



The
Apartment
of
Tragic
Appliances

Michael D. Snediker

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✂ MICHAEL D. SNEDIKER ✂

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When the bottom of the sea
is falling in,
we hang in space
our fingers clinging to the minutes
of our last meeting.

--Fanny Howe
"The Confessions of Persephone"

When I consider how our houses are built
and paid for, or not paid for, and their internal
economy managed and sustained, I wonder that
the floor does not give way under the visitor while
he is admiring the gewgaws upon the mantel-piece...

--Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*



Appliqué

In this version of the myth, Orpheus moves Persephone to tears because at this point nearly anything will move her to tears, and because she can't bear that this poet has traveled to the Underworld for the sake of Eurydice and not her—Persephone needs an exit plan, too.

Why do I remember the Persephone myth as an ancient Cymbalta commercial? Winter is when mommy's sad? Who teaches this sort of thing? That Demeter is a depressive is one thing; that Persephone is stuck in the Underworld is another. Persephone has enough on her plate (namely, seeds) without worrying about the crops of some other country. She can't be held responsible for everything.

In this version, Persephone is a gay man in provincial Ontario. She misses Massachusetts. (Her mother is lovely.) She is no longer with Hades, who was beautiful but cold; she forgave him his limitations a while back. No longer with Hades, but still in the Underworld: for the time being, that's how it is.

If Orpheus isn't going to save her, she'll write her own poems. They won't spring her from the Underworld, but they remind her that if days and nights can be salvaged, so perhaps can she. We find Persephone in the *mise en abyme* of a girl reading a myth about a girl writing a myth.

In this *trauerspiel*, the villain is a landlady who lets Persephone's rented apartment fall to pieces. Trapped in the typology of myth, Persephone is all the more rattled when nothing works.

Appliances are supposed to make the world a little easier. This apartment of broken things has something else to teach her. As Wittgenstein writes at the opening of the *Tractatus*, it will "perhaps only be understood by those who have

themselves already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it—or similar thoughts.”

Or as Walter Benjamin writes, “That which lies here in ruins, the highly significant fragment, the remnant, is, in fact, the finest material in baroque creation. For it is common practice in the literature of the baroque to pile up fragments ceaselessly without any strict idea of a goal, and in the unremitting expectation of a miracle, to take the repetition of stereotypes for a process of intensification.”

We have here a pile-up. In taking repetition for intensification, we have a mistaking. It’s said that we wouldn’t recognize Greek temples if they weren’t ruins. This is how Persephone feels about her apartment. Benjamin suggests that “allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.” In this sense, Persephone lives in an allegory and thinks ruinously.

Unremitting: somewhere there’s a potsherd depicting the Eleusinian mystery as Lucille Ball scarfing chocolates from an assembly line.

Imagine the still without Ethel, without the supervisor, without the chocolates. Roland Barthes meets Lucy meets Persephone: every ruin tells the story of its own sanctifying.



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CONCERTO GROSSO

I leave a radio on like a light for my return from campus. Gay sadness—the leashes it takes and gives. The radio is on for it, to keep it occupied in my absence. When I return from teaching, the radio is playing one of my favorites, the Mendelssohn concerto where Felix is throwing plates at Cécile Jeanrenaud, and then at the surprising tail end of a *Tempo semplice*, he accuses her in English of never truly having communicated the extent of her loyalty. She insists in broken German she thought her loyalty a given. At which point all her languages break. She riffles through them for one that seems fluent, but duress has made fluency itself the missing thing. *If only I were articulate* slipping into *if only I were fluent, graceful*, or does this mean *if only he were graceful*. Sometimes I leave the radio on as a nostalgic fiction, the sort of thing that might have assuaged someone decades previous, like this might trick the gay sadness into considering its own *Antique Roadshow* quaintness, provenance and value appraised only after the fact, which might be the first step in learning to take it less seriously. *And what can you tell us about this sadness, do you have any idea how old it is, or what it's worth?* Cue *schadenfreude* for the duped: *ecce* radio. But how to fine-tune nostalgic and sad—poor Cécile, the world so unkind, what can she say to counter her husband's sense that things get more brittle as each attempt at lubrication or leavening on either side leaves them both, it seems, further dilapidated. The loneliness was *allegro* then *largo* then *subito*. And as I turn the key another plate remembers crashes.

GANYMEDE

When one decides past certain hours to go to SUBWAY (*eatfresh*) despite a decent earlier serving of asparagus vichyssoise, one thinks, I'll feel a little less abject about the excursion if I travel with a nice accessory, for instance an envelope-sized Louis Vuitton satchel on whose veracity one has insisted on past occasions, although not this particular night. Less junket than one is junk, raccooning down the sidewalk to where one's students might be gorging, shoulder-slung with an object Hawthorne might describe as a citizen of somewhere else. Oh Louis, strung between the Actual and the Imaginary, like something in moonlight, cobwebbed or embroidered with the enthusiasm of an allegorical crazy person shriving for someone else's bungle. And so one embarks, +more or less sober, maybe further sobered by the unfolding event, or as likely, sobriety floundering in the Hawthornian threshold as though this kabuki gravitas could help the other more glaringly deflating elements of a binge-before-sleep pass unnoticed. As though the seriousness emanating from the bag might not, in fact, lead to further pathos, one's seeming by others, employees and otherwise, slightly deranged: Aschenbach bringing a little LV bag down to the Lido. When one arrives at SUBWAY (*eatfresh*), one hopes for neither recognition nor blandishment beyond the sandwich. One is unprepared, entering such an establishment past midnight with the shredding dignity of a heroine at the end of a Wharton novel, for comments about the bag, comments that seem to interpellate the bag as a romantic shibboleth. This isn't the idea. Dear reader, I brought the bag for dignity, underestimating the extent to which such a bag might flag me as more than an appetite on the other side of a hygienic counter. And so: when one of the workers says to one upon arriving at the front of the hygienic sandwich-making counter,

I really like your bag, one is a little thrown off, as one was wishing to seem formidable, not needing to be there, as though meeting a lesser relative at an unfortunate train station, who me, no you must have me confused with one who comes here often. I'm waiting for someone. If one had made the mistake of wearing a large puce hat with plumes, one would readjust the hat, reminding him of the larger Darwinian scaffolding from which one only temporarily had dropped. One would say something minute in acknowledgment of the appreciation, even as one couldn't know the degree to which one's reply missed or matched the flavor of his comments. In the splendid ideas of humanism, Cavafy might say yes, it's a nice bag; or, yes we have found each other like shelter animals on opposite sides of a hygienic counter, and this is just the beginning of an unavoidable Proustian dance only superficially for the sake of a sandwich. Or, yes, it is a nice bag—and how bolstering in the epiphany of one's humiliation to be interested in this boy's unexpected spume of interest, as though interest were the accessory with which, from the outset, one might have traveled, even as proleptic interest in the moment seemed not only implausible but its own problem. To walk into a SUBWAY (*eatfresh*) at so late an hour anticipating that something of interest would occur, because the excursion might be interesting, hence bringing along the bag—no, this was unreasonable. We were naked in his fawning, which added to the prescient sense of disgrace (insofar as one can anticipate disgrace more easily than one can track interest), in the way one seasoning disrupts seasonings from a different region. One is a vichyssoise in need of a little tarragon, and despite his Anglo-Saxon milky countenance, his observation about the bag is a festive sneeze of paprika. One debates whether one spoons it out fast, or stirs it in, or just watches

it like swamp guck settling on the surface before sinking. Maybe even inadvertently signaling more paprika, as though this was what the soup had always wanted. At which point the employee asks *what one wants*, as though this under such circumstances were an unloaded question. My life had stood a loaded gun, but never had Dickinson waded through such a congerie of irrelevant feelings. She wouldn't have brought the bag, rowing in Eden, deliberating turkey over meatball. Does one say *turkey* to be the stronger one, with an ear for the decorous or didactic, Saint Francis and his lewd bird across the hygienic counter, sent by the Lord for this lesson alone? Neither was learning. His hands, in gloves the size of plastic bags, were a reminder that the situation called for prophylactics. And then the further harassment of *what would you like on that*. At this point (to keep from weeping), one says lettuce. One orders something, oh heartbreak for everything, without recalling what it is. One wants this over with. And like a boulder dropped from his pelvis into one's own, or near it, the employee says *you know I have the wallet*. One doesn't know what to say, and like Dickinson on the verge of death one's metaphors crash and burn; as critics suggest, sometimes her metaphors just break off when they least understand themselves. Whatever she says at this point is up to whoever finds me holding you in hand, satchel over shoulder, Aeneas raccooning through the dungeon gates.

MANHUNT

I'd never seen so many jockstraps in my life. There were side shots of men in which the elastic around their asses made them look more like Pac-Man than they did already. The elastic straps turned asses into arcade heroes hungry for pac-dots, trying to avoid Blinky, Pinky, Inky, and Clyde, otherwise known as Shadow, Speedy, Bashful, and Pokey. An arcade hero in search of fruits: maybe this was subliminal. Maybe I was reading into it. Nine times out of ten it turned out the members with jockstrap profile shots were self-described bottoms, which made either the jockstrap or the stated sexual preference gratuitous. There was a lot of gratuitous going on, and *saudade*. If other members were thinking about side-profile jockstrap shots in terms of Pac-Man, they probably weren't thinking about avoiding Pokey. Maybe it was just me. There was a profile pic taken by a member standing with his camera pointed at his erection. All one could see in the pic was part of a T-shirt, the erection, and two feet. There were a lot of headless horsemen. It was like Washington Irving with nudity; it was Washington Irving without Christina Ricci. What made this picture different from countless others taken from the same angle was that this member had inverted the colors such that his erection appeared in the photograph an icy blue. It looked like an ice sculpture for a bris, surrounded by cantaloupe teeth and cocktail shrimp. Maybe it was melting. It reminded me of Laura Palmer's head unfurled from its body bag. *I want hot action*, it said, and simultaneously, *I'm numb, I'm blue*. I had to look things up; there were a lot of acronyms in which members were either very interested or from which they recoiled. Some of the frontal jockstrap pics (as opposed to the side shots) made

it look like crotches were wearing preventative surgical masks. A lot of them looked like close-ups of hypochondriacs or dental hygienists. There were profile pics that looked too good to be true. CrazyFunGuy reclined on satin like a Barberini faun. Maybe he'd gone to a Sears Portrait Studio, maybe he chose satin the way parents choose beach buckets. I needed other options. I was looking for someone whose loneliness matched the contours of my own. This wasn't an option.

CANADA DAY (I)

In honor of Canada Day, I left my apartment. There were a lot of middle-aged women posing by the steam engine. There were a lot of people wearing T-shirts that said CANUCK or implied CANUCK with maple leaves. In honor of Canada Day, the Prince George was a cash bar with paper cups. After drinks at the Prince George, we walked to the Royal Duke for more drinks. All the pubs were named after British royalty, even as Canada Day was meant to celebrate Canada's no longer being British. On Canada Day, Duke seemed a better name for a Basset Hound. After the Royal Duke, we went to someone's loft for a surprise party for the partner of the director of the town's queer film festival. I'd never been to the film festival. I could imagine its qualities. The festival director and his partner were en route. We and the other guests hid in the bedrooms. I was in a bedroom with nobody I knew. This turned out to be untrue, insofar as it turns out I'd IM'd half of the men in the bedroom on Manhunt. When the director and his partner got home, we flung ourselves from the bedrooms like bats, screaming surprise.

