinced it was her. The funny thing was, she would not admit she had been replaced by an automaton. I'm Alice, she said, the same woman you have been married to for years. But she did not sound entirely convinced of this herself.

At night he opened her up with tools he found in the garage. She slept on, her breathing regular and undisturbed, while he examined her organs. Yet everything appeared to be in working order.

Over breakfast she announced she was leaving. You don't trust me, she said, and he had to admit it was true.

THE SHIPWRECK

The ship's remains lay scattered across the bottom of the sea. In the field of detritus was a doll's head, white and perfectly maintained, fairly glowing in the searchlight's stinging unblinking. There was a mechanical camel grown with coral. And there were shoes, pairs of shoes where bodies had been and decayed away.

After he returned to the surface Saul rustled around in the closet looking for that one necktie and came across her racks of shoes, evenly matched. Horrified, he said, what have you done with their bodies?

THE LETTER

I wrote you a letter, he said. Didn't you get my letter? She shook her head. It must have been lost in the mail.

The next day she went to the post office. We have a letter for you, the postal worker said. It's bulletproof glass, the postal worker said and slipped the letter through the little slot.

She read the letter and took out her gun and shot at the post office worker. The bullet ricocheted off the little window with its bulletproof glass and nearly killed her.

Saul said, I see you got my letter.

THE ISLAND

It was lonely on the island. There were fish and sometimes birds in the water, and birds and sometimes fish in the air, but no one to talk to. He whiled away the days inventing new languages to speak with the trees, languages of wind and scrape, but they never had much to say to him, and so slowly.

THE NEW GIRL

He watched the new girl move into the building across the street. She was taking out the old window and putting in a screen. She stood on the window ledge, nothing between her and the ground but seven stories and the window ledge where she stood so nonchalantly it made him sick to watch. When she finished she looked up and saw him standing there looking at her. What's that sound? she shouted.

That's a lot of bottles. How did you get so many? she said. Are you an alcoholic?

It was because at first he'd left them there, and then it was too many for one trip to the trash. I'm not a drunk, he said. I'm not. I'm just a little lazy. She believed him, but look at all those bottles.

He opened the windows and the door and let the wind play over them a low moan. I think they like it, she said.

THE MOUNTAINS IN THE DISTANCE

They waited all day but the jets did not come out until darkness began to fall. The magic hour, she said, and raised her camera.

Black winged things arrived from the east, but did not make a sound until they were past. Then a huge, vibrating sound, an endless thud ricocheting across the desert.

Lenses buzzed in her camera, the sunset shimmered in the west. He could not tell if the sound cracked the earth, it was already so broken beneath them.

THE DINER IN WILLIAMSBURG, OR, ARLENE

He slept on her couch. The next morning they had breakfast at the diner. It was snowy and the walk longer than he expected. An old movie flickered on the whitewashed wall behind them as they ate. Around the corner there were fire engines. Flashing lights slumbered on the buildings, migratory in miniature. It was silent and there were no firefighters, just fire engines in the snow and large white plates in the diner where her fingers tapped, traveling without moving. Tap. The fire engines drew closer. Tap. He waited for her to say something, but she was quiet except for her beautiful hands. Tap. Tap.

THE LITTLE SISTER

He found her at the end of a street called a movie star. There were stubby little cacti called ocotillos and dry swimming pools in the shape of kidneys.

Hey, he said. Hey, she said. She was smoking a cigarette on the deck. Come on up, she said, gesturing with the cigarette at him or the deck, either way. He climbed up. This is my boyfriend, she said, and introduced them. He shook her boyfriend's hand and had a cigarette. It was already dark and cold. I didn't realize it would get so cold, he said, it's the desert after all. She laughed. You idiot, she said and laughed, but not in a mean way. Shivering, he clutched the cigarette between his fingers a tiny reddish afterbirth.

They went inside for a while and the three of them sat together on the dingy couch and smoked cigarettes in front of a fire. She rubbed one out onto the arm of the couch a charcoal epithet. Embers in the fireplace chattered to one another. He poked at the logs with a stick, then threw the stick in too.

THE SINGLE SPECIFIC THING

How much should he tell her? Would she leave him if he told her? Would she leave him if he waited to tell her because he hadn't told her before? There were things she should know about him which were private and embarrassing, everybody has such things but maybe they keep them quiet, he didn't know and he didn't know what to do.

They held each other beneath bed sheets she'd brought from home because he hadn't any, and breathed and did not speak. What is she thinking? he wondered. That's what lovers think, he thought, they think about what the other is thinking, but all he could think was that was what he should be thinking, thinking about what he should be thinking without thinking it itself.

They held each other beneath pale bed sheets sticky with sex and their mouths moved in unison, muffled, sincere.

THE ROCK CLIMBERS

They passed her in the van on the way to climbing. There in the middle of nowhere and the Joshua trees like fuzzy antennas.

A sheet of rock rose behind the campsite and in the morning they went up the back and then up the front with ropes attached in case they fell, which some of them did. He did not.

Looking down, he saw only other men, boys, and wondered where she was, what she was doing. From the top of the gnarled cliffs he could look down into various fissures he hadn't known were there, that could only be seen from above. Making his way down into one of them, he found a reliquary of cigarette butts and beer cans.

A little farther east, or west, Saul passed Alice again where enormous boulders grew from the ground. She wasn't climbing, she was wearing a bikini and sunning herself on a rubber lawn chair.

Did you see that? he said. Did you see who that was? The others just rolled their eyes and ignored him as usual and the van was very dirty inside where they crouched.

THE WOMAN WHO FLOATED DOWN FROM THE SKY

The woman floated down from the sky with a beatific smile on her face. Floated down right in front of him, arms outstretched. Landing, she reached around and removed the cable from her back. It ascended back into the sky above. He looked up but there was nothing it might have been suspended from.

Hello, she said. Hello, he replied, a little taken aback.

Do you want to get some coffee? she asked, and he slowly said he would. They sat together in a little cafe.

Where did you come from? he said. She raised her eyebrows as if to say, do you really want to know? and he supposed he did not really want to know.

Twenty years later they sat together in the park reading books. Although they hadn't any children it had been a good twenty years, not without its small shames and arguments, but twenty years is a long time and for the most part it had been a good twenty years. As they sat, a cable descended from the sky, landing in front of them in wide coils.

That's for me, she said, and went to pick it up.

Wait, he said, putting his hand on her shoulder. She looked at him and looked at the cable and looked at him. She did not pick up the cable and it lay there for a while before rising up again into the empty blue sky.

THE FLYING SAUCERS

Walking by the hill crowned with cedars there was snow, endless bales of snow. Children flew down the hill on plastic flying saucers. Saul was on the way to the museum but stopped and watched the children. It was wonderful and everything that art was supposed to be and sometimes was but usually wasn't.

So Saul climbed the hill and at the top of the hill where the cedars grew he said, hey, can I try that one time? Shrugging, a child handed him his saucer and rubbed at the snot caking his nose.

Saul sat down in the saucer and rocketed down the hill. It took a little longer for him to stop than the kids and he ended up in the bushes at the bottom where Alice sat laughing at him and he smiled back encrusted with snow like snot.

THE SURGERY

All these new moles. What was his body building on his body? Tenements for melanoma. He'd always treated his body less like a temple than a slum.

One day a new constellation appeared on the left side of his body. Probably it had been a while but how often do you look at the side of your body? And then there were the spots, spare or round or tentacular, those last were the worrisome ones. It had been years since he'd been checked.

She had him stand under bright lights and strip naked. A camera flashed. She held a little measuring tape against the more globular discolorations and a camera flashed. Disoriented, he wasn't sure if she held the camera or if there was someone else in the room. He'd never been naked with a woman before. He checked his penis to see if anything was stirring. Nothing. Whether this was good or bad he wasn't sure.

After the surgery she gave him pills. The surgery itself felt very strange. He could feel something cutting into him, the parting of flesh, but it didn't hurt. He could feel it but it didn't hurt. Gradually it hurt, but that's what the pills were for.

Saul sat on the couch and the impressionist seascape above him began to swim. He wobbled upstairs for some water and his doctor called and said she thought she gave him the wrong medication. Too strong a dose, she said, and he said, you think? He could see his nose between his eyes like a fleshy spigot spurting from his face and closed his eyes against himself.

THE DEFENESTRATION

Snow came down and so did he, seventeen stories from a high white building perforated with windows like a spine. He did not die.

Everything was white. He did not believe himself in heaven but in a snowdrift and thought, how about that, how about that.

She found him splayed in the snow at the base of the building, moving awkwardly back and forth like a newborn child just emerged from the womb, testing himself out, too surprised to cry.

THE SHIRTS

It is a terrible and vicious virtue that our shirts have only one hole to put our head through, he said.

Imagine our shirts had two holes at least. Each day you would be forced to decide which hole to put your head through. Even if they were precisely the same, the holes, you would have to choose one and not the other, and this would change you. Am I left hole or right hole today? you would say, he said. Front hole or back hole? This hole or that hole? And your choice would not only reflect how you're feeling about yourself, but affect your behavior over the course of the day.

One day, he said, while feeling well in the morning the left hole will oppress you and gradually leak melancholy, whereas the right hole, he said, brightens your corners. Some people will become leftists, others rightists. They will wear their shirts to reflect their political orientation, their sexual orientation. They will wear them ironically so that upon meeting a person the first time you will not know if their choice makes them a Republican or Democrat, straight or gay, sarcastic or earnest, but they will know, and they will know you do not know, and this will matter, this will give them power over you, just as your shirt gives you power over them.

Such power, he said, not in appearance, which is already power, but in self-awareness!

Shirts today are so impoverished, he said, shaking his head.

THE REFUGEE CAMP

Crept across the minefield, what earth was disturbed. Where the tanks went they went too, treading on flat feet, recoiling, round and round. In the shelter of a baobab they stretched their legs.

Saul said, are you out of water? Alice said she was. Are you? Saul said he was and sucked on her finger. It was dry as a bone.

At night they raided the villages. There weren't any lights except eyes in the darkness. What they shone out of was fear. Sometimes something howled: a monkey, a hyena: something. It set them on edge and their hair too. The villagers saw them coming and hid in their hovels.

Saul stole a pot of meal and jars of wine and knew what was watching. Alice said they make that wine by chewing leaves and spitting them into the jar. They drank it anyway and saw visions.

An apple tree. A minefield.

THE CHIMNEY

Saul lived in a brownstone by the museum. It was his first time living alone. His studio apartment was not very big and most of the space was taken up by the fireplace, which stood in the center of the apartment very large and breathing. Sometimes he could see the bricks buckling as it breathed.

