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Amorak Huey
Keetje Kuipers
Erin Elizabeth Smith
Whitney Templeton
Daniel Davis
Anne Felty

Gary Fincke
Michael Milburn
Grant Clauser
Keith Rebec



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Morning Under the Osprey Grant Clauser

You have to believe these things go on
without us, the wake of my kayak,
an osprey circling the willow cove
for bluegill or perch, and words
that sink their points into your shoulders.
You know how beautiful spring begins—
buds swelling into flowers all over the fields
and a scent like youth collapsing
from the ripe trees along the lake edge.
Shoreline lilies at their brightest
begin to become the background
as white petals drift away,
ghosts passing out of our lives.
You have to believe in ghosts,
the shuffling they make in leaves,
the trees they fill with fireflies
just to make the night sparkle.
Because the only thing between lake
and sky is trust, the kayak gliding
across water like a life suspended
waiting for weight to lift or sink
but either way keep cutting forward
across the lake, an osprey always circling
overhead, the gestures of flowers opening
and closing on the morning's breath
and on the beach there's someone waiting—
ghosts you choose to follow
or who will follow you.

Van Gogh's Sunflowers *Grant Clauser*

Van Gogh's yellow sunflowers
are turning toad brown
because the lead in them
can't stand the light.

On the first day of spring
I think of gardens,
the insistence of tiny seeds
to spread their palms
across the earth.

Before he stepped with pistol
into that field of poppies,
Van Gogh's yellow-stained fingers
cupped his head, held
his own hands, hot and cold.

Decay always begins
at the root of things, paint
drying on the brush,
the fission of neutrons
into a night bursting
with colors.

The day always comes
when every sunrise
is a warning from the dark,
and every kiss
is a kiss goodbye.

So the things that kill us best,
kill us slowly,
roots pushing their fingers
through humus and rock,
foundations failing and crumbling.

Grant Clauser lives in Hatfield, PA, with his family, a garden and some goldfish. His books include *Necessary Myths* and *The Trouble with Rivers*. Poems and interviews have appeared in *The Literary Review*, *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Cortland Review*, *American Poetry Review*, *Sow's Ear Poetry Review* and others. He runs poetry workshops at Philadelphia's Musehouse and blogs at unlambic.com

PLACENTAL MEANS I HAVE YOU ON A STRING *Whitney Templeton*

I. EMBRYONIC

You and I, we walk this cord of yolk sac and allantois,
an umbilical tightrope

stretched between two poles, the zygote and neonate.
I carry you, skidding

my low arches along the rope, supple as tongue
and strung above the crowd,

a thousand mouths
ajar. The communal oh,

as in *oh look!*
or *oh my!*

Beneath us, they are poised to swallow you
in case I unfold my arms for balance.

II. FETAL

Your cochlea flowers into sound
so I cup my mouth around a tin can
sprouting from my navel,
the stem green and thin as twine.

Whatever I whisper, your inner ear will hum
into a lullaby. Even lies liquesce—
nectar in your budding lobes.

III. NATAL

Calloused from my lasso,
I reel you in. Because you are new-
born, you are wild
and know nothing
about strings.

This one we will cut, I say,
but the others—
I will teach you how to tie them
into knots.

Georgia Keetje Kuipers

I've been trying for a year to decide
if I'm in love with you. Now, red clover
spattered in the ditches, I cross the state
line on my way to be with you. This week
everything gave itself up to the light,
dogwood trees and effusive azaleas,
even the dead armadillos, belly
up to the sun. I still don't know what holds
me back. The sign on the car I pass says
gone for gas, but that's a lie. Kudzu wound
through the tires, leaves pressed to the glass where
anyone can see the dust on the dash.

Too Many Bridges *Keetje Kuipers*

Light-headed at the railing, I'm afraid to look—
down, across, past the past to the place where I begin.
Coming back might be the mistake the whole town's
been wanting me to make. Back to the cold of the drive-in,

past the past, to the place where they made me begin
among the filleted clouds and pressed light of March.
Wanting me to make it back to the cold of the drive-in,
where I used to park at lunch and fall asleep, neck arched,

mouth open to the filleted clouds and pressed light of March.
Back to roads in the softly curved shape of flattened worms,
where I used to park at lunch and fall asleep, neck arched,
while snow patched the shaved heads of the circling berms.