ELEGY FOR MARNI

Let's ricochet. Let's have him followed. He walks real fast. He's walked right out of a Giacomo Balla. His legs are futurist paint. Let's give him a paper parasol and see if he can open it without breaking. Trying to open a parasol for the first time is scarier than he imagines. Standing under a paper parasol makes him feel like a fun cocktail. He feels garnished. Or maybe he's thinking along the lines of the "tropical flakes" which a certain fish was never given on account of his bad advice. Marni, little quiverer, bluer than sapphires but less resilient. He'd said "once a week" but should have said, as the "tropical flakes" container states, "two to three times daily." Leave it to someone with an eating disorder to force an eating disorder on a fish. Let's all for a moment pause and think of Marni, who led a vibrant but really short life. In order to open the paper parasol, completely open it, he needed to work it back and forth like something he hadn't anticipated as sexual. It felt like he was trying not to hurt the parasol. He treated it like a person. For the sake of instruction, they looked at an etching in the living room of three schoolgirls holding paper parasols. Two of the girls were smiling, one of them more nervously than the other. The third girl seemed not to like being etched or looked at. To which we responded, "We're not looking at you, we're looking at your parasol to figure out how to open *his*. We're trying to learn something here." Our parasol appeared identical to hers in terms of trestles, something between a Noguchi and a McQueen. Upon closer inspection, it seemed the discomfited girl was propping up her parasol with her hand, keeping it open rather than holding it by its handle. Maybe that's what her face was about, her *moue*. Let's pose him with his parasol

beneath the etching. Let's brainstorm. Let's swap ideas without realizing they're nearly the same, the reflection of ideas in a pond just after you skip a stone. For instance, that roses open without the effort of parasols. If parasols only needed sun, there would be no reason for this poem. And if roses needed such dexterity this would be a different poem altogether. Imagine having this relationship with a rose. Carefully, each morning, working the sepals. You don't need to get involved. You can mostly watch, which is what we do. The parasol, the glimmering fish: these were different stories. These were fish stories. They happened every day.

CLEMENZO

If it seems like something out of Racine, it usually is. As in Titus Flavius Vespasianus, Holy Roman Emperor, over the moon for Berenice (pronounced like *very spicy*), ruler of Judaea, daughter of King Herod Agrippa. The Holy Roman Emperor falling in love with the ruler of Judaea equals *problemo*. Equals Danny Zuko falling in love with Sandy Olsen. *Look at me, look at me*, I'm Sandra, ruler of Judaea, and you have an empire to shepherd which kiboshes our idyll before it happens. *Tell me more tell me more, did you get very far*, no, because he's the Holy Roman Emperor. *Uh well-a well-a well-a huh*. Except (this being Racine) that Olivia Newton-John is Christian (or at least has recorded Christmas albums) and John Travolta is a Scientologist (although performs on Olivia Newton-John's *Christmas Wish*). Maybe the Emperor of Scientology could have dallied with Berenice without the Christians and other non-Scientologists cracking jokes behind her back, all poodle skirt and milkshake. Australia as always is a euphemism. Mostly, Titus could have been with Berenice without the empire roiling, but this being Racine and eventually Mozart, the dalliance only further enrages Vitellia, daughter of Vitellius, usurped emperor, who (i.e. Vitellia) for the sake of symmetry we'll call Betty Rizzo, who pines for Danny Zuko, their shared vowels. Hence Vitellia deciding on account of Zuko's infatuation with Berenice to have Zuko assassinated and ditto his flagship Rome burnt to cinders. But then, whoa, hold the phone, Zuko calls Sandy off for the sake of his empire. He's to marry another Scientologist for the sake of imperial stability, whatever that looks like. I don't like imagining John Travolta in a toga but there it is, and there he's picking as his second affianced a Scientologist other than Betty Rizzo, namely Servilia. This is big. Betty, enraged even more

than before, calls back aforesaid assassination and arson, earlier called off post-Sandy. Meanwhile, Servilia, a mezzo in trousers, loves someone else (who could blame her), and Zuko, God bless him (or whomever), frees her from conjugal obligation, insofar as her fidelity to her guy (or whatever) reminds him, plangently, of his broken fidelity to Olivia Newton-John, if only his fidelity could have been explored without totally jeopardizing the empire. Cue Racine. Cue Vitellia, again, who isn't pleased that after Berenice there comes Servilia. So the assassination is on, a minion named Sextus pilfering poison, watching for the right moment and chalice. But whoa, *tell me more tell me more*, the marriage with Servilia is off. At this point, we might be thinking that Titus, like other certain Holy Romans, plays for the other team, insofar as he keeps huffing about marriages then piously precluding them, like a Jamesian, which makes him seem more and less Travoltan. But then there's Vitellia, and once the Servilia marriage is off (like not having to suffer through *Grease 2*), she (Vitellia) gets what she always wanted. Harbingers descend upon Vitellia's chaise to announce with all obligatory pomp that Titus, finally, finally, wants to marry her. But the assassination (not to mention arson of Rome) is still on (!!!), and Vitellia is like *oh YAY, I get my man* and in the next operatic breath *OH FUCK, he's about to be killed, at my orders, not to mention Rome (!!!)*. So she's wailing front-stage as the harbingers think she's crazy in love, for love, with love. As opposed to her actual *FUCK FUCK FUCK*. What is she to do. Plots thicken, thin, *uh well-a-well-a-well-a-huh*.

CANADA DAY (2)

In honor of Canada Day, I wanted to let him know I could have my way with him. At the same time, *I barely had a way*. He could barely walk up my three flights of stairs. Before having if not my way then some clichéd way, I gave him a glass of water and a bowl of raspberries. His belly button was the biggest outie I'd ever seen. It was the size of a berry. This was a distraction. A further distraction were his teeth, which looked like they were missing an important genetic sequence, as though nothing had told the teeth not to sprout from their gums any which way. The next morning, his stagger was replaced by a lack of courtesy that couldn't be chalked up to hangover. He looked at my body for a long time. I asked what he was thinking. He said he was thinking about the varicose veins along my ankles. As he lay on top of me, scrutinizing my body's flaws, we discussed whether the given clarinet concerto on the radio was Mozart. He said it wasn't, and it turns out he was right, but he also asked naïve questions about radios, like whether there were radios in Europe. I still had strands of plastic turquoise on my body from a wig. He picked the strands from my body like a gorilla at nits. After a while, wearing one of my beach hats, he stopped talking. He just assessed and stood around. I wondered why he was still there. When he finally turned to walk down the steps, I asked if he was going to say goodbye. He asked if I wanted him to say goodbye and I said no, I didn't want him to say goodbye. In honor of Canada Day, he didn't.

THE GRAIN & THE GRAPE

This is an important fable. I heard it on the way to a Shad Bake that was also a fable, the moral of one being not so different from the other. All fables, in the end, have some structural and moral overlaps, e.g. “The Servant Girl Justified” (wherein a wife asks *Has not your spouse with you a right to try what freaks he likes*) and “The Eel Pie” (wherein the hero of sorts, the fable’s learner, cries *I’m surfeited, ‘tis far too much: Pie ev’ry day! and nothing else to touch!*). The titular and thematic similarities between “The Shad Bake” and “The Eel Pie” go without saying; maybe redundancy is necessary given the human condition (i.e. incorrigibly not learning from past events). By the end of the Shad Bake, who didn’t want some pie, who didn’t want something other than shad? The morals of most fables suggest that the thing about which one is most excited isn’t what one thought it was or that one should have been wanting something else (or nothing) all along. In another fable which we could call “The Dim Lake That Looked Less Shallow in the Gloaming,” a boy tells his lover that he feels abject when he (the lover) makes him brush his teeth and wash his hands after sneaking a cigarette, but the misunderstanding lover thinks that the boy doesn’t really mean “abject” on account of his “expansive” vocabulary, to which the boy responds, *my vocabulary isn’t just “expansive,” it’s exacting, when I say “abject” I mean it.* Along the lines of Winnicott’s observation that the only thing that could have rescued Hamlet would have been reading *Hamlet*, the boy needed a copy of “The Dim Lake That Looked Less Shallow in the Gloaming.” Something analogous could be said of the Eel Pie and the Shad Bake. All gluttons from certain vantages are gluttons for punishment, and ditto the girl in “The Grain & the Grape.” You can buy fifty clothespins for less than two dollars, but you can’t buy insight. The heroine of our fable is unaware of her lack of insight,

distracted by the Lady of the Lake, otherwise known as the TSS Earnslaw, a vintage screw steamer on Lake Wakatipu. It was Queenstown, and they'd just finished, she and her Dad, a bit of vineyarding in the heart of Otego. Vineyards in a fable named Mount Difficulty and Wooing Tree might have been a tip-off for someone with insight, but the girl and her dad, increasingly less lucid and coordinated, had quaffed Difficulty and Wooing like jugs of Gallo. After Otego, they were back at the wharf, reading the plaque in front of Earnslaw, as Earnslaw (a pretty good name for the Lady of a Lake) gleamed above them like an ancient lacquered temple. And then, like the God-Beyond-God which Paul Tillich describes as *both the courage of despair and the courage in and above every courage*, the girl and her dad espy, past Earnslaw, blue neon. It was *minus 5°*, a very cool-looking ice bar. Like most things in fables, it was very cool on several registers. After vineyarding, the girl and her dad think why not. A hostess shepherds them into an antechamber, gruffs them into winter jackets and boots, everything shearling. The requisite shearling makes the bar seem both cool and preppy, like a country club requiring fleecy blazers. And so they're shepherded into the bar, a buzzing igloo, where everyone looks similarly sheepish. If the girl, parka hood squashing the grosgrain bow into her hair, had an eye for irony, she might think they all were wolves in disguise. She wasn't quite there. Everything inside was ice. They were waspy tourist Inuits. The only non-icy things were the cash register and liquor bottles. These were ordinary. The girl and her dad ponied into ice-stools and ordered *42 Below*, which referred less to the temperature than New Zealand's being forty-two degrees below the equator. Sometimes how cold one is describes both how one feels and where one is. Sometimes one loses track of

space and time altogether because all one feels is cold, which takes us back to “The Dim Lake That Looked Less Shallow in the Gloaming,” to the extent that a shallow lake will both melt and freeze more quickly than deeper water. Which takes us back to the girl guzzling vodka from an ice funnel. The vodka was feijoa-flavored, also known as guavasteen, also known as *Acca sellowiana*, whose fruit, when immature, is white and opaque (cf. “The Dim Lake”), and, generally speaking, somewhat tolerant, which actually means not as tolerant as one would wish (cf. “The Dim Lake”). But distilled, it goes down easy, especially through a funnel. After guzzling, she chomped the funnel down, like all the other customers chewing their ice cups out of sexual frustration or whatever, before the ice melted their incorrigibly melting mouths.