Living in an apartment filled with fireplace is not easy. Everything was crammed against the walls, and he had to flatten himself against them to move around, scraping past the fire-breathing flank of the exceedingly large fireplace. But he liked it because it was by the museum and the rent was low.

One day he passed his neighbor on the stairs. Her name was Alice and he liked her green eyes and lovely blonde hair, although the rest of her was not so memorable. He lived on the top floor and she was heading up past him.

Where are you going? he asked.

I'm going to the roof, she said.

He hadn't known they were allowed on the roof. We're not, she said, and pushed the door open. He waited for an alarm to sound but there was no alarm.

The roof was dominated by a gigantic chimney. This probably should not have surprised him but it did. Somehow he had not imagined the fireplace extended out of his apartment. Do all the apartments have fireplaces like mine? he wondered. Of course they do, Alice said. What did you think?

He put his hand on the chimney. It was warm but unlit. Alice said, have you been inside? Saul looked at her like she was crazy. Didn't you ever think of going in there? she said. Saul continued to look at her like she was crazy. Here, she said, taking his hand.

She held his hand. It was a cool, soft hand. Now put your other hand in the chimney, she said. He put his other hand in the chimney.

They stood there like that for a minute and then she let go of his hand and went downstairs.

When he returned to his apartment it was filled with smoke.

THE BARREN FLOODPLAIN

A great fire burned in the distance. They could see it across miles of plain. This whole state was once sea, he said.

Alice stood looking and said nothing. She touched her hair and put it down and it came up again in the wind. They could faintly smell the fire across miles. It climbed the trunk of a gnarled old sycamore and nothing much changed but turned black. Then it was gone behind flame. Saul suspected it would still be there when the fire burnt itself out.

He said, most of these plants, they depend on fire to suckle them. Chaparral, he said. Opens up the seeds, the heat.

Some kind of mother, Saul said. Flickering. Fugitive. I've known mothers like that but never wished them on anybody. This whole country's built on them though. Alice wound down her hair against her ear without reply and it fought back up again into the wind.

It was a barren smell. It was the smell of highways and ashes and what coolness comes after heat. It rode in the air and crept down the face and they could feel it there. A feeling parched on the skin. Dry and papery and broken.

The brown hills mounted the plain at its edges and a dam was there. No water to be seen, there might have been no water though probably there was on the other side. The dam the same color as the rock in which it pressed. Some stumps of trees stepped out of the hills and cast small shadows barely darker than the slope. The fire too had a shadow but would not stand still and no one could say what color it was. Afternoon kept on and did not turn to evening and they stood there, the dam in the distance and the fire.

White corpulent airplanes occasionally buzzed over and dropped water on the blaze, but the water seemed to dissolve in midair and the fire made no difference. Alice could still see sky where smoke swirled. Part of the day it was night and the rest it was blue and clouds like always. Alice pressed down on her hair and it flickered back up her head's hillside, waiting to be set alight.

THE OCTOPUS

Saul put an octopus on his head as was the fashion. He carefully draped its gloopy tentacles to frame his face and adjusted the bulbous crown where it surmounted his forehead. It's not as purple as it was, he sighed.

In the street everybody had animals on their heads. Sea-creatures melted in the heat, and even the mounted mammals—deer antlers, elephant tusks, lions' manes—were matted and drooping. Sweat poured down Saul's face, sweat and octopus goo.

At work he fought terrorists from his desk. They built bombs in rocky caves and Saul pressed a button until they did not.

Your octopus is looking a little toothsome, Alice said. Saul said he knew. Alice wore a squid, its ten tentacles attractively woven into her plaited hair. Ink slowly leaked down the back of her dress. Alice sat at her desk pinpointing the enemy on terrorist-speckled plateaus. I can see you, she said, quietly singing to herself the songs of satellites.

Do you think there are whales wearing human heads in the oceans? he said.

What? she said. What are you talking about? Don't be stupid, she said, and pressed a button that killed a terrorist on the other side of the Earth, which is mostly covered with water.

THE DRUM MAJOR

When he was a senior Saul was the drum major of his high school marching band. It was the last game of the season. The marching band played at halftime and shivered in the bleachers. The game did not end until late and everybody was hungry so he marched the band into the street and traffic slowed to let them past. He marched them to a drive-through window and as each rank passed a man gave them burritos.

They ate as they marched. It was easier for some than others because not all instruments are easy to hold with one hand; some of them are heavy and awkward, as all things are.

Cars honked and crawled behind them on the freeway. Everywhere they went people stopped and watched and let them pass.

The drum major led them up a mountain and down again. They marched past cities and towns, through jungles and lakes and deserts and oceans and into the night.

When dawn rose they were still marching round and round. As searchlights swept the sky clean of stars they raised their instruments and played the sun up in a blaze of brass before following the drum major into the clouds to Glory.

BRIEF LIES

THE ISLAND OF CATALINA IS ON FIRE

The island of Catalina is on fire. Where have all the buffalo gone? Are they stampeding across the bleak beige land through smoke, thick brown coats burning, streaking flames behind like carried candles in the dark?

In Avalon the homes are washed-out blues and greens and pinks and overlook the harbor where everybody has gathered for the boats. Homes on hillsides are supported by sticks; it's impossible not to imagine them sliding down into the sea on broken legs. Chimneys wreathed with fire, hillsides haloed in smoke.

On the ferry to Long Beach flying fish sparkle up and land on the deck. Every scale glints in every direction as they flop and it is difficult to tell in what direction they are pointing. The deck is gritty and wide and thrums noisily, a subterranean sound. The sea beneath parts to let the ferry through, dirty and blue and stripped with dolphins and wads of seaweed.

From Long Beach, Catalina appears a low long purple murmur in the distance. Disembarking, the evacuees can see suspended above the island another island floating in the sky, insubstantial and raw, that is the fire's crown. It is not a mirage and it is like creation, light against dark, form emerging from chaos where form and chaos both remain, uneasily rubbing against one another, leaving a margin of emptiness between where some sky shows through, dirty and unnamed.

WHAT JOHN QUINCY ADAMS KNEW

This is the last of earth.

He said, at the end. He said, This is the last of earth—I am composed; as if his body was a symphony reaching its finale; as if he was a nation, his organs states now seceding forever. He'd seen it already, he had seen it coming with a rational keenness most men never possess. Years before, before his election to anything, he'd understood it was coming. He dared not say that it is not to be desired, the coming war, although it would be calamitous and desolating. For the extirpation of slavery from the whole continent would be the result, and this he fervently desired at the top of his lungs from his seat in Congress, now that he was no longer President of these United States of America.

When John Quincy Adams was no longer President of the United States of America he swallowed his pride and was elected to Congress, where he spent a generation at the top of his lungs. When he died it was first purple at his desk, and then in a little room off the floor of the House called a chamber, the Speaker's chamber. His bald head shone and his eyelids dripped down over his eyes like wax.

In the one daguerreotype his eyes are bleary with motion and shine. His hair is limp and thin and scraggly, especially on his cheeks where there are sideburns apropos of nothing, resting there limply against the stubble that surrounds them, climbing up under his nose and across his furrowed chin. His chin and forehead are furrowed both, deep enough to plant things in, veins for instance, veins growing out of his eggshell head into river valleys stretching across the wide round expanses of his mottled skull. Beneath, his body reclines in a black abattoir of coat, so dark it nearly blends into the studio background, broken only by a flash of white at his heart.

He wanted to build an observatory, the better to see into the past and thus into the future, but Congress would not let him. They were nothing but hostile to him until he failed opposing them and reluctantly joined their ranks, when then they still opposed him. He was a failure as President and strident as a Congressman, yet Abraham Lincoln called John Quincy Adams his hero, and that should be enough. It is not enough. Nothing is ever enough.

He was the son of that most cantankerous patriot John Adams, and today this is all he is remembered for, in a time where Presidents are weaned at the weak teats of Presidents. At least he is remembered. His father is sometimes mistaken for beer.

JURY DUTY IS EXACTLY HOW YOU THINK IT WILL BE

There's nothing lonelier than the sound of a payphone ringing and ringing in the empty halls of a courthouse. Not today, anyway. The halls sound like seashells, humming. It's hard to say where the humming comes from; few of the jurors talk to one another. The judge has told them not to discuss the case. Until minutes before they knew nothing of the case and had their lives to discuss; now the case is their lives and they do not talk to one another. It is difficult to read a book in all that quiet. And the payphone, ringing and ringing.

The courtroom looks nothing like the wooden courtrooms on TV, all high teak and mahogany creaking out the inside of a ship. It is very high nonetheless, the judge's risen plinth surmounted by a stone monolith telling you to trust only in GOD, that you trust in GOD. It is hard to tell if GOD is capitalized when everything is in capital letters. Everything in the courtroom is in capital letters, from the sparse decor to the lawyers. The judge looks exactly the way you think a judge would look, and sounds like it too. His grey hair is as flat and quiet and stern as his voice. The clerk is dressed very neatly and the folded corner of a handkerchief, undoubtedly faintly scented, emerges carefully from his breast pocket into an apse.

All the names on their perforated ballots are tipped into a metal octagonal contraption and revolved by the clerk. The clerk calls the prospective jurors' names and they respond as if it were they who were the accused. Rising from the hard wooden seats recalls pews. It is hard to tell whether the courtroom is reminiscent of a church or just that every church is a courtroom also.

The accused from the back is bald. All of the accused are bald, shorn and black or brown. All of the judges and court officers are white. This is hardly worth noticing; you knew that already.

One thing you did not know is the magnetometers in the lobby provide colored x-rays of the bags that pass through. Where the colors come from, what they represent is a mystery. While waiting it is fun to watch the bags' insides made visible in all the colors you would expect from just that kind of anatomical diagram, each component a color-coded trigonometry. The colors inside the bags are not the colors on the magnetometers' screens, although they might be by coincidence.

The lobby where the magnetometers sit with their felt-tentacle mouths is two stories high and glassed-in; the glassed-in lobby is surrounded by chain-link fencing and drooping trees, and there is nothing sadder than a building surrounded by chain-link fencing, except maybe for the sound of a payphone ringing and ringing and ringing in empty courthouse halls.

KAFKA ATTENDS THE AIR SHOW AT BRESCIA, 1909

Wilbur Wright does not attend. Instead the aeroplanes look mostly like bugs. Kafka watches Bleriot try and fail and try again to start his engine. It is not the machine that first flew the English Channel, but what's the difference? It takes to the air with difficulty, like a paper bag. It does not seem to want to stay there, aloft, and wobbles sometimes with incertitude.