Ugly things have happened here: too many bridges.
Coming back might be the mistake I've always known
I would make. Otherwise, whose hands are these on the edge
of the railing? Light-headed, I'm afraid to look.

Keetje Kuipers has been the Margery Davis Boyden Wilderness Writing Resident, a Wallace Stegner Fellow at Stanford University, and the Emerging Writer Lecturer at Gettysburg College. Her first book, *Beautiful in the Mouth*, won the A. Poulin, Jr. Prize from BOA Editions and was published in 2010. Her second book, *The Keys to the Jail*, was published in 2014. Keetje is an Assistant Professor at Auburn University.

What We Undo *Erin Elizabeth Smith*

“I’m afraid I can’t quite remember it,” Alice said, very politely.

“In that case, we start afresh.”

We always color our beginnings white,
the slink of a sheet rolled
in its glossy typewriter,
or the squared-off canvas
we stretch to fit the wood.

We begin with a certain emptiness,
things that can be filled.
A new house beams its eggshell
walls, a church almost,

or lined stacks of sliced bread
desperate for jam.
The party begins

with rows of empty glasses.
We know the red that colors
them but the hushed gleam

is a promise more of lips,
their pink snowflake patterns
and the hands that pinch the stem.

But there are no beginnings like this,
no pallid whiteness to startle into life,
no bleached sky looking for its season.

Instead a thrift store trunk
with a mossy doll inside.
The well-traveled box that held

dishes, then sheets.
The hallways and doors
we each used to pass through.

Erin Elizabeth Smith is the Creative Director at the Sundress Academy for the Arts and the author of two full-length collections, *The Fear of Being Found* (Three Candles Press 2008) and *The Naming of Strays* (Gold Wake Press 2011). Her poems have appeared in numerous journals, including *Mid-American*, *32 Poems*, *Zone*, *Gargoyle*, *Tusculum Review*, and *Crab Orchard Review*.

Loup-Garou Sings the Blues *Amorak Huey*

1.
Moonlight & mouthsnap & metal trap –
I fall in love with anyone
in a raucous plum dress – I haunt
& steal. My life is stalk
& shadow & a story on everyone’s tongue.

2.
No catch is so nourishing
as the one in someone else’s net,
no lie so believable
as the one on someone else’s tongue –
the snot & slurp of stolen oysters.

3.
I return from war & the music
on everyone’s tongue peels
my skin from my bones.

4.
You do not have to believe me
to believe in me. I am shoeless
& unsettled & her pretty mouth
keeps my name on everyone’s tongue.

5.
There is jealousy on your tongue.
Shovel & bayou & lover,
bury & fingernail & desire –
I am the words that do not belong.

6.
I am usually someone you know
& you don’t need to transform
to taste wine on a lover’s tongue.

7.
Pennies on your tongue for luck –
the myth that tells itself.

8.
Big lake or bayou, river or gulf,
it doesn’t matter where you drown

or whether there is salt on your tongue
as your lungs fill with water.

9.

I am the nest of rats in the cellar,
poison on an unsuspecting tongue,
sharpened stick against unmutilated skin,
I am all the words that rhyme with *lonely*.

10.

The forest burns but the wolf survives.
The love story ends abruptly
but something hungry takes its place –
a morality tale in any tongue.

11.

The howl on my tongue
sounds like a guitar,
or it's the wind,
or it's the other way around.

12.

After twelve I lose track, start again,
count & count until morning comes.
The numbers falter on my tongue
& taste of blood. When I disappear in the sun
my absence will destroy you.

January Snow *Anne Felty*

Beryl Conners sat watching her mother die. She glanced at the clear plastic bag that hung like ripe fruit from a sterile metal arm at her mother's bedside. She had forgotten her watch and was measuring the passage of time by the decreasing amount of fluid in the bag. Beryl shifted positions in the green vinyl chair at the foot of her mother's hospital bed, peeling the warm plastic away from her thigh. She must stay awake, she thought. The loss of one's mother should not go unnoticed, especially if one is in the same room. Dying ignored is worse than dying alone.

Beryl looked for a long moment at her mother and, satisfied that the shallow breathing would continue for at least the length of time it took to refresh herself, she rose to enter the small, adjoining bathroom.