OUIJA

I hunch over cupcakes doing my exercises. One arm stretches heavenward while I balance on my toes, strengthening my Achilles' heel and abs. One might say I was working several muffin tops at once. It wasn't easy, this simultaneous stretch & hunch as my non-stretched arm dropped grapes into the muffin tins. I didn't want a repeat of the previous weekend's strawberry disaster. I was a flamingo. I couldn't get the Boredom Proneness Scale out of my head. Two-thirds of the population scored between 81 and 117. Only 2.3% scored above 135 or below 63. I rocked a 138 and was trying to be humble about the results. A 138 meant I was non-prone to boredom, as indicated by the enthusiasm with which I contemplated the Proneness Scale. Meanwhile the cupcakes were going okay, better than the strawberries. Out of nowhere, past the sound of fragging and lawnmowers, came a voice. *KNOCK ONCE IF YOU CAN HEAR US.* Huh? I shouted, *Jeff, are you back from Bomster, what's up with the "knock" thing?* No answer. And then the voice, which may as well have been rising from muffin batter, *KNOCK ONCE.* I exchanged glances with myself, got off my tiptoes. It dawned on me that maybe this kitchen full of cupcakes was a mini-rapture. I rapped knuckles on the counter, once, then waited. And the same voice, nearly recognizable, asked *IF THIS IS MABEL.* *KNOCK ONCE IF THIS IS MABEL, KNOCK TWICE IF IT'S SOMEONE ELSE.* I knocked twice. *THEN WHO IS THIS?* It was like I was on the other side of a Ouija board. *KNOCK ONCE IF YOU KNOW MABEL.* I rapped my knuckles twice. *KNOCK ONCE IF YOU ARE IN THE SPIRIT WORLD.* You'd think if one were raptured one would be the first to know. I improvised without an ort of boredom. I spoke sonorously into the late-Spring pollen streaming through

the screen door: *I'm making cupcakes*. There was a pause. I continued. *I have things*, I called, *to say to Cathy*. I imagined letters on a Ouija board as the teacup lurched. It seemed Cathy wasn't there. Meanwhile, the cupcakes had been transferred from counter to oven, and as I watched them spill golden, I went vatic in a Southern accent. *AH SAY, WHUT'S TRAGIC FER YOU IN'T NECESSARILY TRAGIC FER ME*. No one liked the accent, and just in the nick of time, as there were too many cupcakes to finish. Even as I relished telling this story at the next party over soup shots and stone-fruit sangria, only sometimes wondering if anyone could see or hear me. This had been an ongoing question.

JANE EYRE

My usual mood of humiliation fell on embers. I was in the mood for being useful or officious. It appeared he was not in the mood to notice us. His changes of mood did not offend me. He was, in short, in his after-dinner mood. There was something off in the paroxysm which seized him when he expressed his mood. He was moody, too. I believed his moodiness. In his present fractious mood, she dared not whisper observations. That restless, excited mood which hurried into darkening. I was fully aware that only serious moods were acceptable. A singular mood came over me. No new allusion was made to the subject over which I brooded. I walked slowly to enjoy the species of my brooding. Besides his frequent absences, another barrier to friendship was his brooding. We brooded over bliss. I sought my bedroom to brood over it. In his countenance I saw a change that looked brooding. A puerile tear dimmed my eye. I wiped my tears, fearful anyone would comfort me. A wretchedness kept drawing from me silent tears. After drinking some coffee, I swallowed the remainder with some tears. Left to myself, my tears watered the boards. She wiped a tear from her cheek. Tears, hot and large, had continually been scalding my cheek. While trying to devour my tears, I was seized by a fit of coughing. Some natural tears shed on being told this. A few words would bring tears to your eyes. He stopped and burst into tears. My tears had risen as in childhood. Neither of us had dropped a tear. My tears gushed out. I was so hurt by her coldness that tears rose to my eyes. A tear of impatience. Ashamed of it, I wiped it away. I was preparing for a hot rain of tears. Besides, the floodgates of tears were open. I had been struggling with tears for some time. I

had taken pains to repress them, because I knew he would not like to see me weep. I let them flow as freely and long as they liked. If the flood annoyed him, so much the better. I interrupted, furtively dashing some tears from my eyes. The tears gushed to her eyes. I was suffocating with the bitterest tears. The trace of tears was doubtless. The bitter check had wrung from me some tears. So much hurt that tears started to my eyes. More than once, my tears blistered the page. I saw a tear slide. The last letter I received drew tears. I gushed and brooded, moodily. I brooded on my moody gushing. I wiped it away.

COUPLES JEOPARDY

We were on the rocks. Even so, we were reluctant to throw in the towel; or whenever we threw it we ended up picking it up again with sighs of exasperation. I sat with the towel, flipping channels, landing on *JEOPARDY!* It was satisfying to blurt questions with confidence. Unlike my better half, it gave me answers. Sometimes I asked the right question. “‘Up’ Songs” for \$400. *After they fell asleep at the drive-in the Everly Brothers had this to say.* “Wake Up Little Susie,” I blurt. I quickly correct myself, “What is Wake Up Little Susie?” Sometimes Alex Trebek would make a troubled, prodding face, like he believed in me. *In the psychology of learning, it’s “the retention of association,” in “Cats”, it’s a showstopping song.* “What are memories,” which I quickly revise. “What is memory?” Just before commercial break, Alex Trebek announced something unprecedented. Given the success of *COLLEGE JEOPARDY!* and *CELEBRITY JEOPARDY!* they were looking for contestants for *COUPLES JEOPARDY!* When my better half got home, I said that I’d been watching *JEOPARDY!* while he was out wherever, and Alex Trebek had announced some casting call for a special *COUPLES JEOPARDY!* Back in the day, my better half would have caught the irony, but right now he was mostly thinking *money*. Neither of us was thinking this might save our relationship, even as on some level I thought if *COUPLES JEOPARDY!* couldn’t save our relationship maybe it could serve as proof that maybe we just weren’t in the cards. We MapQuested the nearest mall that was holding auditions and went to bed. On the day of the audition, my better half was better than expected. One of the *JEOPARDY!* interns asked for the French name for meat served in its own juice, and my better half buzzed in before the rest of the couples, *What is au jus?* We were meat in our own juice, he knew that. He was stewing, and knew I was also stewing, but that

he knew it in French. Several hours passed like this. Sometimes it almost felt like love; we did high-fives. When we made it onto *COUPLES JEOPARDY!*, I didn't tell our friends or relatives. I considered our outfits for weeks in advance. Matching versus not matching. Alex Trebek was taller in real life than I'd expected; he looked like Bill Clinton. I could imagine having an affair with Alex Trebek. My better half and I were up against Robin and Larry and Mitchell and Denice. Robin and Larry were both schoolteachers. Alex said, *So, Robin, Larry says you're famous for a very special party trick. Robin glared at Larry, I am? What party trick? What did you tell Alex? I thought we filled out the form together.* This was how things went. Denice grabbed the buzzer from Mitchell and snapped each time he tried to reclaim it. My better half and I disagreed about categories. I wanted "Faux Pas" and my better half wanted "The Heavyweight Champ." I shrugged theatrically, as though to communicate to Alex that *this is how it was.* During Final Jeopardy ("Battles"), Robin scratched out Larry's question and replaced it with an intentionally wrong question, not even phrased as a question. "And what did you wager?" Alex asked. And Robin had scrawled *LARRY*. It wasn't funny. It was sad. That's how it went. A few months later, I threw in the towel. Now it's just me and the remote control, the irony of whose name never escapes me.

DÉGUSTATION

--after Dante

Each time a napkin dropped they replaced it with a new one. Folded like augurs, I couldn't drop them fast enough. The deciduous napkins accumulated around our feet. We were wading in a shoal of creased linen. Our waiter was named something like Étienne. Our waitress was Étoile. She flickered gratuitously as she refilled our tap water. Étienne presented grey pearls sleeping under a sheet of pasta on a bed of oyster mushrooms. He presented such *plats* in translation, but they could have been anything. He said pearl and it tasted like pearl. Although the next day, when you said the seaweed salad tasted like semen, it didn't work the same way. Its emerald translucence still tasted green to me, all the more so as you then said you didn't like it. I successfully fought back an impulse to say something romantic about my willingness to eat your cum. Fighting back the impulse was beside the point since there already existed in the air a sense that if I weren't saying something about your cum it was only on account of restraint. My restraint wasn't in the room but we could maybe hear it yelping a few rooms over or in the basement. The napkins continued to accumulate, at this point past our knees. I reached under the tablecloth to touch your leg, ideally long enough to feel, from both sides, like I was holding you, and what I thought momentarily was your leg was the leg of our table. It wasn't that your restraint was more coordinated than my grabbing. You just weren't making grabs, errant or otherwise. In a descent of further pathos, you eventually did make a grab, but only when the sadness caught up with the surface of my face, a winter koi pond whose dejected and flamboyant fish were trying their best to fake dormancy in the dark of their pond bed, which, fascinating for the fish, turned out to feel less frightening than the surface to which they'd wished to think

themselves adapted. The surface, as sadness peered through, was freezing. A wind blew across it, and sadness peered through the weather, fish-eyed, incarnadine; and there was your hand on my leg, masterful and swift, like you'd done this sort of thing a thousand times, which you hadn't, not with my leg. Your hand was a nickel sending the pond askitter, the fish following, distracted, thinking girlishly along the lines of *ooh nickel*, perhaps thinking a nickel was an appropriate thing for a fish to wish on. This was all happening to my face. My hands, mercifully, were drowning in linen, which continued to rise. Only then did Étienne appear with a dish called the Meat Garden. I think I heard this correctly. Apprehensively, I tested each object and its adjacent black sauce. There, like a fig-shaped amber, was part of a pigeon, conveying its last S.O.S. And there, verily, beneath a thatch of daikon, was too large a piece of mine own heart. And with Love weeping beside me in a darkness as sudden as it was complete, I ate my fill.