There is a zeppelin Kafka does not see, all baggy and soft. People hang from trailing lines and whisper through the air. When they let go it is into muddy fields where some of the first automobile races had been held, whose tracks are covered over with dirt in the same way graves are covered over with dirt.

Max Brod is there and another friend. This is Kafka's first vacation in a long time. They hate their lodgings and the cobblestone streets, which are not so different from the lodgings and cobblestone streets in Prague, streets Kafka feels one way about and then another. Later he will pose in a wooden cut-out of an aeroplane and in the photograph he will be the only one smiling. Biographers will always comment on this, that Kafka is the only one smiling, because they cannot imagine Kafka ever smiled.

One thing Kafka likes to do is attend the movies, but he does not in Brescia in part because he is not staying in Brescia, where the air show is, and in part because he can see a movie anytime and aeroplanes only rarely. It is still a novelty, man's dominion over the air. And an incomplete empire as yet. Half the planes carted to the air show in wooden packing crates do not make it into the sky at all.

It rains and the aeroplanes do not stir from their hangars. Crowds wait under umbrellas in the same way they wait under umbrellas in the summer under the sun, and the rain does not stop and the aeroplanes do not stir from their hangars.

Kafka returns home before the air show is over and his account of the proceedings is his first published work, so far as his biographers know. But what do they know? They cannot even imagine him smiling as he looks up into the empty sky and thinks, those men in their stained overalls, those rickety contraptions stuck with greasy lines and cogs, they together will rise above all this. Staring into an empty horizon all around, staring into the future, into war.

John McCain, future Senator from the state of Arizona, future candidate for President of the United States of America, current prisoner-of-war and captive of the Vietcong, tries to dig himself into the dirt away from his tormentors, but the dirt won't let him in. It is hard and unyielding and it is soft and muddy. It is not yet ready to open into a grave for John McCain.

He thinks, there are so many things to be said and none of them in particular are what he has to say. It is hard to think anything while small shadowy men stick bamboo up underneath his fingernails. The pain is excruciating. He thinks, if I were President of the United States, I would have sent myself into this hellhole to fight communism and be tortured on behalf of communism and on behalf of democracy because it is the right thing to do. If I ever become President of the United States, he thinks, and I ever have to send men like myself into war, I will do so unhesitatingly if I believe in that war, if I believe in that cause. I will send men to be tortured and to their deaths. He thinks, you would not think a little piece of bamboo would hurt so much. It's always the small things. Bamboo, bullets. Shrapnel. What is left after the explosion has cleared the explosion away.

They bury him up to his neck in mud and until the insects come he thinks, this feels nice and cool. Later on women will give an arm and a leg to get such treatment. Not as literally, of course. The United States Armed Forces do not yet want women. Or gay people. John McCain is opposed to letting gay people serve in the military. Let them get their mud-treatments in spas, he thinks. He thinks the government shouldn't be enabling gay people to get mud-treatments at the hands of the Vietcong.

John McCain, standing on the Senate floor, fulminates against allowing the torture of captured terror-suspects: does he realize he will shortly back down from this honorable, long-held position? Does he want to be President so badly he is willing to compromise his beliefs, beliefs he suffered for? Fuck them, he thinks. I was tortured for my country and nearly gave my life for my country and I deserve the benefit of the doubt. What he does not realize is he is not a Senator. He is not standing on the floor of the Senate in a grand building all of marble. He is a prisoner-of-war and captive of the Vietcong in the wettest, dirtiest damn jungle on Earth and as he watches them behead his friend he does not think at all. There is nothing to think about.

MR. ERIC QIN, BY MEANS OF HIS AMAZING NEW ZOOPTAXISCOPE, OBSERVES THE REPRESENTATION
OF MOTION, NEW YORK, NY, 1967-1993

How many ways are there to die on a New York City street while riding a bicycle? Count the stars in the sky. Measure the waters of the sea with a teaspoon. That's how much I love you, he said.

His friend coughed and hollered. His friend counted one two three. On and on the piano said, each time a little differently than the last. It was so quiet only the hands moved. Movements, for example, of two fingers, an elbow and wrist.

In accordance with instructions in the dream by which he obtained his power they arranged the motion around the stereo field. Moving cyclically: everything determined, but separately. Separate cycles moving simultaneously across a stratified space. Sound, like vision, cut into constituent slices. The arm moves up, inch by inch. The mouth smiles and opens in each successive photograph. He climbs the ladder. The horses gallop. One hoof off the ground and then another. It is 1879, Palo Alto, California.

On a ranch, in the scrub, Mr. Eadweard J. Muybridge observes the representation (by aid of his amazing new zoopraxiscope) of horses in motion. The horses trip along a rail and trigger the flashbulbs. They pop as one and yet one after another. Light appears to move on the track alongside, and horses fly.

At first his hair is long. He looks like anybody. Then it is short and he reaches toward the ceiling. The snow beneath him is white and the door behind him is white. He grasps the process and the whiteness both: looking toward plasterworks, Los Angeles. The year is now 1925.

In the meantime he constructs brackets. Time is measured for the first time and carefully doled out. A gentle static; the sounds rest on a bed of white silence. He counts and he says A. B. C. Deaf. It is now a grey color, more melancholy than white, the sound of forgetting. It is an empty page. It is what sky can be seen between buildings. It is New York City, 1993, and a bicycle.

Then pain struck my body, he sung. I collapsed on a corner of the road. How can I make my way through the darkness down the long road I have never known? Road like a jeweled spear. And, plucking grass for my bed, I lay down.

The world, it seems, comes but to this.

MAURICE RAVEL, HIT BY A CAR

Can no longer compose and thinks about his friends who can. When there was only one hotel room and one bed Stravinsky slept beside him and ever afterwards had to endure the endless jokes about what went on in that bed. Ravel, like Vuillard, like Cornell, lived with his mother all his life, or so he'd heard. He was punctilious in dress, in manner, and in music, leading to the drawing of certain conclusions. But late at night when his mother was asleep he snuck across the silent meadow through the silent trees to the brothel. He was one of their best customers. Nobody found out for almost ever, until long after his mother had died and he had died.

It was after a surgery. His head, wrapped in a white bandage, never quite worked since the accident. They went in with their eerie metallic instruments and sung his death-song in the echoing chambers of his skull, where his brain was in its cauliflower coils. There was nothing we could do, they said. We thought we could, but we could not. We could not, well, unravel the damage, so to speak.

In the nineteenth century, where Ravel had begun, it was believed ontology recapitulates phylogeny. However, this was untrue. It is true that embryos at first look the same, but then they don't. For many years it mattered to many people whether Debussy stole from Ravel or Ravel stole from Debussy. Nevertheless, they all died. Debussy of sonatas, Ravel of a taxi, and now even the most modernist can hear the difference between clocks and clouds.

Ravel called for his brother and said he had much more music to write, but his head was open and it was over. It is said that at the end he attended a concert and did not understand the applause was for him.

RETROSPECTIVE PERSPECTIVE

They specifically designed the floors to hold his work. They specifically designed the doors to fit his work. He specifically designed his work to fit the space. Standing in the sculpture garden, however, he concedes the most spectacular thing is not the enormous spiraling work itself sitting on the floor, but the smaller sections flying over the wall. A photographer from the Times arrives to flash a photo of that towering steel wall suspended from a crane, rust flickering off, shimmering flakes fluttering down into the reflecting pool where a stone woman watches, contorted, terrified.

In the second-floor gallery Richard Serra is dwarfed by his work. He is not particularly tall but gives an impression of wideness; it is too tempting to say he is as solid as a sculpture. He laughs more than might be expected out of a stern mouth, hard eyes glittering, when Charlie Rose interrupts him again and again, insisting the work must follow some kind of logical progression, that the work must develop from year to year: he can see it, why can't Serra? They keep calling it *the work* in italics. Charlie Rose does not realize work progresses only from work, that sometimes creation proceeds from opposition, from destruction, that what appears to follow on from what has come before appears that way only because it follows on from what has come before, while elsewhere, simultaneously, something else follows on from what has come before and does not resemble anything in the second-floor galleries or even the sixth-floor galleries.

On the sixth floor is a steel plate wedged into a corner. Secured by nothing, it topples sideways in opposite directions at once, completely still, serenely struggling to burst the careful geometry which defines and delineates the antiseptically white room.

Sometimes lead plates lean against walls; other times they are held there by pipes, by masses of bulging rubber. Richard Serra draws with lead, not just with his pencil. He has drawn on the wall with leather and with rubber and yes, with lead plates too, and the drawings are as two- and three-dimensional as drawings.

Charlie Rose interrupts Richard Serra, and Richard Serra cannot get a word in but if he could might have said that his work, unlike sculpture in the past, does not fit into its surroundings; it contains its surroundings. In a field, in a landscape, they would be shrunken by the skies, the plain. He does not define his surroundings. He does not control his surroundings. Instead he transforms the space which surrounds him, he transforms the space which surrounds Charlie Rose.

This is not always a good idea, this transformation of space. *Tilted Arc*, the only work of art ever destroyed by the government of the United States of America, lasered a corridor down a black-and-white plaza in lower Manhattan, mottled and rusted through photographs from the nineteen-eighties that look like photographs from the eighteen-nineties. Recalcitrance destroyed it; Richard Serra, uncompromising, destroyed it. It might have funneled a bomb blast into the government building. So they said. It annoyed the government bigwigs who had to look at it, who had to think about it. It annoyed the government workers who had to walk around one hundred and twenty feet of steel every day—yes, it might have been nice and even artistic the first few times, but *every day*, every damn day?

Richard Serra walks the loops and curls of various torqued toruses and ellipses. They change through time, and even when he stands still they do not. The steel is preternaturally light and seems molded, hand-kneaded as Rodin's Balzac who faces haughtily away from the sculpture garden behind, where the future rises reddish into the past.

TUESDAY

I remember the events of that day as if it were possible to remember.

It was ten o'clock in the morning. I was not alone in the elevator. The woman next to me said to her companion, the second tower has just come down. I did not know what she was talking about.

I went home and turned on the TV.

Unsure what to do, I began walking downtown. I was the only one going in that direction except screaming emergency vehicles. At St. Vincent's on 14th street I offered any assistance I could give. Was I a doctor. I was not. They had not yet begun to receive the thousands of blood donations that would remain unused until they rotted in their bags.

I don't know why I didn't keep walking downtown. The area below 14th street would not be cordoned off for a few hours more. Perhaps I was afraid. Of what. I didn't know.

Walking north, homeward, I did not stop when I reached my apartment. It was a beautiful day, no clouds, just vast spreading blue above. It may have been the most beautiful day of the year, warm enough for shorts, but not hot. I had not showered, and I could feel and smell the sweat on me.