At that moment her older sister burst through the door, announcing herself, as always, not with words, but with *presence*. Rachel was impossible to ignore when she invaded a room. Her quick, strong motions announced her entrance like a royal presentation.

"Where are you going?" Rachael demanded.

"I need to go to the bathroom."

"Get a cool cloth for Mother's forehead."

Beryl bit her lip to keep from saying *Any other orders?* It had been that way from childhood: Rachael issuing orders to the world and to Beryl in particular, and Beryl acquiescing because she could not come up with a passable reason to resist. Beryl nodded and opened the bathroom door

"Cool, not cold," she heard Rachel say behind the drifting door.

"Yes, your Majesty," Beryl whispered into the mirror. She splashed some cold, not cool, water on her face and added some warm water until the water was cool, per Rachael's orders. Taking a washcloth from the towel rack, she dipped it into the bowl several times, letting it float and soak up the water. Its white mass bobbing in the sink reminded her of jellyfish, and she gingerly pulled it out to wring, half expecting to be stung.

When she looked up, she caught her reflection in the mirror as she twisted the last drops of water from the cloth. The florescent light dug its way into each crevice of her skin, making it impossible to ignore the network of fine lines that, judging from her mother's face, would deepen into canyons with the passing years. She knew that her dark hair was gray at the sides, but she had not realized that cutting her hair short had the effect of creating silver wings on each side of her face which, when not smoothed flat against her head, resembled a bird in flight. If I were a man, Beryl thought, turning out the light and opening the door, I would have gray temples and look very distinguished.

She pushed the door open and faced Rachael, who was planted by her mother's bed waiting for her orders to be carried out. Beryl dropped her eyes to the checkered floor. Suddenly, she felt an urge to play hopscotch — one white, two black. She hated this quality of hers, this tendency toward inappropriate responses. It reminded her of the time that she had laughed in church when she had thought she noted a slight bulge in the minister's trousers during a particularly moving

sermon on the wages of sin. It seemed, she reasoned, that she simply did not have a mind that respected *occasions*.

“Here,” Beryl said, handing her the cloth.

“You could have folded it,” Rachael snapped.

“All right, I’ll fold it,” Beryl said, snatching it back and slamming the corners together.

“I think she might be coming around,” Rachael said. “She moaned.”

Beryl sighed and edged away from the bed. How could she explain to Rachael that life for their mother was nothing to hope for? Rachael didn’t understand about the loss of someone: how you should start letting go as soon as you loved them, how they should be something apart. People should be loved through a window, like January snow, while you stayed inside away from the cold.

Beryl hadn’t known that with her father; she had gone outdoors for him, without a coat, even — just plowed right in never think of avalanche.

It had been such a little bridge. That’s what she found so odd about it: that such a tiny bridge could do so much damage. Her father had crossed it every day on his way to work, and one day it collapsed, just folded down into the river when he was halfway across.

Rachael and her mother consoled each other, and she realized now that their grief had been real. But then they had seemed trite, somehow, as though they were only going through the motions of expected behavior. They couldn’t understand her pain. Their *we’ll get along’s* were contemptible in her eyes. She had hated their shallow grief and their clinging hope. She had hated *them*.

“Beryl, we’ll be all right,” Rachael had said one night when Beryl could no longer stifle her sobs into the pillow.

“I’ll never be all right,” Beryl had answered with the fury of discovery.

“Do you think you’re the only one who’s sad? He was my father, too.”

“Not like he was mine!” It was true and they both new it, and they might have left it at that if Rachael had passed up her opportunity for revenge.

“We’ve still got Mother. Of course, she’s not your mother like she is mine,” Rachael had answered. And Beryl had known that this, too, was true.

In the months that followed her father’s death, Beryl began to feel superior when she watched Rachael and their mother together. There was something comforting about not sharing their closeness. *I am not in danger now*, she thought. Her mother could not steal parts of her away and take them where she could never retrieve them. What was left of her was hers alone.

She could feel it happening, a slow closing, like a garage door drifting shut, lower and lower until she was encased in half light. She had felt safe in her shadowed world. Everything had passed before her like a giant moving picture, with players floating before her eyes as she nestled in the safety of darkness, an audience untouched.