ATTIC

Is where we saved special occasion china, outfits for different seasons, paintings whose walls we'd yet decided upon, a noose, only figuratively speaking, a noose, the attic door clamped shut on itself, an allegory in reverse—it closed then opened, as this ought have been a closing, as ought have been a different meaning. Stockpile of dejecta and you name it, all the while mutters to the rafters, mutters, a houseboy in adjacent ZIP codes, adjacent streets, this whole preposterous, in the attic. I admit my own investigation, how few were boxes, trunks, vague memory of an unplugged chandelier alongside bulbs that wouldn't light for several goes. This is not our life and is our life. There were animals in the bedroom like there were in other, safer bedrooms, signs of life besides the wine glasses in bathrooms, living room, et cetera. How much witness born, who bore this, adopted whom, as though parents could be saved by orphans. The back door broken in like allegory in reverse, back door broken, swarm of pots and detritus in the sink. Little camera of crotches, leak of tantrum under beds: the ivy rankles as it touches, we know this now, before we think of knowing. The bunk bed, harbor and stockpile, lighthouse flinching its faggots, I was there and not. I would have, were possible a parasol conducive to blowing storms. It flurried here, as though suspended symptom. I flurried, cold confetti of intention. Soon we shall grill, and plant hydrangeas, no more marjoram for seven dollars. Traditionally, this was what onewanted and didn't work. The attic. Strobe light lead of leading down the attic. You watched this as I elsewhere waited. The strobe light, what I'd imagined, and how imagine waiting, three streets past. I register this, brooking little and as much as possible. And I watched, narrator in search of character in search of plot. Little orange-belt, sweating in downtown sun, what defense would

you perform, what block of wood your knocking.
There is more than barefoot on a plastic mat, your
feet are scorched. And the attic, if only it were
burning. Don't do this, don't do don't do, even
as I say I would, I do, but don't do this, or do, and
do, and draw the attic from its latch, muttering
stockpile, such as it is, cleared by brokedown
morning.

SOME BIG NEWS

From a slight distance, the sea looks like foil with sailboat leftovers. The sails are down as though the boats are grieving. I wonder if I've missed some big news. The people in the coffee shop didn't seem especially aggrieved. They were just gabbing. One of them was extra-gabbing. Her son seemed a little off. He was behind me in the coffee line, dressed for a job interview or to spread the word. He ordered exactly what I'd ordered. The way he copied was strange, as though until I'd ordered he didn't have a clue what sort of coffee he wanted. The strangeness was confirmed when the barista asked if he wanted anything to eat and he stammered, as though this were the most impossible question in the world. Maybe he was grieving. His mom was still gabbing like a rooster, hours past sunrise, as though sunrise was just one moment among many. He joined his mom at the table and buried his head in the paper. If it had been the *Help Wanted* section, his outfit would have made more sense. Not that anyone dressed up in this town, not that any interview here required the getup. He was immersed in what seemed like an ordinary page. If it had been a disaster, the font would have been larger so I could read over his shoulder, this being why disaster headlines were in larger fonts than those of other stories, so more people know. This is how word got round. My best guess was it was a feel-good story about a do-gooder. Besides the boy reminding me of Bartleby, everything was fine. Maybe the boy would never leave the coffee shop. Maybe the coffee shop would have to set up across the street. Maybe the boy *was* the disaster, cause for the lowered sails. Maybe everyone knew the boy was the disaster but wasn't letting on; or maybe nobody, including the boy, knew he was the disaster. They could have been covering something up. Nearly everyone is capable of this, especially in such towns. I met a woman

once who lost everything in a fire, and she just kept on playing croquet, bantering about her child's recent graduation from Bowdoin, Belá Fleck getting an honorary degree, how wonderful for a banjo player to be given such a thing. We wondered if other banjo players had ever achieved such distinction. We couldn't think of any. She roqueted my ball into the privet. I roqueted hers into the ocean. We laughed and laughed against the coral sky. No one would have guessed her child was in the fire. Snoopers were trying to figure out if the child had survived. Others were mentally drafting intentionally vague condolences that sent the right message regardless. She had, after all, lost a lot of things. Nobody wrote, "I wonder if your child is alive;" there was no way of getting answers. All of a sudden I heard down the sidewalk what sounded like Carl Orff. It was an enormous number of kids with parents, or teachers, or given the season, kids and their camp counselors; or given the town, kids and their nannies, or kids with other kids who were too old for the swim team. Everyone, including the adults, was holding a yellow piece of paper. Everyone was chatterboxing. There might have been a few quiet ones. When I was a child, I was one of the quiet ones until I put away my childish things. But even the quiet ones were holding yellow paper, like it was obligatory, like a scavenger hunt. If I were on a scavenger hunt and had to find a bunch of kids, I found them. Maybe they were grieving. Maybe it was another cortege and they were doing their best to hide it. They were doing good jobs.

SWANN'S WAY (I)

That's not the way to make him active. He made his way into a cave. He had a fine way of bringing up his children. He would find a way of slipping it into her hand. A way which might have led me to believe there was an excuse. I was in no way responsible. We mustn't go on in this stupid way. The doctor warned her not to tire herself in that way. In precisely the same way. Tomorrow was a long way off. In the same way. He did everything in the right way. I wouldn't be surprised if she lost more time on the way. In this way they made a critical valuation. She gossiped in this way. From a long way off one could distinguish and identify. Others looked best when seen in this way. I will seek my way again. She'd never done them for us in that way. I ran all the way to his house. Some day I would find a way of expressing gratitude. It volatilised itself in some way before I could touch it. In this way, I used to sit in the heat. By way of warning. He had a way of his own. Some special way of life. In this way life went by. He carried me all the way up to bed. Suspicions fell a long way short of the appalling truth. A long way beyond and behind it. I never knew anything more than the way there. The way of good breeding. They were in no way connected. I had in no way been deceived. Anxious not to distress in any way. And in that way distracted me from tedium. The ways had vanished. He had been intimate in this way. The anxious, timid way in which she begged. The way in which she looked at him. I believe we are going the wrong way. She doesn't care for him in that way. The way they joke about it. The way she told it. His way of looking at things. The way he goes on. He recently discovered a way of expressing it. A way of spoiling our party. Giving way to a slight shuddering movement. In this way I can rid myself of suspicion. I think I found a way of getting invited. Extending a long way beyond the province of physical desire. In the same way he

might have wiped his eyeglass. He remembered it only in a confused way. By the way, I don't know whether you're particularly well. The agony he suffered in no way resembling what he supposed. The normal way of life. In a purely mechanical way. A way of feeling intensely happy. An obsolete way of pronouncing language. Making one's way after luncheon. Still on the way to the supreme pinnacle of happiness. Way in excess of my real strength. By the way, guess whom I saw at the umbrella counter. On his way to the dentist. Divided in a different way. All the way up to the poplars.

DOUBLEBACK

Once across the border, none of the exit signs pertained to exits. Some of the exits were closed. Some seemed never to have existed. Some were contemplating becoming exits, still not sure onto what they would open. We'd stopped for photos with the turbines. Were I with the turbines by myself the photos would have been a cry for help. In the long field beyond were likely bodies. We left them in peace. We doublebacked into the big city. It was easiest just to follow Princess, which we did but not without another doubleback. We found my apartment, equivocally waving its ivy like an underwater plant. Given the state of things, and us, we headed for a bistro. We wondered if there was such a thing as non-wild boar. The waitress said it would be porky, but it was more like lamb. The waitress told other inconsequential lies, but we were too tired to make a stink. I was too tired for most of the boar, which ended up in doggy bags. Up Brock Street, back on the bottom leg of Princess, ahead of Princess turning into my alley, we found ourselves on the fringe of the clamor of a crazy person on a warm night in a town too Northern to take such warmth for granted. *Who's got a pen, I need a pen*, the clamor yelled. I had the remnants of a boar, but not a pen. You had a pen, and as you fished for it, the guy upped his ante: *I'll give you a dollar*. Misinterpreting your fishing for haggling, he re-upped. *I'll give you five dollars*. At which point you produced a pen, which made the guy screech into brightness. *You want five dollars for a pen?! We hadn't wanted money; we were just quick studies. You said a buck was fine. Next to our new friend, some other guy used your pen to scribble the other's number on a scrap of paper. This preceded by *who's got a piece of paper?* I didn't have a pen, but I had paper scraps in my satchel. He was trying to form the former's digits when the former recoiled, *gimme that, gimme that, that's shit, you can't read that*. The former grabbed the scrap*

of paper from the latter and wrote in his own illegible scratch a set of digits above the scratched-out attempts of the latter. We were privy to all of this, somewhat undermining my previous insistence that nothing happens in Canada. This was happening. After the transfer of digits, our guy turned to us. *I know what you are*, he confided, in a tone so scrimmed with alcohol and maybe crack that we couldn't quite catch the tone. *I am*, I said, *but he's not*. *Nah*, he said. *No*, I said, *he's really not*. *I'm definitely, but he's not*. The exchange continued. He told us that for the sake of the pen he'd give us free dinners at *Louie's*, the restaurant at the downtown *Holiday Inn*, where, he claimed, he worked. The dinner would be his specialty, named after himself, *Fettucine Barberini*, like the faun. That he "had" a pasta was less verifiable than the *Barberini*, as he lifted his T-shirt to show us *Barberini* tattooed in a demilune above his hirsute belly. We wondered if he really worked at *Louie's*. We doublebacked home.

HATSUHANA

The boys scarce seek nor hide. Unduly bonnet-bowing, sinewed—lash-laced, moth-wood pinafores (as in certain cautionary tales they crushingly are called). *Ecce* my nervy threadbare, darting over mothwick panels innocent of pantaloons, hermaphrodite subtext—indolence, squalid, like there were skirmishes I'd forgotten. Today went smoothly. We squirmed, then lobbed rejoinders. Just sherbert mountain calligraphy, pistachio in the horizon, as though sherbert scoops could winnow out these cold insistent shapes. I am a vowel upside down, the mountain says. I might well turn over without repercussion. We retreated to our geodes, inverted landscapes, retreating from peacocks, laughing thrush, verso of which is vanilla bean dropping seeds behind the canvas. And who, returning from verso, is this juggernaut of bliss. Dodo, we guess, and cranes thought capable midflight of seeming purely literary and indistinguishable from the droppings that really prove their fluency in several spaces. Are these birds or blots, this Darwinism of looking painterly as whooping both from and toward our lonely idyll. Our one and only, berries were their wearing, inedible. And some bygone Enoshima Strether, pondside, placid conundra of reciprocity, the sense that romance at some future moment might benefit from a kick in the pants. The sherbert made us miss the Vivian Girls—not that we needed warfare, not that so nuts a principle could keep us from falling further into foreground. The edges of our bargain were fluffed, all silver rush left poofing to their own devices. We seemed in good company, truly, so much left unpainted, as though my folding screen were trying to teach itself a lesson. And verily you were saying something in a dialect of which not even you had a firm grasp, it only being at this point we noticed the delicate sword-bearer, stage right, knowing, like most cupids, to arrive full-

quiver, in case he had some serious explaining. Or was it a *koto*, a net for butterflies. *Ki-cho*, *sujibosi*, halos crumbling delicately to the touch, trying not to look too flittingly anxious about having misplaced their respective saints. Yonder garnets led to pomegranates like a botched trick, and islets, amorously consumed by their own shadows, were willing to fold into water as viciously pale and holding as a mother not knowing what else to do with herself. Red-handed, mouth like a sunrise, I folded into passerine, somewhere between rare and terribly accidental, as though a manchild forgets lonesome, as azuline whorls right through his more perfidious trinkets.