The West Side Highway was parked with cars, completely filled from midtown to Washington Heights. Drivers waited patiently inside, or stood alongside their vehicles listening to radios, talking tensely to one another. As so many people were to remark about that day, I thought it looked like a scene in a movie. If gigantic ants had arisen over the horizon to lay waste to the city, I don't think I would have been terribly surprised.

When I reached the George Washington Bridge, a wide vein of people rose up along its spiraling ramp but could not cross the bridge. It was not really a bridge anymore. There were police everywhere, and soldiers with machine guns.

As I stood there two sleek loud fighter jets flew over the bridge. I will never forget the deafening sound and flicker of those jets, although I think I picture them now much lower than they actually were.

In the blackout two years later, my neighbor D., who worked downtown, showed me the shoes he had walked home in two years earlier. He had preserved them in a clear plastic zip-loc bag. You could hardly see the shoes through the dust.

Walking home that afternoon I stopped in one of the few delis still open for a drink. Inside, nobody was stocking up on supplies, only watching the Spanish-language news. Everybody seemed in a daze, not so much unsure what to do as unable to do anything much differently than usual. Only a few miles north of the unimaginable, it might almost have been a market anywhere in the country, except that there were police everywhere.

As I was speaking to a policeman a woman came up to ask about getting out of the city, which was still impossible. Her car was parked nearby. She had been downtown to pick up her daughter and her car was covered in a coating of thick grey dust and ash. I was reminded of a film I'd seen of the aftermath of the Mt. St. Helens eruption. As I scooped up some of the dust, I realized I was standing in Harlem holding the World Trade Center in my hand.

My friend L. was in Battery Park that day. She watched as debris fell from the towers' high windows. It took her a few minutes to realize it was not debris falling, but people jumping.

It was Tuesday. On Thursday the wind shifted. Into my Hell's Kitchen apartment came that indelible smell, impossible to forget, an impossibly acrid combination of smoke and char. Even when the windows were closed it crept in. It was only later I realized I had been inhaling the dead.

I could feel the ashes in my throat for days. I could feel them in my throat like voices. Unspoken. Unspeakable.

VERY LATE AT NIGHT

Sometime after two in the morning he heard two loud thumps from upstairs and opened his eyes. It was a big apartment building and sometimes that happened. He closed his eyes again. Then a woman screamed *Help me! Please help me!* and there were another couple of noises and then they stopped.

They were anguished screams, the screams of a woman in need of help. They were not sex screams or joke screams. They did not sound like actresses sound on television screaming for help. They were anguished screams, the screams of a woman in need of help.

He'd never heard anything like them. They were loud but not horror movie loud. He could hear them through the floor from somewhere above. It was hard to hear his neighbors through the concrete walls but sound came through the floors like water, although just where they came from was hard to tell. Some years ago his downstairs neighbor had complained for months about the loud noises coming from his apartment until he pointed out he'd been away for a month while the neighbor complained.

It was near two-thirty. He got up and turned on the light and listened. He could hear himself breathing and his heart beating. This was a good building, a doorman building. People who didn't belong didn't usually get in. That very day the new doorman had buzzed the wrong apartment when his friend arrived and his friend had had to call to let him up. Women did not scream for help at two in the morning in this building.

After a few minutes he called emergency. He did not know why he waited a few minutes but he did. The woman who answered seemed bored. He explained what had happened. For some reason he omitted the noises and only reported the screams. She said, coming from the hallway? He said, from somewhere upstairs. It's hard to tell where sounds come from in this building. She said, the seventh floor? He said, no, I'm on the seventh floor. The sounds must be coming from the eighth floor at least.

Will you send police? he said. She said they were on their way. Should I tell them what I heard? he said. She said they wouldn't come to his apartment. Then she thanked him and hung up. His phone stayed in emergency mode until he switched it off. Earlier that night the lamp in the corner had burned out with a flash and it was half-dark in the half-light. The city was never dark,

his mini blinds long broken, and he stood there motionless in the light from the other lamp and the light from outside and it was still dark in between.

This is a story, he thought; I'm in a story.

I was dreaming, he thought; only dreaming.

He had not been dreaming. It was too dark and late at night for dreams.

After hearing her scream at first he assumed the thumping sounds were of struggle. Now he began to wonder if maybe she was alone up there and knocking things over in her anguish. A heart-attack or a stroke. Should I go up there? he wondered. Why are all these bad things happening to me all of a sudden? he wondered.

He had just returned from the coast where his father had had a heart-attack. Barely sixty and in good shape, rarely sick, wide and strong, until the week after Thanksgiving his father was the picture of health. Then some chest-pain while working out at the gym turned into an emergency angioplasty which in turn shook loose some clots which turned into a heart-attack. Now this. It did not at first occur to him that none of these things had happened to *him*.

I did the right thing, he told himself. He told himself this as he turned off the light and climbed back into bed. Should I have gone upstairs and tried to help? What if she was being attacked? What if the attacker had a weapon? I'm in my underwear, he reasoned. I don't even have a baseball bat (why don't I have a baseball bat?). The police will be here soon enough; the precinct is across the street. He got out of bed and lifted the mini blinds and looked at the strangely illuminated police station. During the blackout it was the only building for blocks with a generator and even then as the city slept in darkness his window still glowed as always.

I did the right thing, he told himself, and went to bed. I did the right thing. As he lay there a siren grew louder and louder and then stopped. In front of the building? he wondered, but did not get up again to look.

It was three o'clock. It was four o'clock. He lay in bed and did not sleep. Every little noise made him start. He turned his ear to the ceiling and his other ear into the pillow. Through the pillow he could hear ambient thrumming sounds, and his straining upturned ear caught a few footsteps that might have been from the hallway and some muffled voices from above, quietly, but that was all he heard until he finally fell asleep near sunrise, exhausted.

WHERE THE WORLD TRADE CENTER WAS

The Winter Garden is that bulbous glassy building behind the World Trade Center Site. From the top of the steps stretches a torqued rectangle of whitish wasteland where ramps mount one another into a low retaining wall. There are holes where excavations were, the search for human remains, most of which are no longer than a finger. They are called potential human remains because it is not at all clear whether they are or are not human remains. They are burnt and stubby and grisly if they are.

Inside the Winter Garden are rows of palm trees which may be fake or may be palm trees. An interesting thing about palm trees is they are actually very difficult to fake. In Southern California, where palm trees line every street and every highway, the cell-phone companies have erected fake palm trees to hide their antennas and they may as well have just erected the antennas, so ugly and fake-looking are these supposed palm trees. Reception is good along the streets and highways though, where you are not supposed to use your cell-phone while driving.

There are many things not to do when driving and people do them all. Then they crash into palm trees and the palm trees do not burn but the cars sometimes do, and the drivers. It is very hard to set a palm tree on fire. It is easy to set a human on fire; all you need is a wick. Clothing, for instance, or hair. There is a movie in which a palm tree burns continuously for about ten minutes until it is consumed, like a wick, just like a wick. The filmmakers could not possibly have started that fire by crashing a car into the palm tree.

Those palm trees that line the streets and highways are tall and straight and planted in parallel, mostly, like the World Trade Center. In the high desert someone has created a sort of artwork by teasing palm trees into rare and curious shapes, outlining bent toruses and ellipses along the road like living Serra sculptures. Whether the trees were grown and tended and coaxed into taking such strange shapes in the manner of bonsai trees or whether chainsaws were once at work is impossible to tell at ninety miles an hour. The desert shoots by very slowly, changeless and serene and darkening. Dusk arrives so subtly night is a distinction, not a difference.

At night the World Trade Center used to be illuminated, windows in rows and rows of parallel lines. The actual black buildings themselves disappeared and their mottled insides glowed, so that they appeared to hover in midair, delicately suspended in the dark.

REMAINS

PRIDE

Threaded through her mind's eye,

A travail of phosphorescent hearts.

Snow White as the briar she lies

In the glass box of her component parts.

A lily-white invitational to comprise

Every ditch between a sigh.

BATS

Watching television one day, you look up and discover that the ceiling of your living room has become the residence of a colony of bats. That would explain the white pillars gathering on the carpet and the rustling when night comes. You had thought it was the wind, but apparently you were mistaken.

Who knows how long they've been here, clutching those little bumps on the acoustic ceiling with their shrunken sickly claws, beating the air into a latex wind, staring at the television with a hundred pairs of epileptic eyes. Weird. It isn't everyday a colony of bats arrives in suburbia and settles down. Or maybe it is, for all you know. How often do you look up at other people's ceilings, anyway?

When your girlfriend comes home you take her to the living room. Have a look at this, you say. At what? she replies. The ceiling is empty. You wait through nightfall but the bats don't return until dawn, just after she's left for work.

In fact they never seem to be around when anyone visits. Once the bats failed to return for almost two weeks and you thought yourself finally rid of them. They found their way back though, eventually.

After a while you decide that if you can't get rid of them you may as well sell their guano, which is apparently worth quite a lot. But when the time comes to collect it the bats have gone, and taken their shit with them.

BARBIE

When he came back from the war his ponytail was still wet with jungle sweat. He wasn't so fat yet, never complacent, fixing and dragging little carts bouncing behind. Everybody dragged things home from Vietnam: war's driftwood, little detritus. There was the footlocker, filled with the bones of Peking Man. The second wife, yellower than the first, eyes black like curled dried-up leeches. The souvenir sword, he'd taken it from a thatch hut there in the undergrowth before setting everything ablaze. He stood back and watched it burn. Too much lighter fluid on the charcoal, again. Over the backyard wet with grass floated the smell of barbecue and the sounds of children, and then the roar of a jet returning to a military base that wasn't there anymore.

EMPTY GRAVES

Every year about this time old Edgar hires me and a few others to come round the cemetery and dig up the things, empty em in the river, bring em back up the hill for cleaning and reuse. Really, the worst part is the cleaning, so we like to stand back and hose em down from a distance, making sure the back spray isn't coming anywhere near our open bottles of beer. Last year Freddie cut his lip on one of those bottles and had to miss out on a couple dollars worth of work to go see Doc down in the village and have it sewed up.

Everybody knows about what we do, and by the time we've reached the river there's usually a crowd up and about to say their final farewells to whoever's going downstream. We don't like to dig up anything too recent, but it doesn't really matter because anyway they aren't anything to do with us. Most belong to the people from the city a few miles up the valley, and they don't know about any of this, of course.

What's important is the gravestones, I guess, it's the value of coming down to see them that matters, in my opinion. I mean, you don't know if who you've buried is still under there, now do you. Not going to up and check, are you. So to save him some cash Edgar hires us to dig up the coffins, empty em out, clean and resell them. Also leaves more space underground.