“Did Jonathan say when he would get here?” Rachael asked as she placed the washcloth on her mother’s forehead.

“What?”

“I asked if Jonathan said when he would be here?” Rachael repeated.

“I don’t know. Some time today.”

“Didn’t you ask him?”

“Ask him what?”

“Honestly, Beryl. You have the attention span of a gnat. Why didn’t you ask Jonathan what time he’d get here?” Rachael’s words carried the familiar exasperated tone that had become habitual when she spoke to Beryl.

“I don’t know. It wouldn’t have changed anything,” Beryl answered. “He’ll get here when he gets here.”

“It would change the fact that we don’t know when to expect him,” Rachael snapped. “I should have called him myself; I know how imprecise you are.”

Beryl smiled and pulled a thought from her *only Rachael* file. Only Rachael would call someone imprecise. Any other sister would have called her stupid, dimwitted, lazy even; something you could work around, chalk up to name-calling and discard. But Rachael always managed to come up with the exact — no, the *precise* — descriptive phrase, one that nailed you right to the floor with no possibility of escape.

“Sorry,” Beryl said. “Anyhow, he said he would leave within an hour of my call, and it’s a three hour trip. I’d say about noon.”

Rachael glanced at her watch. “It’s eleven twenty-seven.”

The file was still open. Only Rachael would say eleven twenty-seven. Why not eleven twenty-five, or almost eleven-thirty?

“I suppose he’s bringing *her*,” Rachael sniffed. “And I suppose they’ll expect to stay at the house.”

“I suppose so,” Beryl said.

“You didn’t ask, of course.”

“He has a right, Rachael. After all, the house is one-third his.”

Rachael sighed. Rachael always sighed when she couldn’t argue. This was her *you’re right, but you shouldn’t have said it* sigh, a short, gathered puff, like air being forced through a straw. “If he had to get married again, why couldn’t he pick someone his own age? Besides, he doesn’t need her here; he has his family.”

Beryl turned and looked out the window. She couldn’t tell Rachael that their brother had never had his family; he had always been the spare wheel, the odd-man-out. Their family had been a quadrangular arrangement between Beryl and their father and Rachael and their mother, leaving

Jonathan to skirt the edges of their affections. She and Rachael had had a family; Jonathan had had moments of inclusion, like a visiting friend.

“Will the hospital let us all in here at one time?” Beryl asked.

“They most certainly will!” Rachael huffed. “For what we’re paying for this room, we should be allowed to send in clowns at midnight if we want to — although I wouldn’t object if they limited visitors to the immediate family.”

“Now, Rachael...”

“Oh, don’t worry. Jonathan would probably leave if we didn’t allow her in, and that would upset Mother.”

“I don’t think...” Beryl began.

“You don’t think what?” Rachael asked, daring her to say it.

“I don’t think he’ll be much longer,” Beryl finished. What she had started to say was *I don’t think she’d know the difference*, but she knew what Rachael’s reaction would be. She rummaged around in her “what Rachael would say” file and came up with *how can you be so cruel?* No, not cruel. Callous. Rachael would say callous.

Would Rachael be right? Beryl felt a flash of guilt. Maybe she had been wrong all these years. It seemed there was a down-side to letting go that she hadn’t counted on: To let go was to *not have*.

“I’m going to find that doctor,” Rachael said, heading toward the door. “He said he’d check her again before lunch.”

“All right,” Beryl said. Normally she would have reasoned for Rachael to wait another half-hour, but she wanted this time alone with her mother, *to have* her after all these empty years. She walked to the bed and lowered the metal bars, thinking how silly it was to begin and end life in a bed with bars that guarded against neither life nor death.

Beryl looked down at the small mound of covers. Her mother looked at peace with her oblivion. She reached down and grasped the silver braid that curled like a snake across her mother’s breast. “Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your long hair,” she whispered, recalling how Rachael would repeat the fairy-tale words as she loosed the braid from its crown around her mother’s head. Beryl removed the cloth and placed the back of her hand on the damp forehead. She leaned closer, pressing her lips against her mother’s gullied cheek.