COTTAGES

Weekends like this, everyone has one—cookouts, Labatt Blue, oval braided rugs from L.L. Bean, oven mitts with scenery and cursive names of herbs. A corner of my psyche was pretty rural but lacked a cottage. I had an undeveloped psychical plot, even as to desire an inner cottage seemed a step in the right direction. Even to accept in advance that said cottage would be a musty dump. I didn't mind mice turds in kitchen cabinets. I'd brush turds off tumblers with the best of them, like residue from washing. I would learn to love hockey sticks in mudrooms. Given that weekends like this were for summer, I wondered if everyone else's hockey sticks were décor. Next to the psychical plot for my cottage was a pond, which neither froze nor thawed. We never moved past blueprint. Whoever was in charge had yet to contact a contractor, intimidated by contractors, everything. The undeveloped plot contracted despite the weekend's humidity, whereas the other cottages were just there, less thoughtless than obviously immanent, like Whitman's twenty-eight bathers, who would have liked a cottage. Maybe things went on there one could only imagine. Like my landlord shuffling into some nameless town where his stepkids perseveratingly think about braining him on my behalf. My fridge crisper still needed fixing. *Brain him, brain him*, he deserves it, make some use of those hockey sticks. *Think of him as a puck*. He's a puck. If I had a cottage, I'd have hockey sticks in every room, suncatchers and potholders hung from limbs like gallows. There's a maple tree near where my cottage should be, cracked with birds, calling to birds across the border. Their phantom wings flutter, trying to remember sky. And now, from what I gather, everyone heads off to the lake, inflatable donuts and Kawasakis in tow. Everyone returns and listens to Canadian music. Shania Twain has a cottage and every cottage has Shania

Twain. Let's play Stratego, missing pieces and all, because with enough Labatt Blue, who cares. This was where everyone was. Everyone remarks upon newly caught fish and hockey, bare Canadian feet padding wetly into bedrooms whose fraying carpets smell of earlier padding feet. Better to have a cottage, shimmying out of swim trunks, than to wait for a landlord to fix a fridge. On Monday they'll return, but somehow more vacant than before, a little off, as though there were vampires living at the end of cottage docks. They know it. I knew it. Canoes shaped like coffins. They can't see themselves in mirrors (which is why Americans think they're friendly). Under other circumstances, this could be me, escaping from escape, already planning the return trip. I could resume "life" "recharged," resume again. This is where they are, parking lots of the mind, fields of summer mind, away.

DISASTER RELIEF

If by prepared you mean Googling salmon recipes, I am. If by prepared you mean Bloomberg speaking in Spanish, he is. Everyone looks for safety, scrambling from short buses like this is new. One difference between this weekend and others is that this one is being tracked; there are two-pronged commas running up and down the seaboard. It's harder to do than bunny ears. It seems to require practice in a mirror. It's not entirely clear what I'm trying to convey, beyond that this (two-pronged scooping up of air, and then in some micro-disco-like move, putting the air lower than it had been originally) is where something might happen. The graphic is shorthand for potential damage. The prettiest reporters let gale-force winds play with their hair. One reporter tosses her ponytail like it's in a commercial; it gets across the message. Someone should be reporting me, lemon yogurt sauce not cutting mustard. There's no special disaster category on *Epicurious* unless one counts one-dish wonders. Rob Marciano regrets not wearing the pants that go with his disaster poncho. And here's the roof of something: we can all relate to this. Some of the reporters got the memo to look as serious as possible. Some of the reporters seem to be taking the memo too seriously. What we need is a salmon recipe without dill. What we need is some way of not wishing that damage be as disastrous as possible. Tracking damage that never comes to fruition feels like its own disaster. We can't bear the thought of these reporters, several days later, non-ironically referring to a tropical depression. We need some less-ambivalent relation to being downgraded.

HUCKLEBERRY FINN

A black sail goes bust. We hitch skiffs and pull downriver. A boy rises to surface. River rising. Black driftwood drifting into town. Fish-belly. Blackberries beginning to show. White sighs from ferryboats. She's pinned. We're greenhorns. White as snow and good for frying. Masks of black cloth spatchcocked into fog. Way downriver ready to jump. White and still again. Some black thing ahead, floating. Chipped pieces showing white, or something. Black specks on water. Were found in rivers drowned. Aunt Sally white as a sheet. Black clouds with rows of glowworm. A woman in white, ready to jump. White curtains painted with castles. Blackberries beginning to show. Rivers, we reckon, beginning to rise. Linen so white it hurt. I went downriver and camped for good. Gun in hand and white hair flying. I told him I fell into rivers. Black raft. White-caps half a mile round. Ready to jump. Black shores for hours. Aunt Sally white as a sheet. Rivers coming up fast. My peeled head and white whisker. Suit of solemn black. Dragged to door and down to river. Sluice of white glares. Black with a soothing way. White shirts off a line. Black as stars and two feet deep. Fish-belly. He whitens a little, he can't help it. Downriver under willow. They'll hunt rivers for anything but my carcass. The river looked miles and miles. A river like a steamboat without lights. River and driftwood and away. Rivers a mile wide. Go get the river again. I tuck up river roads. Swim half across rivers. Rivers rising. Rivers going between banks. Relations upriver. Relations down. Ready to jump. Drifting downriver, kind of solemn. She's pinned. Breaking up and washing down. White as a sheet. A boy floats to surface. I found a man in a river setting lines. You can't tell the shape of rivers, and you can't see distance. Black specks on water. She churned up. I crept along and found two bodies. They think I've been killed and floated downriver.

Then rivers softened. They were mine. Rain
in rivers looking awful pretty, always gnawing.
Edging towards the middle of rivers, nobody said
a word. When I'm downriver, I'll write a letter.
We'll have them feathered and flung. Aunt Sally
drying out. Coughing a black river. A bonnet to
match. A shovel, a river like stars. We sold him
out. We kept right along.

IT'S VOLLEYBALL, NOT SEXISM

Regardless of where one stands in terms of volleyball being a sport or the exploitation of affective awkwardness (e.g. *I got it, I got it, oh fuck*). We compensate for lack of positions in sometimes wearing protective goggles. Where other sports have positions, we have lines that never completely agree on their jobs. I emerge from the locker like Alice Adams untangling her head from a trellis. The color of my shorts is eclipsed by their length, which is shorter than the others. In advance of the game, still gassy-sweaty from the poutine van, we talk strategy like the last lonely couple in winter's kitchen, considering, as frost stitches up our windows, the vicissitudes of oatmeal, simmering in a cup's worth of water. Is it okay that we used tap, should we try the wooden spoon. Should we try it again, is it all too late. Let's spike it. Let's assemble in formation, a marching band without instruments—like tubas and xylophones might drop at any moment into our clammy hands. Our hands (our non-sexist, needful hands) find themselves roped in what surely is not hygienic to the extent that others have done this, with the same sweaty net, before us. I have the focus of Plotinus. The nudity of my limbs is devoted to this art of swatting, apologizing, perfunctory fist pumps. What would it mean to win when outcomes depend, like manna in reverse, on what doesn't hit the waxy ground. I will die here. If marching bands were armies, then we were marching. By which I mean I marched, the asphalt more slippery than it looked, requiring further precaution. I walked, carefully, past the scrimmage of undergraduates in St. Patrick's Day glitz. I was going home. This was my court. I was ready, and these sad Canadian clouds were my team. I did my best.

GOOD HONEST GUY

I find that the most desirable trait in a partner is their immense desire for me. I'd like to think I'm open-minded and versatile. I'd like to find "the one" but I'm trying to get to know people before jumping back into a relationship. I'm a scuba diver. I'm willing to learn how to develop the bond of human emotional intimacy with guys who are willing, honest, communicative, and thoughtful like me. I guess you could say that I am just a regular T-shirt and jeans kinda guy that happens to like guys. I am pretty much an open book so just ask, I guess. I can be very random in action and interest. Being a hardcore INTJ, I'm probably at home eating candy. Each and every day, I learn more and more about myself. I love dance music! There I said it! I am good at researching fun things to do. I really know what I'm looking for, I've known since I was 20. I don't know if I have a favorite anything. I have been called a gypsy by nature. I love hotwings. I believe in fluid living; this flows into everything possible. Right now I work in the insurance industry. I'm learning to speak Farsi. Maybe this is untrue but some things are best left to a conversation. I have three dogs, a gecko, and a hedgehog, so being an animal lover is kind of a must. I have been to the other side of the world and back which really changed my outlook on things. I focus quite a bit on what goes on in my body. I'd like to say I'm good at French horn but some days are better than others. Absorbing information is one of my joys. I've been told I'm good at being bitchy, though you can decide for yourself. This conversation would go smoother if we were having it over a cup of coffee. I tend to go towards either side of the spectrum. Cars are amazing things to me. I want to take in as much as possible and have a good balance of downtime as well. Country cooking is my favorite. I am a hopeless romantic, have a great sense of humor, and work out 3-4 times per week. I am not looking

for HOOKUPS that is not who I am so I am sorry if you are just looking for SEX please don't message me. I work on a help desk and I've been told that even though the people can't see me on the phone that they can hear my smile in my voice. More of my friends have cried around me than anyone I know. I'd like to get to know you, and figure out if there's something worth pursuing. Let's start off with what I am and what I am not. I enjoy being an active person. I have worked really hard to get to where I am today. I'm self-employed, I guess. I guess you could say I'm a big kid at heart. Inspired creation seems to be the only thing that matters. I love sports and the gym, but there's so much more to me than that. I am a teddy bear who loves to be held. I greatly appreciate at least basic consideration for others. I could eat Mexican food every day and usually do. I used to think I was a city person, but now I'm not so sure. I would say I'm a chill guy. I'm not "obviously gay," although I know all the lyrics to *My Fair Lady*. I love puns, and if you smell nice, that's definitely a perk! I'm an all or nothing personality. I'm an active guy looking to meet like-minded individuals. I am not nearly as nihilistic as I pretend. I enjoy being outdoors. I am a work in progress, and could use a little help. We all have drama, but some things could be nipped in the bud before they explode. I don't know what it is, but people have this tendency to end up scared that I'm going to engulf them and devour them whole. No matter what I write, I'm sure I can only provide a glimpse of what I might offer. It'd be great if biking was your preferred mode of transportation. I think my coworkers think I'm bizarre. I like interesting things. I've been called a Norman Rockwell painting come to life multiple times. If you want to know anything else, just ask. Please do not waste my time. I seem to be really good at knowing what I want and doing what I have to do to get

it. Overall, I'd have to say I'm a pretty good guy. I recently purchased a fixer-upper. I probably spend 20 dollars a month on dryer sheets. Once I started a fire in my grandmother's house; to this day, I have no idea how it happened. I'm usually very busy, but I make time to free-form dance. I am well-mannered, well-traveled, brutally honest, earnest, and compassionate, not to mention passionate about everyone and everything. I am masculine and very outgoing. I can gift-wrap like nobody's business. Sometimes, when I'm cooking, I talk to a camera like I'm on the Food Network. I used to write that I consider myself an average guy, but now I realize I'm anything but. I'm one of the good guys. You might say I could be ready for a change. I don't want to be alone. Actively seeking an outgoing and adventurous guy to see where things go from here. As a teenager, I fucked my beanbag. I'm an old-fashioned gentleman. I've never been to Maine, but know I would love it.