Ever notice how close together those gravestones get. No room for a whole body, much less a big ol coffin under there, so close to what's supposedly another coffin inches away. You might think they're buried one over another, but you can't do that, about six or seven feet down you hit rock, and you can't dig through that too easily. So we do this thing every year, and the business stays profitable.

A wiser man than me once said the business of the dead is the best business; not like people are going to stop dying. True, but you got to put them someplace. Usually they get dumped in the river, eventually, round here. We tie bricks or rocks or whatever to em so they sink. Last year was a dry spell, and the river went down far enough that bits and pieces started to poke up above the water, but the birds mostly took care of that. Now they're talking about building a dam downstream. Sure, the level would go up and we've have more room to dump, but I don't think I want my drinking water collected from a reservoir round these parts, thank you very much.

Nasty business, but I mean it could be worse. You could have lived back in the day in Europe or someplace like that and buried people during the plague. Must have been mighty

unpleasant. Much less safe, too, less sanitary and everything. The pay couldn't have been this good, either. When you're starving and they're ain't no work to be found a man will do anything for some cash and some beer. Even if it means crowbars and shovels.

It's not so bad. It's not so bad.

LAMENTATION

I saw through a glass darkly disfigured desire,
 The spherical ember of Dido's spent fire.
This burnt aureole of our celestial mother
 Is third son elliptic spun round one another.

TRILOGY

MIDDLE SCHOOL

Chapter One

A braid ran down her neck. She followed it with shoulders. And the loose way she wore that dress, half-falling off, gathering in loose folds where it thought there should be body but was no body.

Chapter Two

I heard she fell off a cliff into a coma. She was alive and she was not alive. I have no idea if this is true. Either way I never saw her again.

Chapter Three

Drummed her fingers on the desk. Inside, a blur of books.

PSYCH WARD

Chapter One

She took him to the emergency room and they took him to the psych ward. When they locked him in they took his shoes. And everything else.

The pants they gave him wouldn't snap. No buttons to pull or eat or choke on, the snaps didn't nestle. It was the one detail he thought he'd remember, holding his pants up every time he had to walk, to shuffle. It wasn't the only detail he remembered.

Chapter Two

An almost-handsome doctor took him into an examination room filled with forlorn machines. The doctor wore thin green scrubs that reminded him of paper airplanes. They were green scrubs because blood looks brown and unthreatening soaked into green scrubs. While they spoke he imagined the almost-handsome doctor floating up to the ceiling in his creased thin scrubs like an enormous paper airplane. The rubber mattress on the exam table was scrunchy beneath him as they sat there for what seemed like hours and hours and may well have actually been hours and hours.

Chapter Three

They kept him all night and into the next day. They took him into and out of a small windowless room and finally she asked him if he lied to the doctor to get sprung. He said he had not and she looked at him for a long time. He saw the mascara smeared beneath her eyes but could not see what was in them. Then she left.

Later she said, I know what you said. She had heard what he'd said to the doctor and she said he had lied. Lied about her and hurt her. He was confused. How would *he* know?

ACROSS 11TH AVENUE

Chapter One

Uneven asphalt. Dirty chain-link. A ball field a miniature desert, beige, no grass. Kids playing handball on concrete, against concrete. An uneven sun glaring down on the crooked park leaning heavily toward the Hudson.

Everything made of coral. The city a drowning reef. The trees, the buildings, even the river hard and brittle. Everything hollow and filled with searing light. Grass crackles and snaps underfoot. Empty spokes driven into empty earth.

Across 11th avenue, gleaming cruise ships grow out of themselves like enormous white mushrooms. Loud cars and roads. Sun glaring off glass, on dirty chain-link, there at the edge of the island.

Chapter Two

As if saying it could make it so. As if it ever was.

ATLANTIS

ATLANTIS

Eight pigeons swarmed around his feet and sucked at sidewalk stones. He felt at his cheeks with his fingers and felt at his brow with his fingers. Slowly his skull was growing out of his face. He could feel it pressing on his eyelids and hardening his jaw against the lights of upper Broadway. Sitting in the little park creased into the street, the bench seemed to tip and slide into traffic. When the light changed he did not. Now that his apartment was bare and only light lived there, some birds snapped shut their beaks and dust eddied about their plate-flat eyes. Once there had been a wife and children but never had they been so far away and closed. And another thing was the indifference of the street that left no trace when he shut his eyes. The mirror turned invisible then. Nothing glared back. He tied his tie tightly and grimaced quite clearly. Sinners paced the sidewalks and shunned the fruit stands. Shabby clothes stuck to sweaty backs and grainy skins bled sugary sap. Armpits smelled like melons. He had left to lose. Now the pigeons circled his grave.

CONCRETE AND ASH

Winter. Wide black fields cornered crows. Little black voids in the shape of birds. Round body, sharp isosceles beak, all black: they clustered and spoke. Across the fields were the newer homes and the sound of steam, of rising heater-coils turning from whitish-grey to red, furnaces kicking up soot through the air. Crows settled on trees, on cars, on gutters, singing songs of shriek.

An abandoned car: a smashed windshield parted snow. The trees bent and carcass. Ice stalactites and the open mouths of caves. One small crow tasted the air and let out his breath, then staggered over to the remains of a mountain. Mine entrances ringed with ash. Ringed whitish. Steaming shit and spots of grey underfoot. A few lost houses in the fields, empty, unbroken snow heaped up around. Alice came tramping up to the door, smashing ice, breath heaving, short and hard and cold.

She walked through the doorway and gazed at sky through no roof. She saw how the fallen roof described a triangular arc like the prow of a great ship buried deep in the West Virginia winter, or perhaps thrust up into it from below.

Erosion had worn away the carpet and the floor, and sunk into the earth beneath her lay the skeleton of an enormous whale, from when all the world was covered with water, and she said.

These must be the bones of a fallen angel.

DEATH (FROM THE CORPUS HERMETICUM)

...and then from the doorway sprang the strangest of things: a man or an angel—a body with wings! Who are you? asked the children with spleen, for that was the oddest damn thing they'd ever seen.

I am the Mistress of Marbles, the Queen, the Elbow of Darling in a glossy magazine, the Specific Tie to an Uncertain Race, a map that will point you to no certain place. I am a moppit, a sly sleeping bird, the nefarious schemer who slips out unheard. Maybe you know me from books or the zoo, or maybe you don't—but you will—what then shall you do? How I will embrace you with pith and with vigor, how I will embrace you, grow bigger and bigger in my pants till they burst red with sorrow, tomorrow how sore will you be—like a war, but sooner, and thinner, you lay in your grave—Yes, yes, I am Death, and death's what I gave to you, son, daughter, an angel am I, I spring from the depths to despair and descry the ill limits of life, all ill seen and ill said, shrink not from my service, for now you are dead!

He stretched out his finger, his bones all akimbo, wings flapping like miters in a deserty Limbo—No manna for you, no harp—no, liar!—you, dears, are headed for the pit and the fire! For my name is Legion and Pigeon and Harsh, the Most Earl of Eloquent Slime and the Marsh, the Lanky Lean Liar Who Sits in the Mire, the Elephantine Margrave who enslaved the saved, into a pine box will your name be engraved!

With teeth like a lighthouse that shines off a cliff, he reached out his hand, turned one child into a stiff. Then tortured others by fanning the flame—Oh dear, oh dear, how they wish he never had came! But he did, all over them, a mess not to be hid, but he did, from his dick spurted phlegm, and triffid. O horror, what terror, what purpose was his? No one knows but the Angel of Death and his Ms., the Abscessed Creatrix who lies in her box, malformed with cholera, lice and the pox. Beneath their play was her last hiding palace: infringing her territory brought forth secret malice.

I shall strike you down where you play, said the corpse where she lay; my fingers will purse and my lips will unsplay and your mouths will burn with fear and dismay...

THE MARRIAGE OF STICKS (FROM LUNA PARK)

I will explain myself, said the Vicar.

This ought to be good, muttered Alice.

In the times before writing, he began, people used sticks to denote property. All you had to do was find a stick the length of what you owned, and that stick represented the property. Now, there were certain difficulties with this system. For one, what of different kinds of wood? Could a stick made of oak be substituted for a stick made of, say, elm, and as such, what were their relative values? It might seem that the larger a stick is, the more it is worth, but this was not necessarily true: consider the eel. An eel might be as long as one's leg, but is not a leg worth more than an eel? So a general council was called to solve the problem of sticks.

First it was proposed that conflicts be solved by burning the stick in question to see what color and quantity of smoke it produced: but did not burning of the stick also symbolize divestiture of said property? Then it was suggested that a replica of a dwelling-place might be made from the sticks, and whoever's dwelling-place most resembled the model would be their rightful owner. But this proved impracticable in context because everybody lived in caves, which all look more or less alike, and anyway being of negative space rather than positive cannot really be represented too well by a model. An additional problem was that it was very dark in the caves, and to see the sticks they would have to be lit on fire, which not only destroyed the sticks and said symbolic property, but a stick on fire is a different shape than a stick not on fire.

Finally the correct solution was hit upon: the marriage of sticks. By splicing one stick to another in a symbolic matrimonial ceremony, one stick became subservient to the other, bigger stick, and so the men were able to use the married sticks to beat one another into submission, thus solving the question of property.

The Vicar took this as a parable of his treatment of the Voluptuous Blonde. By entering her body with my symbolic stick, he concluded, I thus make her equal in value to my wooden leg.

SATELLITES (A BIRDSTONE)

Sensible satellites dangled from sensible earlobes. Not too long, not too short. Her eyebrows arched like street lights. They were thick, Paradjanov thick. Sometimes she was mistaken for European, or West Asian, but in fact she came from Chicago, where it is always cold in the wintertime.

One Thursday she lost an earring in hoarfrost. She searched everywhere. But it was gone. Eventually she forgot all about it.

A garbage man found her earring in a drain. It was covered in lampreys. It was probably good it wasn't hanging from her ear anymore.

STILL

1

Here is a tree. Was a tree. Some birds have climbed a tree core sample. Imagine if it were ice? They knock their heads against it in surprise. No one had expected this. They had not expected to die. His head is garish with red and orange dye. Beneath, his eyes have been gouged out.

2

When a palm tree burns it smells like the sky. Hardening around its green and brown. Lumpy and rough and serrated dark green combs align with the oily smoke. Curling up like teased bangs. You're standing alone watching it deliquesce into the sky. One wavering cloud blackens the air and dissolves. Then blue. Bluish white, maybe. Walking over, the ground strewn with black nuts, black knots. Black gnarls, black pits on beige desert. Toothpick stretch. Eye waste. Flickering eyelash. Around stretches the rest of everything.