At first she barely heard it. Then it grew louder, a low, rasping wheeze, like the dying of some great engine. Was this the end? Did all of the dreams, accomplishments, and disappointments of a long life expire in a small room with no bands playing? Beryl reached for the buzzer beside the bed, but she did not press the button. This was, she knew with absolute certainty, her last chance to atone for all her years of shallow love.

As her mother drew her last breaths, Beryl dropped the buzzer. What if her mother died and, in her rise to the ceiling or wherever newly released souls go in their first moments of freedom, looked down and saw that Beryl was not calling for help? Would she think that Beryl actually wanted her to die? Would she understand merciful love?

There was no noise now, no movement of blankets or involuntary twitching. Death, unlike dying, is quiet, tranquil. Beryl stood for several minutes, allowing death to settle in and marveling at the

peace that filled the room. She was, she suddenly realized, alone in linear space: no parents, no children, untethered from either end. Beryl bowed her head and said a quiet prayer for her mother's soul and for God's understanding before she reached for the buzzer again and pressed. It was only then that she realized she was crying.

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Anne Felty is WVU Alum and a retired teacher from Tucker County schools. She has won prizes in poetry and short story from the West Virginia Writers Competition, and was an Honorable Mention in the 2020 Glimmer Train Family Competition. She currently reside in Davis, WV, where she works on her novel.

Traveler's Check *Daniel Davis*

I always choose hotels located near somewhere I can get a drink. Preferably a sit-down kind of place, where I can maybe pick up a chick, or at least catch a ballgame. I never wear my ring when I travel. There are practical reasons—you spend so many hours a day clutching a steering wheel, that little band of metal begins to chaff—but I'd be lying if I said that's all of it. Can't tell Ginger, 'cause she would flip, but then she rarely asks about my work.

The Home Away Inn in East St. Louis was across a dimly lit street from The Rusty Nail. I didn't think I'd have much luck finding a girl there, at least not one I wanted to share a bed with, but I was tired and didn't feel like looking any further. Got a room, right off the lot where I could park my car in front of the door. I like hotels built like strip malls; you can't really get lost in them.

I put my suitcase in the room, then locked the door and headed across the street. No traffic, but the bar's parking lot had a couple cars. Through the front windows, which ran the length of the building, I could see maybe five people, staff included, and pool tables that'd seen better years. I glanced at my watch as I opened the door. Eight o'clock on a Thursday night.

The bar was opposite the door, so I walked over and sat down. Bartender came up, asked me what I wanted. I took a draft. He poured it and didn't ask if I wanted to start a tab. Bars near hotels rarely do. Nor did he ask me where I was from. I'd yet to meet a bartender who was genuinely interested in anything a traveling man had to offer other than his money.

I turned a circle on my stool, surveying the bar. Three guys sat in a booth. They looked over at me, then dismissed me. A waitress sat at a table, fingers tapping at her smartphone, occasionally glancing up to see if the guys needed anything. I wasn't even sure she'd registered my presence.

A Cardinals game was on the television, so I watched it. They were down by four in the eighth, but I've always been a Braves fan, so I just watched. The bartender did too, in that dumbstruck silence fans save for when they know their team has dug the hole too deep. A wild pitch, and the bartender cursed and turned away.

I'd been there maybe an hour, and about four beers, when I noticed the flashing police lights over my shoulder. There were seven of us in The Rusty Nail at that point, a middle-aged couple having wandered across the street to join the mute festivities. The woman went over to the jukebox and put on the Stones, drowning out the game, which by that point was in extra innings, the Redbirds having tied it up. My awe at the grand slam was almost dwarfed by my respect for the bartender's reaction; he'd almost dropped the beer he was pouring at the time, and had cursed so loudly, you'd think the game had been lost.

The lights took us all by surprise, and all seven heads perked up and looked out the window. Two police cars pulled into the hotel's parking lot, lights swirling but no sirens. Four officers got out. One of them carried a shotgun.

"Christ," the bartender said. His voice was barely audible above the jukebox. The Clash, now.

The clerk from the front office came out. Older Asian man, maybe late fifties. He gestured at the police, rattling his arms as though trying to escape from some invisible prison cell. The cops ignored him. One reached out and casually pushed the old man aside. The clerk didn't fight back.