SWANN'S WAY (2)

It always happened when I woke like this. Always providing the maid with a fresh problem. Always happy to find an excuse for another turn in the garden. Having always had a craze for antiques. I have always told you he had plenty of taste. That frail kiss he always left on my lips. That line of yours which always comforts me. That hateful staircase, up which I always passed. Having grown accustomed to seeing him always in the same stage of adolescence. Always at the same evening hour. It was always to a steeple that one returned. Its roof always surmounted by the cooing of a dove. Always bringing that summer back to mind. Always preceded by a zone of evaporation. The sensation of being always surrounded by our soul. I've always said that he was not in the least like other people. Always the exact opposite. Always putting himself in their place. The unlucky coincidence that always brought both visitors to his door at the same time. People are always coming to me about it. They always prove fatal. We always returned from our walks. One always had the wind for companion. I would always be just on the point of asking his name. Always in the same helpless state. Habits, which they always imagine themselves to be on the point of shaking off. Always a long way ahead of us, like birds. Whom he always treats exactly as he pleases. I am always free, and I always will be free if you want me. There's always some excuse. His desires always ran counter to his aesthetic taste. Having always hitherto had the certainty of finding it. Always until then a grotesque disparity existed. He would always go. Since he was always tipsy. Always finding himself dull. Always hovering. Always trying to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds. He would always have until then. Always mistaking it for water. Always making a point of letting people see that he simply must not indulge in any display of emotion. Always

struggling to be positive and precise. Always in that trembling condition. He always returned safe and sound. I had always imagined it. I always kept within reach. Why are you always talking about that street? He has always had an insane desire to get to know people. He must always be forcing himself upon strangers. Always creating awkward situations. Who always seems afraid. Who is always free.

ROCKWELL IN BRAZIL

For the time being, shrubs were content being shrubs. Like inside jokes or secret handshakes, they shrubbed along in ways only shrubs could understand. We hung our knickers on spoonwoods near the swimming hole, scared off butterflies, attracted melanogasters, swam our lithe little nudities into green water, observed the whites of our feet squished in mud. Meanwhile, someone's absconded with our knickers. Thanks spoonwoods, thanks for your vigilance, argus-eyed for azaleas, pileated woodpeckers, *but not for knickers*. We give the spoonwoods a talking to. We ask not-so-difficult questions. Our nudities, naired, considered each other like crab apples blushing from neighboring branches. In certain cultures, blushing is a form of ripening. In others, it's like growing. We considered our respective blushes, our mudwhite feet. We wanted to trust each other. As you would say, I was trying. There were serpents in the lurks, blooming in compensation for missing bloomers. We couldn't tell how much was going on but we were tempted. People can, so to speak, become anything, incomplete as they are. In this new situation, prelapsarian, post-mudsquish, we considered our options. Somewhere a printer was clogging. Printers wept ink like squids mourning virginity. Or were they tears of joy. Regardless, they fudged our names. Of a sudden we found ourselves surrounded by bureaucracy and dust, like the printer was our problem, like we knew what printers were. The file cabinets and the clerks inside them responded to our *gosh* with the gaze of llamas. Where'd the azaleas go? Being naked in some foreign, saturating tedium was as fun as it sounds. We missed Stockbridge. We played hand games, told knock-knock jokes, recited Longfellow, all the things that might prove our profound innocence. Not even the dust was convinced. No one was having none of it. How

to get into your pants if you weren't wearing
any is a real question. We played it as it laid.
Maybe the spoonwoods were in on it. Madame
Roland wept because she had not been born a
Spartan. I sympathized. Was it certain that only
soft happiness was happiness, good days being
dangerous in different ways, the lonely child
among adults drawn to Felix, the other child,
naïve to the naïve. Hey Buster, just wanted to say
hiya, let's share the casket out of which I'm falling.

THE APARTMENT OF TRAGIC APPLIANCES

My dishwasher is a Danby Designer. It has buttons, one of which is a blue hare pelted with rain, suggesting the speed with which a rabbit, seeking shelter, might clean dishes. There are four hundred rabbits in the Aztec myth known as the Centzon Totochtin and they are led by Two-Rabbit, Ometochtli. Collectively they represent inebriation, not the dregs. They wash drunkenly, slurred between the ears. When one pushes the blue rabbit button thinking speed, one asks for trouble, woozling of pickle jars, peanut butter spoons, other Danby Designer denizens slush-piling in the alley of spinning blades. *Make it stop spinning*, keen the Danby rabbits, *oh the spinning*. Each morning, like a Berryman poem, I wake the glasses up, rub off the crud like Johnny Appleseed polishing galas on his thigh. This rabbit, hungover from the outset, old as Aztecs: who made this an option for a dishwasher? And why do I keep pushing its button? This is my Danby. It is “designer” insofar as it fits anywhere, rolls across the scummed linoleum like it has places to go. More specifically, I roll it from one corner of scum to another like the desert dragging of *McTeague*. I can only intimate how barely the Danby washes. It heats residue only to reimagine cleanliness as an art project. Why put things in there at all is a rhetorical question that the dishwasher, like one hand clapping, answers with further questions. Then there’s the microwave. The Sears representatives were informative if not persuasive. We expected no more from representatives. We wished facts about reheating, and not once did they say never expect anything from this microwave for which already you have paid. Not only will it not heat, it will not turn its lazy Susan. It will warm nothing. If only laziness were the heart of the problem. If only the problem had a heart, roots. The laziness, like everything else in the apartment, is a misnomer for something

serious. The microwave's own particular buttons—produce, poultry, et cetera—are pro forma. Its buttons could be pushed indefinitely (they are), and still. My lasagna is frozen. My appliances make sad food sadder, though it's rare I think about food, which is a separate problem. Separate and related, feeding off each other to compensate for things not being eaten, fed, cleaned, warmed, stored. I refuse to feel sad for the Danby or the microwave when there's so much sadness elsewhere. Like the fridge, which was abandoned for five months. Had it been a child it would have died, but it's a fridge, which doesn't keep it from nursing ongoing betrayal and resentment: *I could go on, but can't*. Oh to live in a space where all appliances are inconsolable. Who learned this from whom. There's a magnet on the fridge for a repairman, but he can only repair the surface issue. There are deeper issues in which the fridge and I commune. That something is melting. That something isn't thawing. These are pressing.

SEMIFREDDO

I'm thinking of this less in terms of gourmanderie than a confluence of the gustative and the diachronic, so that when you order the dessert you don't know, temporally speaking, what you're in for. Therefore it will need to be a French landscape, which speaks more than most genres to time's capriciousness. Étienne Allegrain's *The Orangerie at the Chateau de Versailles* would serve as a good example, the orangerie involving a flight of stairs which surely will look different depending on the quality of light, this being as much a question of time as it is of color or weather, and all this has to do with the dessert as an experiment in inseparabilities we take for granted. And even though the painting is of an orangerie, the dessert is lemons, although I wouldn't rule out the semifreddo moving toward Meyer lemons if not mandarins, as the daylight progressed. Or is there the possibility even of blood orange, a delicate apocalypse. Or is *Parterre du Nord* a better example, would this be more executable, with its less harrowing sense of perspective. Some versions of the semifreddo might, I suppose, be more harrowing than others, but you wouldn't know until it arrived, the softness of light falling on or retreating from the most delicate fretwork of a tree branch. The tree branches are the darkest, least generous of chocolates, a sort of chocolate calligraphy that itself serves as the vehicle for what the sun is thinking, which will depend perhaps on the amount of whipping cream, could one play with the ratios of such a thing, especially for the sake of replicating that experience. There being only one way to find out. The semifreddo being both the landscape and the light that falls on it, as furthered by the branch placed orthogonally across it, as furthered by the lace cookie on which the semifreddo rests, which might if it's not too obvious, involve pistachio. And because temporality is as much a

seasonal predicament as a diurnal one, sometimes perhaps the branch will sprout leaves, which of course will not, like the branches, be imitations of branches, they'll be real leaves. I'm thinking at this moment of thyme sprigs (if the pun isn't too desperate) pressed delicately into the edges of the branch, gentle indentation of the semifreddo itself. Or then there's something more along the lines of aggressively misused ingredients in non-aggressive ways. I think I've gotten here, thinking about the tree leaves, but now it's much more about the things one could do with cauliflower. So much remains to be done with cauliflower, which raises a different version of the question of ratio. A head of cauliflower is not the same as the floret of a cauliflower, which for the sake of our discussion we might likewise call *chou-fleur*, if only to illuminate the ways in which *fleur* and flower are and are not the same, the ways this cooking already was about not only time, but translation. Forgiveness is an act of translation, Wimsatt and Beardsley don't say that a poem is like a pudding, but they do write that judging a poem is like judging a pudding. How would one judge the use of *chou-fleur* as purposively disorienting mode of sprinkles. I've seen flower-shaped sprinkles, and the oddness of the cauliflower would flicker uncannily in and out of recognizability. Is it a very small scoop of chocolate ice cream with sprinkles, or is that chocolate ice cream with cauliflower sprinkled on top of it? This is related to our earlier discussion of the chocolate branch versus the real sprigs of thyme—does the cauliflower count as its own sort of sprinkle, for instance, sprinkling, after all, being the action by which the florets would be placed, and of course this already is raising questions about ethics, not that everything always goes back to queer theory, or to paraphrase de Man, the sprinkler from the sprinkling. So on one level this second experiment

which arises from the first involves more or less straightforward questions of mimesis (here we're back to French landscape), if *chou-fleur* counts as cauliflower, if it counts as sprinkles, even as sprinkles technically are less sprinkles than cauliflower is cauliflower, sprinkles more or less just being sugar. Do you see all the interesting questions we're approaching, cascading one after the other, how they're all related. In terms of sugar I'd like to play with the extent to which cauliflower, as a starch of sorts, I think it's starch, is a sugar too, which makes it already closer to sprinkles than we'd maybe presumed. So then the question is how much to roast the florets, to bring them to the point of caramelization, maybe some of them beyond caramelizing, burnt-sugar florets, to raise several temporal questions all at once. At least in this moment I'm thinking the cauliflowers would roast in maple syrup, although maybe two separate Pyrexes, one involving maple, the other vanilla. Or if the chocolate ice cream is sweet enough, and the sprinkles are already so strange, what if they're roasted with cumin, I don't think cardamom would work, much as I wish it could. But something about the cardamom conjures the promising pale lucidity of a November morning, which could be applicable to the semifreddo. But what it comes down to is do we use an intentionally familiar chocolate ice cream (Breyers, even?) or is the ice cream going to need something else, there's just so much to discuss. Preposterous with stakes is a way of describing vulnerability, the pathos of the semifreddo, whether it is cold or just half-cold, and what would that even mean, to be half-cold and sweet, the two of us strolling in an orange garden.