3

Rain smell, hard and close. Some rain spell. Flashes whitening the sky. Herds flutter and dash. Smash. Stones roll across the arroyos. Thunderclaps smash stone roofs. Lightning ticks off the buttes, dances branches over long long mesas. Rock crests pushing the earth out of the way. Backbones of continents, rolling on and on. Roofs shatter. Rough shingles litter flat housetops, yards strewn with car-parts, rust, metal, rust, weeds. Dirt. Another shard. Another shorn setup. Why'd we ever move here anyway. Back behind the house, a child is crying. Jagged. He adds an edge to the wind. Smack him, shut him the fuck up. Christ almighty.

4

Fifteen monkeys surf creeping breakers high above a sea of rolling green plasticene mist. White stars bloom beneath, eyemouths open. Scraggly brown branches gnarl hex signs into the back air. Kenya an impressionist garden. Hanging fluffs daubed. The painted earth girdle rides astride a peeking yellow fringe. On the right it is brighter, but the middle is more blue. On the left Bob Ross has inserted a sudden large tree. The canopy waves are indebted to vines and leaf scree. The plaster glacier backdrop has pushed these monkeys together. Small families are on the move. What

are these hanging mossy rusticles they encounter? Root worms strangle the nearest cosine limb. Each animal has limp hair but soft. His muzzle is turning greyish. He looks forlornly away from us. What can be seen in such oddly deep red eyes? His brow is creased and slightly mangy and his chin is proudly rounded with asleep floating hairs. A mother primate cradles her child and has snapped its neck. Or perhaps not, but it is already dead.

RESPONSORIA

BEGINNING

1

We are all beginning,
beginning to go to war.

Victims of the cold restraint
suffering, the lack of it,
fingers within us.

Suffering is necessary because violence is insufficient.

We live without living, die without death.
The world no longer knows which way it turns
because we no longer spin it,
balancing on our finger like an eye.

It is no longer enough to be only alive.
There are things beyond us:
not God, necessarily,
not clocks,
not dirt,
not stone,
nor the eye. All lie.
We have moved past those things.

Monoliths of words lie on pages in the past:
we may repudiate them, we were young then—
to no avail.

Words are not made of memory,
as the eye is not made of sight.

Everything is at war,
everything drifts into evil:
we cannot believe this.
The earth's better than that.
Just because we shall all lie beneath it
does not mean that's what it is for.

There are better things than we know
drowned in every stone,
buried in an ash.
There are no things we cannot know,
but we cannot know them all.

2

Poetry does not need to be defended:
it needs to be disguised.

Forgive the young poets
not because they are young
or because they are poets
but because they suffer.
Forgive them because they are human.
Forgive them because they will one day be dead.

And if this is not ecstasy,
and if this is not pain,
then we do not yet know if we are alive.

True, pain reminds us that we are still alive,
but it also reminds us that we are in pain.

There is nothing to be gained from suffering—
or, there *should* be nothing gained by suffering—
but truth,
and truth is not worth this.

Better there had been no Celan, no Cioran.
We cannot believe that. Why not?
There must be poetry after Auschwitz
because if there is no poetry there is no Auschwitz.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR WRITING THE STORY IT SEEMS LIKE EVERYBODY'S WRITING THESE DAYS

Something surprising happens. Characters respond to it as they would any slightly surprising thing, when in fact the thing is extremely surprising, or even impossible. These characters may be sympathetic or not; we may not know anything about them; they may not even have names, or be animals, or robots. Ironic deadpan humor occurs. Sometimes the story is aware of itself, its characters ungainly literary appendages; other times it aspires to be a *slice of life*. Either way, it is told in clear, economical prose, or less often in highly metaphorical, overripe experimental language, depending on who the author studied with at that one university or writers' program. Events that take a long time are telescoped, and events that occur in an instant are magnified. Nevertheless, the story is usually short.

ON FORGETTING

1

Any communally experienced event worth remembering passes almost immediately into myth. Where memory is concupiscent, myth is archetypal. Memory remembers what it is able to remember; myth tells you what to remember.

2

Forgetting in Paradise—Benjamin's *das Unversessliche*—is related to the forgetting of apocalypse, that the universe dies over and over again not only with the death of each person, but the death of each object—and since it is impossible to say when something truly dies, the world is in effect dying at a continuous rate, neither dead nor alive, in a period of continuous transition, the past a prediction and the future a remembrance of what has been forgotten.

3

There is something *incomplete* about writing. Writing is supposedly a form of communication, with the self or others, but this is a misconception. In fact writing is *absence*. It consists of the things we know, or think we know, pushed out of ourselves. By writing, we absent ourselves from our own thought.

4

Concerning Rilke's sisters of rejoicing, longing, and grief: Once you have rejoiced, you have learned what it is to rejoice. Once you have longed for something or someone, you know what longing is. But you must relearn grief in every instance of loss.

5

The aim of philosophy is its own destruction. If a proposition can be shown to be true, then it no longer needs to be said, because it has become apparent. Thus philosophy is the process of unmaking thought.

6

Paradoxically, minimalism isn't about repetition; it's about change.

7

Identification is always exclusion.

8

I cannot sleep, but sleep is poor practice for death.

9

If I lost these words somehow, if these words disappeared, I couldn't really reconstruct them. I cannot recite all the words I have written: Writing is forgetting. Or, rather, writing *allows* us to forget. Thus, we do not write to create, but to free ourselves from creation. Though compelled to make, what are we making? The future, and the past. Writers destroy themselves that they may go on. And books, the consolations of memory.

10

The task of any work of art is to make itself relevant.

ON MORALITY

It is a mistake to confuse morals and power. Morals are the means by which we consider administrations of power.

For instance, murder is never a moral act—or an immoral act. It is instead an exercise of power. Morality has to do with our human response to that exercise of power, a response that differs given one context or another, one situation or another. This is setting aside questions of whether morality is an objective reality or derived from social/evolutionary development—we are discussing the function of power and its attendant proxy, morality. If morality represents real values, it is nonetheless acted upon by agents of power who seek to reproduce its effects, which cannot be differentiated from any real effects deriving from said acts.

Seen this way, morals are never absolute. Power is the only absolute, which is to say, death is the only absolute, for power, in human terms, is always the exercise of will toward death. Thus power and morals can be thought of as actualizations of death; morals are simulations of death. No action is willed that does not carry behind it the force of mortality. It is a happy coincidence that only one letter, the t on which Christ was crucified, separates the two concepts.

Morals are the conclusions we draw when actions are insufficient.

PALIMPSEST

Every work of art is necessarily a palimpsest;

every art destroys its ground.

What we make, we destroy.

Time is a perforation

invisible already in the work,

as erosion and stone

are one and the same.

Stones, rise up and walk.

Speak. Speak your mouth.

AUTUMN RHYTHMS

It is interesting how so many critics see abstract expressionism as violent, as painful. Is this to do with the violent, painful lives many of the artists lead, the violent, painful gestures which supposedly comprise their work, or the violent, painful times in which they lived? Because the curious reality of the greatest abstract expressionist works lies in their stillness. That Pollock used the brush as a kind of stick, as a mere disseminator of paint—brush as process—is ultimately irrelevant to the finished work on view. *Autumn Rhythm*, for instance, is a meditative, quiet work, as its title might make clear, a quality it shares with many works by Rothko, Guston, even De Kooning.

What we are seeing in their works is the expression of the static nature of gesture. A gesture lives in a moment; a gesture is a photograph, a state of being-as. But the work itself is not the gesture, nor even simply the remnants of a gesture. It is instead pure structure. In this way abstract expressionism is cubist, in Berger's sense. This artistic movement more than most is about surface, regardless of its dimension. It is about the fixity of gesture in art, about the static nature of the work itself. Knowing nothing of the action lying behind the creation of Pollock's work, when we look at his paintings we see not gesture but remains.

This leads us to ask how the aestheticized gesture, form without content, can be meaningful with no object to refer to. Some might argue for the significance and palpability of process with regard to the work, as in minimalism, but ultimately the experience of any artwork must be aesthetic, not functional with regard to process, as its power is not didactic.

Abstract expressionism is an antiquity of transience. It can be compared to a Japanese garden, where each element exists both on its own and as part of the whole, perfectly composed and perfectly still. No matter that in such a garden each element was carefully planned and placed whereas Pollock created in a moment; its aesthetic content is the same: the subsumation of desire to consolation, of movement to stillness.

FASHION IS NOT ART

1

Sculpture: the consultation of edges.

2

Texture, attendant on sculpture, considered as the addition of shadow, or its occultation, what limns edges. All sculpture is furthermore about the description of the human form; whether representing a dog, an automobile, or simply abstract, sculpture always has as its subject the comparison of its form to the human form. This is because when we look at something, we class it by comparison, whose first model is the self's form, the human body.

Sculpture is differentiated from visual art (drawing and painting, photography and film) by precedent to the sense of touch, and touch always has as its object itself, its own form, as opposed to the eyes, which take as their model the forms around them, offering as it does the concretion of edge by (virtual) fingers. Thus, sculpture: a critique of the human form, by means of the consultation of edges.

Fashion is the antithesis of sculpture because while sculpture is about likeness to the body, fashion is about difference from the body. Fashion says: I am not the body.

3

Fashion is always negation, a negative theology, a dialectical force opposing the ur-reality of the body confirmed and detained beneath. Because fashion diverges from the human, fashion is not art. It is instead a kind of refusal to see the body as sculpture. Fashion says, the nude is not enough.

The perfect dress is wings, the perfect body birds'. Angels are incomplete: there is too much human left in them, too much soul. Perfection has no soul, not only because it is death, but because it has freed itself from all meaning. Perfect beauty means nothing. Yet it is transformative.

It is not that the perfect dress is nudity, or that the perfect dress frees the body to be nude underneath. The perfect dress frees itself from the body entirely. Perfect beauty: the body is gone. Disappeared. The perfect dress erases the body.

Nothing underneath. This is why beauty is often mistaken for shallowness, lack of depth. Beauty frees us from meaning. Perfection kills the body.

4

The difficulties of sex are often mistaken for the difficulties of sin.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF ARRIVAL

1

Gardens grow near water towers
green against grey.
Together, and apart.

Near the churches are roads.

2

Long white fences and
long white fences
shuttered against the breeze.

In the grass, long fingers wave
as if they were the wind.

They are not the wind.
What is attendant upon it,
what knows its name
slippers the words in a hushed mouth.

3

Ground,
and trees,
a smoldering fire.

Autumn trails its fingertips down my arm.
I can feel the long bone underneath.