Something about the way the cops had parked their cars sparked a cold feeling in my gut. I took a deep swig of beer to try and drown it out, but I could tell before they'd really gotten close that they were heading for my room. They were so focused on that one door, and the car parked in front of it.

I thought about standing up, running over there. I actually thought about it. Then I pictured myself in handcuffs, stuffed into the back of a cruiser, hauled downtown and having to explain to both the police and Ginger what the hell I'd hoped to accomplish going across the street to a seedy little bar. Caution quickly took hold, and a little hitch in my shoulders was my only reaction.

One of the cops knocked on the door. I couldn't hear them from across the street, but the other residents could, because doors opened and heads peaked out. Darted quickly back inside, too. Curious, but not foolish.

The first cop stepped back, motioned to the one with the shotgun. The second cop stepped forward and kicked out, boot battering the door. The old hotel clerk started forward again, hands raised, but thought better of interfering further. Took three kicks to bust the door open. The cop with the shotgun went inside first.

They spent less than two minutes in there. Then they filtered back out, looking dejected. The old clerk said something to one of them. I couldn't tell if the cop responded, but his shoulders shrugged. *Well, we messed that one up*, the shrug said. The cops got back into their cruisers and sat there, probably radioing back some excuse. They kept the lights going while they did this. Then, after three or four minutes, the lights went off and the cars pulled out.

The clerk peaked into my room. A couple other people did as well, but no one went inside. Perhaps out of politeness; perhaps out of fear. I waited until everyone found something more interesting to occupy their attention. Even ordered another beer, though it tasted flat and warm right out of the tap.

When I finally crossed the street, I went to the front office instead of the room. The old man glanced up. He didn't remember me; he saw hundreds of guys like me every month.

"That was my room," I told him.

The clerk put down the magazine he was reading and looked at me, eyes scrunched. I could tell he honestly had no idea what I was talking about. I wondered where he was from. Vietnam, maybe? I wondered what kind of things you had to go through in your life to make something like what had just happened seem so forgettable.

"Room 17," I said. "The cops."

"Oh." He picked up the magazine again. "That nothing."

I opened my mouth for a retort but couldn't think of anything. I turned and headed for the door.

“Nobody go in,” the man said after me. “I make sure.”

No you didn't, I thought, and let the door close behind me as I stepped outside.

I went back to my room. Nothing was touched. Some dirt on the carpet, that was it. And for whatever reason, the cops had left the exhaust fan in the bathroom running.

The lock on the door was busted, so I slept with the lights on. Took me three hours to get to sleep, and when I did, I dreamed of Ginger lecturing me on how I should find a job back home and not travel so much. Funny thing: she's never said a word like that to me in real life. That's another reason I never wear my ring. I have plenty of them.

Daniel Davis is the Nonfiction Editor for *The Prompt Literary Magazine*. His own work has appeared in various online and print journals. You can find him at dumpsterchickenmusic.blogspot.com or on Facebook.

Human Subject Gary Fincke

Wayne Schuck has been a human subject before. He's managed a week of low-salt followed by a week of high-salt while women in lab coats took blood samples. He's taken pills both easy and hard to swallow and let himself be watched and measured. He's been happy and angry, but mostly fogged up or what he thinks is unchanged. Just once, he's felt his heart race in a way that made him get up and walk for an hour because he was sure he would die if he stopped moving. No one ever tells him what they've learned from observing him. He gets his check and signs out as someone witnesses his signature and enters the date and time. If any of the stuff he's taken has given him permanent damage, he can't tell. If any of it will cause him a problem years from now, he isn't thinking that far ahead.

This time the trial is housed at an out-of-business motel Wayne has passed a hundred times. He almost misses the turn because he's so used to the lot being empty that he doesn't recognize it nearly full of cars. Shivering, he checks his watch and sees he is getting in just under deadline. June 3rd, he thinks, walking across the lot, and so chilly I can see my breath.

Although it is 8:58, there are seven guys in each registration line. All men this time, Wayne decides. Some sort of Viagra, maybe. Something where you have to worry about keeping a hard-on for half a day when something goes wrong. The man who moves up across from Wayne wears a t-shirt that says *Life sucks and so should you*. The guy in front of him has one of those Christian fish symbols on the back of his shirt. Wayne wants to tell both of them that he's never even owned a bumper sticker, let alone a shirt that talks, but he doesn't want glares from both heaven and hell.