SELF-HELP

I went back and forth about baggage. I could fill it, empty it, claim it as carry-on, pay to have it checked, but shedding wasn't something I could do with real bags, which made the exercise befuddling. As far as the exercise, checking baggage seemed positive only if an airline lost it. My bags would call no attention to themselves beyond a wish to be overlooked in transit from carousel to trolley to hold and back; if they returned, they'd be snagged by someone else. I'd make sure of it. Although losing luggage is less common than the anxiety of lost luggage, it was a little freeing to find myself desiring losing bags. There would be no anxiety about the losing, anxiety being part of the baggage. In my head, I knew the chance of lost baggage was more likely if the itinerary involved lots of layovers. Not that I wanted to go anywhere. What needed to go was the bags. And then, maybe I'd feel less sad and self-berating and plan a trip. The baggage, actually, didn't need to go anywhere, it needed to be lost en route. I realized that even if my bags were lost, they might eventually return, and the only thing worse than having the baggage at all was the reprieve of losing it and then its being retrieved and left at my door. That would be the worst day of my life. I'd open the front door humming Hall and Oates, not even aware of my contagious smile, and there it would be, stuffed with what I most dreaded and to which I was most attached. Working myself into a new panic, it came to me that I could write on the baggage tags a name and address other than my own. Insofar as I'd been told on several occasions that depression was rage turned inward, I thought I'd write the name and address of an ex-boyfriend. While I liked the idea of my baggage getting sent to someone who contributed to it, it only then dawned on me, self-beratingly, that I could leave off the baggage tags altogether. I berated myself for having spent

so much time thinking about the tags at all. Stupid stupid stupid! I thought going for a walk might calm me down, but the idea of leaving the apartment struck me as unlikely. I wondered if walking around the apartment would count as going for a walk, but the thought of walking through those messy, empty rooms made me anxious. Either particular objects inspired dread, or reminded me of related past events. I looked out the window. A goldfinch flew away as soon as he saw me. I summoned the courage to boil water for tea. I thought tea would have a calming effect. Midway, I gave up on the tea idea and turned off the burner. I burnt my hand just thinking about it.

BLANCHE

Old man-trap was the end of the line. As far as farce I'd heard funnier, which didn't keep the crowd from stitches. They whooped and crowed, did my fellow Americans, regulation-size hands slapping postbellum blistercloth and blonde until the palms went claret. It brought them to me, neither laughing nor spiriting anything, drovishly, neither card nor cabin. Meanwhile, my lathy non-regulation-size palm was busy with a bullet in the brain. Where are strategically placed mirrors when you need them, eyes in back of heads, pith helmets. Brain, mutational, telling a body to keep growing past folly and lintel-stoop, sweet confused, brain, inadvertently eloquent. Pink of persuasion, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow: meet this, try to figure each other out. What part of Red Sea don't you get, going further biblical by the second and limsy, sorry blanched. What's black and white and red all over? What forrerd hyst, the keeling over, final tour of a great nation. Never in my life have I made so many people cry. Never so useless in assuaging. Nary an airkiss as the train reels, nary clutch of living fingers, catching sunset after gently mewling sunset. I was spinning out of control, differently, some related, likewise degenerative mutation. I didn't end a war, I was one, or remembered having been one, amounting to the same thing. Soon when we survive this night, this theatre nightmare redux, we'll tape timelines to posterboard tea-bagged to look old, put our heads together. Was born in a county named Hardin now called LaRue, how rue can swallow nearly anything, calling all outlying territory into its glassy fold. How afterward to understand this bergamasque of itineraries, compass needle arthritic and tired of turning. Until then, this was the date and *I was this*. The image of myself on stage didn't seem, as far as mirrors go, more coordinated; it reflected flailing with ruthless precision, unquietly. Bullet-

brained, lodged and whizzing, ardent ricochet, I sat and watched the baroque and speedy entropy of what, after the fact, we separately imagined as the reflection of reflection. Reflection of curtains rising onto smudging, warped glass of a travelling carnival. We talked about this in a manner of speaking. Bitters, veto, slip ticket, slingflip. I nanced my way in and out of chairs, forgot many things which you did not. Arrack, pupelo, dram after dram. I wasn't pining for something lost, I wasn't unaware that my sense of ethics required a certain blur of fantasy and the world as such. I really put the licks in, this wasn't nothing to nobody, we caught a weasel sleeping. I didn't remember being part of the problem, why one travels with everything, negligee after negligee, litany of negligences alchemizing into pinxters. This is the prairillon of my discontent, populated by animals that nose each other's noses in what only looks like kissing. When was I recognized, were there recounts, did you bellow, no, but boy did I. Bullet-brain, buttonbush, all drammed out. What is the penance for this. I could kill you, was extreme; I could leave you, more so. I'm not quite demolished, not yet. It's just that script, *old man-trap*, the line that gets me every time.

SPECIMEN DAY

Every day feels like today in Bangkok. A little hazy. Somehow someone has heaped the pallets in advance. Softwood skids of tamarind, cabbage, jackfruit, none of which seems to have an opinion on anything. Various tubers in soggy crates likewise seem not to care one way or the other, they all look so disaffected. Or maybe placid, maybe the gourds just know their days are numbered, and in this knowledge have learned a more peaceful relation to dread, as though the gourds, leaning into each other like quiet bodies in a bathhouse, were counting breaths, naked, non-salacious, exhaling into Bangkok's sailcloth sky. The sky, likewise, is more placid than usual, so much so that it seems unaware of the ways in which placidity itself nearly always forebodes something or other. Pym could tell this to the gourds, *Tekeli-li*. But the gourds, the beans, the little eggplants are not nonplussed. Kosum and Buppha consider their pallet of litotes. Malee and Bussaba crack their necks, their knuckles, all the other joints that humidity is confusing. Kosum, Buppha, Malee, and Bussaba all mean "flower." Flowers considering their own produce, like affect thinking about emotion. It's nice to think there are so many names for "flower," like Inuits and all their words for "snow." *Tlamo*, "snow that falls in large wet flakes." *Hirylya*, "snow in beards." *Jatla*, "snow between your fingers or toes." *Naklin* and *klin*, "forgotten snow" and "remembered snow," respectively. "I remember snow," this is a good distinction. I'd like to know the ways in which these Thai women's names signal different modes of flowers. "Wilted flower," "wrist corsage," "flower just peeking out of its calyx," "plastic flower on a dinner table set for one." "Plastic flower in need of dusting." They consider their produce. Pensri considers the sky, which is necessary insofar as Pensri means "beauty and goodness of the moon." She watches for the

moon, waits for it, as though once the sun sets through that thick white sky, things will really start happening. Things are going kind of slow. The produce, the women, equally mindful, some of them holding parasols, one of them tonguing something stuck between her teeth. But then, because this is how it is every day, there are calls of *yohk*, *raawk*. Of a sudden there's a need to hoist the tarps and awnings that shadow the gourds. Hoist, hoist, ye flowers, hoist ye fighterkite. And hoist ye placidly, mindful of breath, how the ropes crotchet up the pulley, the old technology of wheels doing something we underestimate. "Hoisting," a good word, a good name for someone. And so tarps are hoisted. All along, between the skids, are tracks, so narrow one might think them flagstone paths, winding through some amorous garden. Imagine, in the "beauty and goodness of the moon," such a flagstone path awakening as from a dream to this yellow train. Good morning! This is mindfulness of a different order. From the front, the train's windows look like eyes and a nose, its face weaving around the corners of dilapidated buildings. That's how graceful the train is. It's not a bad train. It's just a train, the way the gourds are gourds. The hoisted canopies look incredulous, who wouldn't be, fluttering in the train's approach, as though the train were a breeze. It's not a "breeze," there are several words for breeze but "train" is not one of them. All of the dread that everyone and everything is mindfully inhabiting gets displaced onto the awnings. Good for the gourds to be so ready for the next life. And nothing goes as planned. The train is a caboose in search of what preceded it, a caboose without expression, less going off its tracks than proceeding upon them impeccably. I'm mindful of the tracks, of the skids over which the train glides without touching anything, like Jesus. And nothing is damaged, the

women unhoisting their awnings, and it's back to the day, the parasol, the white sky. The safety is unbearable. Perfect train, perfect market, all as planned. This is when you know you've met your maker, when you know this will happen, like clockwork, each day thereafter.

RABBIT

Klonopin, Cymbalta glow low in dusks of
bracken. Tomaselli garden with real pills in it bled
out shrubs. This is where I see him, years later.
I thump the others quiet, *put out your cigarettes,*
dimbright, stop clinking bracelets, stop chomping,
he's here. He was as he'd been a little older. Twigs
in his hair, like he were becoming scarecrow, or
scarecrow slowly becoming human. And there
was I in a variation of earlier birdlike outfits, fewer
patterns, more knowingly angular, theatre of
jarring neutrals. My ears twitched silver. We didn't
have words. I was real, far as that goes, though
this recent development disrupted what hitherto
had been an easy arrangement. *What's he looking*
at, I thought, *is that aura cowlicking my head again,*
or were there crows. Vision pretty much stayed
asymptotic, each squint approaching the other's
axis like a pastoral spaghetti western. The trees
were paste, the pills falling. We were ripening in
reverse, wishing we could stick everything back
as we'd found it. And so I scampered off with the
others just before the warrens vanished. Single
gleaming shape broken back into gloaming, its
being evening didn't matter, nor March nor May.
Branches, leaves. And sepals closing where just
before there had bloomed a fairy, flower-faced,
unblooming from bract like a jewel box ballerina.
She spun rusty, wand uncreaking against her
dewdrop gown. She seemed to speak in reverse.
The dizziness receded, dewdrops drying. The
pebbles of my neck still smarted from where her
wand had cracked. And there were shadows in
the velvet grass. I was leaning against a fowlhouse,
which at least bore the sound of logic. In the din
of clucks I barely noticed molecules exchanging
valentines. Blood was feathering, paling. The
further horror of the event of returning to the toy
version of oneself being that one can't respond.
I wasn't dying, I was receding, growing softer.
There was no memory of fever, there being no

memory. And I was unchucked from the heap
of dejecta, saved from fire, returned to a shelf,
the bow around my neck fluorescent with a new
vigor. The threads fraying from paws found ways
back in, homecoming of glassy parasites. I was
ravishing again and loved and barely felt it in the
batting. Soul-swaddle doesn't know the trouble
it gets into. Doesn't know all goes dark. Nor how
long in stocking. Nor scent of oranges, almond.
Placid sprig unknowing held in soft unfeeling
arms. Nor boy approaching, *stop*.