4

Trees flee fire
and the sky full of rain.

Nothing burning. Nothing wet.
At least, not yet.

Arrival is an illusion.

As all art is a prophecy about how it will be perceived in the future, and all persons our idea of what they will be for us in the future, so too is the idea of body rooted in our apprehension of it in the past, imagining what it will come to, though we cannot conceive of how it will end, for death is not a fact in life, as Wittgenstein knew. Thus we dislocate time in the examination of our bodies. We proceed as if the future were an extension of our past. In fact the future cannot exist.

Memory is a myth. We create thoughts each moment we imagine to be reconstructions of another moment, but are in fact artifacts of the present moment themselves, already passing into a kind of disbelief, into a poetic state of iconography in which objects are simultaneously the idea of an image and themselves the image. Any attempt to conceive of a future in relation to ourselves and others demands a recreation of an already imaginary past, and thus makes ruins of objects. It is not that buildings contain within them the ruins they will perhaps become, but that the ruins are the thing itself, and the building a figment of our imagination, already passing into memory.

After all, did not the World Trade Center itself always resemble two great gravestones? Black tombstones of futurity, monumental predictions and precessional commemoration of their own demise. There was always something sinister about those blank dark tablets, even when streaked with light at sunset, less an enormous brooding presence than an absence on the edge of our island. We have ceased to see these buildings as buildings, but as symbols, objects of contemplation. As they always were; only their meaning has changed. They have become ciphers, meaning taking vivid, double shape. In this way we see that the towers are figments of remembrance, the shape memory takes. We see that an object is a circuit, closed by perception.

Thus, a monument is a system of remembrance. If every object is a circuit, a circuit must be closed. Monuments only possess power so long as they possess memory. In other words, memory is the monument. Monuments lose their ability to commemorate as humans lose memory by death and by decay, becoming memorials of monument; eventually monuments are themselves the event rather than memorials of the event itself. The human aspect will inevitably diminish over time until all that's left are forgotten names carved into the side of a sepulcher.

Monuments are always monuments to themselves—monuments to monument. Therefore the only true memorials exist as activated memory, memory made solid by signs. A monument is a hieroglyph, a sign that must be understood prior to reading.

Coming upon a structure with no idea as to its significance, such as the mounds of Britain or the megaliths of the Mediterranean, we can only project onto them what we might use such a thing for, or, using what knowledge we have of its builders, imagine what use they might have put it to. Even if we recognize a structure as, for instance, the memorial of a great king, because we know nothing of the king, really (even a whole history of his reign is irrelevant now because we were not there), we cannot utilize it as a monument. To call it a memorial is not correct. It may once have been a memorial, but only so long as it lives in human memory. Today it is only the memorial of a memorial. We make memorials because we need for others to know we remember, and to remind ourselves to remember.

When we visit a cemetery or a memorial, the feeling we get is not general. Each gravestone reminds us of a loved one's grave, each monument reminds us of a tragedy we were too close to flee. This is why when we create monuments, erect gravestones: we are not mourning the lost, but mourning ourselves. We are contemplating the rumor of our own death, for which all other deaths are synecdoche.

And all remembrance stops with death. W.G. Sebald knew this above all. In *Austerlitz* he notes that darkness does not lift but becomes yet heavier as he thinks how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on. It was Sebald's attempt to create such places and objects that possess this very elusive power which commends him to us today, and to the future which was for him a place of the dead, like the past, filled with those with whom we cannot speak, but speak to us, searching for what is not theirs, and not yet ours.

In an essay first published barely a month before his death, Sebald tells of a 1976 visit to the artist Jan Peter Tripp in Stuttgart. He remembers that visit as a remarkable occasion, because with the admiration he immediately felt for Tripp's work it occurred to him that he too would like to do something one day besides giving lectures and holding seminars. Sebald fell to examining Tripp's engraving of Daniel Paul Schreber, the mentally disturbed judge who became convinced he was nightly transformed into a woman and subjected to hideous ordeals, and about whom Freud drew some of his more specious conclusions. In Bruce Chatwin's novel *Utz* the storytelling I, who remains unnamed like the narrator of Sebald's extended fictions, both the author and not the author, is admitted with some reluctance into the collector Utz's bathroom, where he discovers

hanging on the door a silk dressing gown embroidered in the most delicate and fantastic manner. On the way out through the dark bedroom, he sees a wig and wonders if Utz, like Chatwin, might not harbor some secret vice which would ultimately lead to his downfall.

Indeed, as *Utz* was being written, a dark and then almost unspeakable death was already growing inside Chatwin, a death that may be imagined similar to Tripp's engraving, which depicts Schreber with a spider in his skull, leading Sebald to wonder what can be more terrible than the ideas always scurrying around our minds. He tells us that much of what he has written derives from this engraving, not only the will to create the brilliant works of art by which he will be remembered, but even his method of procedure: in adhering to an exact historical perspective, in patiently engraving and linking together apparently disparate things in the manner of a still life, asking himself what the invisible connections that determine our lives are, and how the threads run. It can be no coincidence, then, that in this selfsame collection of essays and prose, Sebald writes of Chatwin himself, and Utz's dressing gown, suggesting that, as in the work of poet Ernst Herbeck, it is objects that attract us, for things, as Chatwin writes, are tougher than people. Things are the changeless mirror in which we watch ourselves disintegrate.

My grandparents were in Auschwitz. One day when I was young we sat in the backyard of their Denver home and as my parents silently ran the video camera I interviewed them about their experiences. There was a lemon tree, and shade, and cool concrete. The lemons were inedible. I do not remember today what they said, and have not since viewed the video, which still exists. But although I can never forget the essence of what they told me, being told a thing is not the same as knowing the thing itself. For there is a certain uselessness to remembrance. Memory of the atrocities they witnessed will fade, as they always have, and fresh crimes will be visited on the heads of our children, as they always have. We learn nothing from loss.

Sebald knew that loss cannot be heard, described, or passed on. His great attempt was to try and hear, describe, and pass on that loss, and when he failed, settled for making a natural history of that destruction, which is the most any of us can hope to do. Writers can show people ruins, but the great tragedy of history is that we must make them for ourselves to understand.

ARMSTRONG

Armstrong looked at the moon rocks and saw himself looking back.

All around weighed the great weight of meteorites. He stood another minute before the exhibit, then left the glassed-in museum where fountains stumbled. Grass poured down too-carefully held slopes. Sky already fading, the color of freeways, the greyness that comes when afternoons last too long.

On the way home he stopped for a drink and called but Alice didn't answer. In the mirror he looked like anyone.

You divorced your first wife, Alice said. It was not a question. One sofa rose up from the carpet to clench her. She clenched back.

Armstrong stood in their living room and mixed a drink. Plate glass, flat roof, swimming pool pierced by a diving board. Astroturf.

Alice's hair drooled down her head. She looked older than before because she was. So was he.

It was quiet. A feeling half in darkness. Armstrong ran his hands up his forehead into the skull rill. He *was* getting older. These things happen. She was always older than him, but exactly the same amount older. He felt as he grew older she should remain the same, like the stars.

That's Sirius, he said, looking through his telescope, and Cassiopeia.

Was she the one who could tell the future? Alice asked.

I think that was Cassandra, he said. And nobody believed her. I guess it wasn't really the future after all.

I can see the future, she said. It's going to rain. Look.

At that distance it was only an arrogance. Dark against dark, lightning hanging comma from storms' sentences, the air electric like television. He hated going on TV, hair painting itself down against those hideous lights, makeup chalk-caked against his face. It made him feel like a fossil.

An umbrella stood against the door its own gathering space. Armstrong thought it looked: skeletal.

He thought of Titan with its frozen ocean. The red spots on Jupiter are centuries-old hurricanes.

That night they made love, and when he cried out she assumed it must be in pleasure. He passed a stone. She gave birth to rocks.

THE BEGINNING OF THE BEGINNING OF THE END

Chapter One

They married at a church sinking slowly into the highway. It was white and they picked it because it was white.

The door was a little crooked and so was the minister, but in a nice way. He had a gold tooth and white boots and introduced himself as Father Christmas. Of course, she said: of course.

The altar looked like a living room in some Hugh Hefner miracle. There was a fake rock wall and white shaggy rugs to stand on. We do Jewish weddings here too sometimes, Father Christmas explained, and tapped the Corinthian columns astride them.

Acanthus leafs, she thought.

She said her name was Alice and he said his name was Seth and they did and they were married. He put a plastic vending machine ring on her finger and signed the papers with a flourish.

Well, she said, we're married now. You don't have to impress me anymore, she said.

Chapter Two

The concierge winked and got them the heart-shaped bed. But when they tried to sleep their legs had nowhere to go except around each other, which seemed sweet and entangling at first and then just pins and needles. They tried the other way around, feet where the aorta would have been if they were sleeping on an actual whale-sized heart and not a heart-shaped bed, but that wasn't much better, and in the middle of the night her head came unstuck from his cheek and pulled her down into the sheet-slough. She woke with a start.

Where am I? she wondered, not for the first time. Then, careful not to wake her husband—how weird is that, she thought, *my husband*—she rose, put a slinky thing on, and slipped out the door. Seth slept on in the heart-shaped bed and did not fall off it for a while.

Alice wandered down the Strip. She passed the Luxor and above the Luxor a man was floating at the pyramid's very tip in a beam of light.

In a manmade lake she saw ships sinking over and over again. Air-conditioning blew from every doorway like the breath of arctic giants, rustling the palm trees.

Farther down the Strip there was a roller coaster wound around the top of a building, and Alice found Seth there.

I couldn't sleep, he said.

Me neither, she said.

Stupid bed, they said.

Later they went back to the hotel and she tied him to the bed and left him there after they were done.

When she came back up he was still tied to the bed. You know, those weren't really knots, she said. You could have pulled yourself free anytime, she said. He said he knew that.

He hadn't known that.

Chapter Three

In the morning they met a couple called the Robinsons. Here's to you, Mrs Robinson, Seth said. Yes, she cried, delighted, although they must have heard that joke a million times. No, no! she squeaked. We were just married. I've been waiting for that joke ever since we got engaged. Congratulations!

You're the ones who just got married, Seth said. We should be congratulating you.

On the joke, I mean, said Mrs Robinson. Ah, said Seth.

They introduced themselves. I am Lisa and this is my husband Saul. Mr and Mrs Robinson. Mrs Saul Robinson, she said, trying it on.

We were just married too, said Seth. Oh my! squealed Mrs Robinson. How wonderful! Did you have an Elvis?

They had not had an Elvis.