THE HOUSE OF MIRTH

Cousins inhabiting dingy houses. Visits to relations whose housekeeping we criticized. Where she installed herself in a house, looking at life through screens. A woman who presumed to have amusing house parties. The only person who kept us in good humor when there were bores in the house. When the house had been too uproarious overnight. Two or three red farmhouses dozing under apple trees. Gasping for air in a little black house. The house being empty. As if she had been lamenting the collapse of a house party. The entire house deluged with suds. It was insufferable to have such creatures about the house. The drama of household renovation. The house in its state of unnatural immaculateness and order. A doorbell sounding through an empty house. Talk of buying the newly-finished house of the victims. Violating the cardinal laws of housekeeping. As if there were a contagious illness in the house. Household expenses weighing. He reentered the house and made his way through deserted rooms. You can't tell what you're smoking in one of these new houses. Annexed to her small crowded house. Can't see why Judy keeps the house wrapped up in this awful slippery stuff. He led her through the house to a large room at the back. God you go to men's houses fast. A voice warned she must leave the house. She had once picked up, in a house where she was staying, a translation of the *Eumenides*. As the mud and sleet of a winter night enclose a hot-house filled with flowers. If their house was shabby, it was kept. Rattling round in that empty house. The house was closed—Judy telephoned this evening. We were sure she thought her house a copy of the *Trianon*. The house loomed obscure and uninhabited. The housedoor closed. Something doing before she left the house. The privilege of living in a house that belonged to her. Striking rapidly across the

lawn toward our unfinished house. I gave up
my apartment and shrank to the obscurity of a
boarding house. A house where I could come and
go unremarked. Hating the noises of the house.
Small aggravations of the boarding house world.
Uncongenial promiscuities of the boarding house.
Once out of the house, I couldn't decide where
to go. It was strange to find myself passing his
house on such an errand. I crossed the street and
entered the house. Since it was my fate to live
in a boarding house. An image of the old house
stored with memories. The intense silence of the
house reminding me of the hour. I felt as though
the house, the street, the world were tempting.
Conceptions of a house not built with hands.
Thus adjured, I turned my eyes on the spectacle
which afforded them such legitimate mirth.

GONE WITH THE WIND

He lost it when her neck break. Grabs his gun and shoot that pony down but he rather shoots himself. Gets called murdersome for teaching baby how to jump. Baby knew jumpspoon all along, at least some picture in that pearlbrain of hers how the jumping felt. She wrong, jump and idea of jump colliding, as is the way. Spoiled as pastry, cute enough for slaughter, all deathwish coiled with a sense of irrevocable. In the manner of Hippolytus, Phaedrus, Phaeton, pony is unfortunate extension of ambivalent wishes for attention, as shellgame stopgap to familial bicker. You want cruel, you want bray, make yourself at home. Make it. She the offspring, she the kingdom for some comity and canard. Just try. They be beautiful, self-excoriating and mean, not innocent even from first punchbowl banister. Could dressage defer barbs, dressage she would. She and pony pony up. You can hear them in advance, silverleafing, ponydown. Nary a mare whiskered in pony's ear, headshy and ringsour. Pony, phony figure of spoony dotage, knows better and less, feels breakneck staccato down to reticula. No stopping this pretty spectacle made more so in our thinking we smart enough to know how it ends in advance. No stopping boozehands clasped around an ever-paling head. He done lost it. He grab gun. Locks himself in a nursery with the dead babe. And that for some time where he stay. You both thinks you the baby, you both thinks he's horse. We take turns with guns in conjugal flicker. Put it down, and play as lay. And the neck, long since broke, more persuasive than the baby, patient past wishing until it wouldn't. Spoony spinning ringsour without understanding implication. Quondam spoony doesn't change so much as reify the games, reifying what we'd all long fretted. Look after him but never let him know. We being everyone and everything at once, our options shrinking to the size of a

room. Before which we watched from a verandah in whose Georgian light we convalesce from previous disasters, so many ways of falling, stairs, horse, a white ladder that would pass inspection none, but we can't live without it. Maybe some other incident will befall us, maybe we lacerate ourself with regret. Maybe he grab his gun and this time mean it. This is Mammie speaking, who earns the right to speak. Who has been emptied and filled by too many persons not her own. You gone empty Mammie what with ideas like you can't die because you already dead. None you dead, you so sorry live Mammie hurts for your living. You lie with the dead as though this was the same. And Mammie like my fridge gone lose it. She leak tears on kitchen linoleum, which don't clean tiles so much as further stain. We gots tears next to boxwine, corn chowder, snits of cheddar. Tears leave gray less gray, furthering oyster like pearls for swine. You makes Mammie all broke up. And Mammie cries for years, black hunker in a kitchen full baroque with need. This goes on like all things else needing fixing. They chips away at frozen, but still she cry tiles, as all you pace round like the fridge was the problem and not some final, incurable end. The fridge looks like a coffin, and you both in different ways thinks the other's corpsy, for whom tomorrow is another day for more reasons than Mammie can reckon. And if you kick her hard enough it might do the trick. And he still pony, he still thinking jump, heart racing like bullets in a brain. And we still whirling, we pooling together.

MILDRED PIERCE (PIE WAGON)

Nail to spackle, blueprint of houses before going bust. Some different we builds a house from different plans, marquetry and sliding walls. Soon we'll have lines of Dickinson on the walls to explain what light in any given moment is up to. The quarry and the bait is in love, bait's vertebrae treble-cleffing to her mirror. How she's turned out, edges crimped like a brittle pie where hands had touched it. As a dancer, you watch her foot as out of nowhere it goes en pointe. Toe touches floor like it holds a world only nearly immune to the chaos it organizes in absentia. The ankle tenses, ever so, the calf, I notice too, as though love made perspicacity possible (it doesn't). Theory three. Coloratura down to her bones, the tone in her voice, something Mildred never heard except in dreams. The toe just touching, reward of training, year after year—discipline of foot barely gracing floorboards, barely gracing. Hands try to rest but won't, versus hands try to rest but can't. Cantata of lassitude, sighing down to feet barely recognizable as such, so weary-shod. Plodding fish trucks, fancy ice cream, radio repair, Mildred walks like a mare into pasture. Her feet hurt. Contra Veda, whose foot, turned out, holds its one glass note past shiver. Mildred's house can't take care of this. No cooker, no retinue of help make sense of Glendale, the house, the kitchen from which all things bleed. When Mildred apologizes for startling you, she wears her allegory, chinoiserie, oystered up to throat. The frog is her preference, reminder of whose voice and when, and what it all is for. Whereas we prince frogs less for the story than *this frog will do just fine*. Sing, but not for me, *ribbit*, mares straggling to fields past Laguna. Foot on pedal, showing how sound was understood. Meanwhile not just banisters but doors were iron, and being iron, wrought. Let's undo garters, let's think ravened not so bad. There were gentler forms of ravening, contra

Veda's voice presiding over books, snapdragon. Her hands tried to hold a cigarette. The gesture failed in all the ways Mildred fails. Block and cleaver, all punching away at dough, away from crimping, what turns out. We made a foot that could walk one way or another, but for the time being, the foot is extension of the spine. When Veda sleeps, it is sleep of the drowned, and when Mildred leans in to kiss that death, it is Judas in a mirror. Pie wagon, this pertains to us only in eating it up. To live through each other being Lamia's song, whereas from the get-go we lived beside. Pie wagon, endless number holding the answer to circles, rings. Theory three, chasing rainbow with our sharp, imagined hands. I never kept books. I kept you happy as I could, wherein lay the problem. Those hands had no relation to gravity, as mine floated like moths, caught implication. The hands went down. Throw, love, pies in my face. These hands at ready, such as they are, toe touching, not sure if this meant holding or renouncing the end of the world. The house was a ghost in advance of our settling. Everyone's wheezing banshee, but when she puked her soul onto the piano, when we were asked to think of consequence, I held your dancer's foot, hand cupping your toes, as though to say the world, it held.

FLAHOOLEY

For some time, I'd felt flat. Less collapsed or two-dimensional than something yeasty that had risen as much as it could. I rose, I tried, you just couldn't tell. Injera has a slightly spongy texture, which means it absorbs—but only so much, only slightly, after which whatever it was absorbing just leaks out. That's how I felt: like the national dish of a country famous for starving, a country plagued with drought, which meant my sponge-like properties only reminded everyone of something that wasn't there. Thinking about injera when one is starving is a particular kind of thought. The closest some of us got to wishing I was more around, wondering when I'd return. After great pain a formal feeling came, and after the formal feeling came something that felt like Yma Sumac. Something that only a few people had heard of. The few who had heard of Yma Sumac were split between wanting to believe she was an Incan princess and thinking she was from Brooklyn, spelling her actual name, Amy Camus, backward, like liking, for once, what one saw in a mirror, like playing an album in the wrong direction. This was how I felt, as though in becoming what one had liked in the mirror, one would from that point on avoid mirrors, because now the mirrors reflected what one had fled. If Yma Sumac were a Greenpoint housewife, she held this secret to her heart. This doesn't mean there weren't moments when Yma perhaps thought about Greenpoint, shin-splinting down Pequod in drizzle and an orange headscarf. Eventually, she was maybe resigned to the fact that whatever she said likely wasn't true, and she was as disappointed by this resignation as she was committed to her stories. She felt like Martin Guerre, and this was a formal feeling. We'd put her most ambitious album to date on the Bose, an album titled *Miracles*, so ambitious that she was abandoned by her fans, all of them, because they heard in *Miracles* the sounds

of hell, the fever dream of an Incan princess making her lysergic way down the belly of a volcano. Where they heard the sounds of hell, she heard the chirpings of forest creatures clutching berries, butterflies accompanying a virgin as she swished her way to the god of the sun. As alarming as the music itself, we grew accustomed to it. Lynn made up interpretative dances, an eerie macaronic of Maya Deren and past crazes like *The Frug*. Jeff, fresh back from shucking corn, not only didn't mind the music, he kind of liked it. Jeff and Lynn thought it might be a contender for Stuart's annual album of the summer. I was nonplussed by how non-nonplussed we were. At some point, Yma Sumac forgot about the chandelier on her head, the bolts of gossamer. When her phone rang in the middle of the night, she answered in that infamous five-octave voice. She used no fewer octaves when she talked to herself, when the phone stopped ringing. Even at her bleariest, nothing mattered more than this gift, her craft. She worked that gift like nobody's business. She went on a world tour that lasted ten years, stomping off the stage in Hamburg after the audience started laughing. Before *Miracles*, she was on Broadway in a musical called *Flahooley*. So a saint, when ripe for heaven, is weaned from the world. This is how it felt.





Michael D. Snediker is the author of *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions* (U. Minnesota Press) and *Contingent Figure: Aesthetic Duress from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick* (advance contract, U. Minnesota Press). He is also the author of two poetry chapbooks, *Nervous Pastoral* (dove|tail books) and *Bourdon* (White Rabbit Press).

POETRY

I remember hearing a story that might not be true: Isak Dinesen eating nothing but white grapes, oysters, and Chardonnay until she died, presumably in a fur coat. This book knows everything I love about that story—but no way no how is it going down like that. —**Lucy Corin**

Michael Snediker's prose makes the room spin—which seems like a pretty good definition of what real poetry does to a body. Yet the vertigo his poems produce—incantational, recollective, interrogatory—achieves a perfect equipoise. His ear is unerring and his ability to synthesize a roomful of different voices is wondrous, captivating. With a flick of the wrist, his tone can shift from deadpan to street-baroque and back again....We have been missing poems like these for a long time. —**Daniel Tiffany**

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