Mrs Robinson seemed disappointed to hear this. Well, we had an Elvis, Mrs Robinson said. He even sort of looked like Elvis. The real Elvis. Can you imagine being married by the real Elvis? He could do that, you know, she said. Alice said she didn't think he could. Of course he could, said Mrs Robinson. He was *The King*.

That's true, Alice said, although she did not say that Kings are often not particularly powerful. Once she had read an article about the King of an African tribe who lived in Queens and drove a cab in Manhattan where the criminal law courts are called *The Tombs* because they look like Egyptian tombs.

They used to burn mummies for firewood, she said.

What? said Mrs Robinson, a little confused. Alice didn't reply, so she smiled and suggested they go to the pool.

They went to the pool. Alice wore a single-piece that opened in all the right places and almost gave Mrs Robinson cause to regret the two-piece bikini she had chosen. Hers was not the most striking figure, but it would have to do, or so she had to believe because it was hers, and we always believe in what is ours.

Seth wore swim trunks and a shirt that said Okkervil River, which is a band, although it is probably also a river. Mr Robinson thought it said Overkill River and it reminded him of that one time in Vietnam.

They swam listlessly for a while until Alice said, let's go to Egypt. So they took the Robinsons and went to Egypt.

Chapter Four

In Egypt there were pyramids and tombs and sand and the Nile and what they did was go shopping.

In the hovel shops Mr Robinson asked if he could buy a crocodile mummy.

The shops were collapsible tents and it was Mrs Robinson's considered opinion that shops should never be portable. Things ought to be where they are and not where they're not, said Mrs Robinson.

Mr Robinson squinted in reply. The sere desert light reminded him of the club where he'd met his wife. It was so bright he couldn't see himself blink and it was like blindness. It was so loud he couldn't hear himself walk and it was like floating. The women were dark and soundless in the light and loudness. All he could do was feel them and smell them. They smelled like dead flowers. They moved slowly past him, bumping like tugboats and freighters in a crowded harbor.

There was something about those clubs that made Mr Robinson feel: nautical.

Once Mr Robinson saw the corpse of a beached whale. It was an enormous, darkly colored shapeless thing slowly bleaching to a viscid yellow. The whale's mouth hung limply open like a wound, as if those teeth did not belong to the whale but what had bitten into it.

Seagulls were tearing the whale to strips. Greyish shreds littered the beach, blubber raining down from above, the slatternly shapes of seagulls biting and dropping.

Birds don't chew.

Later, flatbed trucks arrived and men with axes and pitchforks struggled to dissect the whale into chunks small enough to cart away.

The whole beach stank.

The club smelled of expensive alcohol and perfume. Mr Robinson had trouble deciding if it was a desperate smell or a hopeful smell. Surely people would not subject themselves to this without hope. Surely there is hope in any action man undertakes, he thought: when a man washes himself or climbs a ladder or makes a painting or courts a woman, he does so out of hope. He does so that time may supersede itself and actions suggest reactions and the world push forward into tomorrow.

What do they do with washed-up whale carcasses, anyway? he wondered.

Lisa laughed. She liked that her husband rarely said anything. Eventually she maybe even loved him. Mrs Robinson loved people as much as she could make them herself, and his silence allowed her to imagine him completely, so she loved him. The Robinsons would go so far as to say every person is to you whatever you are to them when you're with them. In this way they made a perfect couple, although she exasperated him sometimes.

Chapter Five

They were tired of Egypt and Egypt was tired of them. They had been married just long enough.

Seth and Alice and Saul and Lisa were starting to get short with one another, as happens when people take trips with each other and when they don't, but they weren't entirely tired of each other just yet so they rented some ostriches and saddled them and rode out into the desert.

It doesn't matter which direction, Alice said. The desert doesn't have a direction.

This was proved untrue when at an oasis the ostriches suddenly stuck their heads into the sand in fear. They had unknowingly ridden all the way into Iraq, and insurgents appeared in a rickety flatbed truck and kidnapped the women and shot the men.

Luckily Saul had been shot before: I was *in Vietnam*, he reminded Seth, and saved their lives so quickly and so completely that within hours they were able to follow the flatbed's tire tracks to the insurgents' hideout.

The hideout was a small shack surrounded by an endless duneless desert and the ruins of war. There were bombed out bunkers and smashed tanks like the carapaces of giant insects and the blasted skeletons of enormous antennas.

Bombs had emptied the oil wells, and everywhere iridescent oil oceans lay sunken in the sand. From afar it might have been attractive, blue and green and brown and black arranged in neat lines amidst endless beige wastes like the Gap during khaki season, but from close up all the standing pools were slicked with scum and every attendant building long gone to rust and desolation.

The insurgents took the women inside one of the buildings and handcuffed them to a table. The most annoying thing about being kidnapped is not being able to keep the sand out of your hair and your hair out of your face as a flatbed truck whips you around the desert, thought Mrs Robinson, and was happier cuffed to the table.

As they prepared to make a ransom video the insurgents tried to make themselves look as scary as possible, but mostly they looked ridiculous. To a man they were short scruffy people, hardly resembling any kind of real terrorist.

Mr Robinson emerged silently from the sink and snapped their necks.

It was over in seconds. They weren't real insurgents, Mr Robinson explained. Real insurgents would have taken you to some kind of headquarters. These guys just took you into the desert.

Of course they took us into the desert, Lisa said. This is Iraq. Where else would they have taken us?

We should try and find a phone or a computer, something with internet, Mr Robinson said. I doubt we'll find anything like that here, Seth said, but I'll show you what I did find, he said, and lead them outside to some of a building.

Some of the building had been destroyed when a Tomahawk missile landed in it, but the missile hadn't exploded and remained there, stuck half in and half out of the crumpled-up ruin.

Smart bomb, Seth said, although it didn't look particularly smart. It was huge and blunt and not very scientific-looking. We could try to use the targeting computer inside, Mr Robinson said, somewhat dubiously. They gathered round and together lifted him up to where he thought the computer was. As he fussed with some wires the bomb began to hiss.

Uh-oh, Mr Robinson said.

Suddenly rockets fired and in a plume of sparks and smoke the missile shook loose its concrete cradle and began to rise stertorously into the sky. They tried to pull Mr Robinson free, but he was caught in the wires and they were all four of them together lifted into the air, dangling behind the Tomahawk like a kite tail, holding on for dear life as they climbed higher and higher into outer space.

Chapter Six

Everything was dark.

I am dead, Alice thought. But she was not dead.

The space station took them in. How did you survive? the bewildered astronaut who had rescued them wanted to know. They didn't know. All they could tell him was an impossible story about Iraq and ostriches and unexploded ordnance.

It's impossible, he said.

It is, they agreed. And yet here we are, they said.

I've been through worse, Saul said. I was *in Vietnam*.

That must have been rough, the astronaut said, but Mr Robinson disagreed. Not really, he said. I didn't mind *Vietnam*. Iraq though, I don't like Iraq, he said, shaking his head. I don't like the desert. The thing about the desert is it has no morals. The sea, the sea has morals. When you drown you fill with water and become part of the ocean. The forest's roots digest you too. The air flings you out of itself so you're killed not by the air but by the ground. But the desert, the desert just dries you out and leaves you there. It leaves: *a husk*.

I don't want to be *a husk*, Saul said.

But husks can be nice, Alice said. This space station's a shell, she said, like a husk. Isn't this husk sustaining you, protecting you from the darkness of deep and infinite space?

Mrs Robinson pointed out that where a husk is a seed once was. By fighting the enemy abroad instead of fighting the enemy at home, you've planted a seed, she said, a seed of peace.

Mrs Robinson didn't like outer space much more than she had liked Iraq. *Too much of too much*, she thought. Too much sand, too much outer space: too much nothing. And something is always better than nothing. She liked America's *too much*, even Egypt's *too much*. But kidnapping doesn't count as tourism, she didn't think.

How do we get out of here? Alice wanted to know. I feel as if we have come to the end of something. Seth agreed. As if something that was supposed to happen has not happened, and now it's time to move on.

What a weird honeymoon, he said. There's barely even been any sex.

Unfortunately the space station was too crowded to try zero-gravity sex, so they decided it was time to return home. The astronaut loaded them into one of the extra Soviet space capsules he had lying around. It was a cramped Soviet space capsule crammed with all sorts of communist crap including a bona fide Russian astronaut, but all in all it was the only way to travel.

We're not going to land in some godforsaken Kazakhstan, are we? Seth said.

I guess you don't have to, the astronaut said.

How about somewhere nice? Seth said. We're on our honeymoon, after all.

I hear Mexico is nice this time of year, the astronaut said, and pointed out the window at the whole world.

Mexico is nice every time of year, Mrs Robinson said, except for the Mexicans.

Alice slapped her. She said: *enough*.

Chapter Seven

After landing on the pristine sand of a pristine Mexican beach, they hailed a passing cruise ship and were taken aboard into endless parties.

There was food at midnight and noon and every minute in between. There were Lido decks and Sky decks and Mezzanine decks gleaming white in the devastating sun. There were decks with swimming pools carved into them a little piece of elevated ocean and real quaint portholes in every cabin and bars and casinos and a chapel. It was just like Las Vegas, except all of it was sinking.

In the chapel Alice and Seth found Father Christmas. They glanced in and there he was, magnificent and tilted in his gleaming white vestments as if he was wearing the cruise ship itself.

Alice! he cried. Seth! he cried. You remembered us, they said. Of course I remember you! he cried. I remember every couple I marry! What a small world, he said. We know, they said.

Still together after all this time? he asked. But it's only been a few days, Alice said, although that hardly seemed possible.

How time flies! Father Christmas chuckled. How are you? Are you getting along? I heard about some recent unpleasantness? I saw it on the news. I recognized you. I said, that's Seth and Alice. I married them. Hell of a place for a honeymoon, Father Christmas said, Iraq.

Well, it was supposed to be Las Vegas, but we got bored, Alice said.

Of course you did! he cried, of course! Vegas is nothing but hot air and neon. I should know! That's why I took this gig. Can't stand knowing practically every marriage I solemnize will end in drunken despair by the end of the weekend.

Well, we're still together, Alice and Seth said, as if reminding themselves.

Chapter Eight

That night they went out on the deck in the moonlight. The cruise ship had dropped anchor off a fantastic coastline. It didn't really look like Mexico anymore. There where the cliffs met the shore was a headland shaped like a half buried giant, head in hands, enormous arms sloping to the sea.

Nothing has happened of which we were not a part, Alice said.

Not yet, Seth said. Not yet.

Alice did not reply. It was very awkward between them, like new lovers.

Our marriage is failing, she said.

We must not let it fail, he said.

Later, they died.