Wayne recognizes all of the forms—liability release, informed consent, privacy statement, and payment method. “You're employed full time?” a young woman says, sounding as if he she thinks he's lied.

“Yes.”

She opens her hands in front of her like an apology. “I'm sorry if I implied anything,” she says. “It's just that nearly all of our subjects are unemployed or students.”

“And I don't look like a student?”

The young woman looks like she's in college, maybe getting credit for doing this work. “You'll be isolated,” she says. “You'll have no interaction with anyone except staff members for twelve days.” Wayne nods and signs on four lines. He is a “healthy volunteer” for this one. Two weeks on the science clock instead of taking the vacation the grocery gives him. A double-blind comparison. He might receive the placebo, a thought that relaxes him until he sees his room doesn't have a television.

“Don't you worry about that,” the young man who's escorted him says. “We'll keep you busy.” Wayne feels him watching as he examines Room 208. The bed is bare, the mattress yellowed as if slept on by sweating bodies. A set of white sheets and a pillowcase sit on the gray, damp-looking pillow. Wayne hangs up three shirts in the small closet. The dresser drawers are empty except for a faded, bald tennis ball that looks chewed. A dog's toy, Wayne thinks. He doesn't touch it, nor does he put any of his jeans, t-shirts, underwear, and socks in that drawer.

The young man leads Wayne to a room to be interviewed and tested by the first person Wayne's seen who looks old enough to be any kind of doctor. He rearranges shapes to make circles and squares and rectangles. He selects one of five answers about choices he'd make under a variety of stresses. He recognizes a reflex test he's taken twice before. After he's finished, he's handed two yellow oblong pills. "Your room has been examined while you've been here," the test-giver says. "I want you to understand that. We have to be certain you won't ingest anything that will interfere with the test."

"It was on the form," Wayne says. "I know about all this."

"A veteran," the man says. "So you know your person will be searched as well."

"Someone will always be in the hall on your floor if you feel anxious," another young woman says. "Help yourself to some magazines or puzzle books. There is an exercise room that still has the old equipment in it. Someone will be in there to keep you from talking to other subjects, but you're welcome to take advantage. Exercise doesn't affect our study. The pool, however, is empty." For a moment, Wayne believes she is going to escort him and do the body search, but that thought disappears as soon as the young man steps into the doorway and gestures him back to 208.

"I must ask you to fully disrobe," he says. Wayne faces away from him as he undresses. He is so cold he feels himself shrivel to humiliation size.

Alone again, Wayne dresses and wraps himself in the one flimsy blanket lying at the foot of the bed. Though 208 has a balcony, the sliding glass door that leads to it is locked from outside. In the tiny bathroom, one towel and a washcloth are folded beside the sink. A tan stain spreads in a fading spiral from the drain. There is a similar stain in the bathtub. The faucet, when he turns it on, coughs out brown water for a few seconds, and then it clears. His dinner is delivered to his door, which isn't locked, but just like the girl has promised, there is someone with a bouncer's build in the hall. He lies on the bed and looks at the ceiling for two hours until the same burly man knocks and leads him back to the test room. "It's like being on jury duty," the attendant says. "We don't want you tainting yourselves by mingling and revealing how you feel." This time Wayne grabs a Sudoku puzzle book, 100 of them graded from beginner to expert. "Hours and hours of fun," the cover says. Wayne notices that all the easy ones, numbers 1-25, are filled in. The rest are untouched except #100. *Ultra Hard*, it says at the top of the page. Six numbers are filled in. A half dozen more squares show erasures that have worked holes through the paper.

So Wayne has time to think. That's what his mother would say to justify sitting around doing nothing for hours while yellow pills do their work. "Use your time to your advantage if you're going to be a guinea pig," she said when he told her last week what he was doing for his vacation. "You can work things out with yourself while you're doing someone else's job."

"I can't stand anything I hear myself thinking."

"You sound like your father when you talk like that."

"Dad always sounded neutral."

"That's exactly what I mean. He's a hundred miles away, but I can hear him right this minute in my ear."

He'd been cutting her grass and trimming her shrubbery. After his father left, she'd refused to move away from a house and yard too big to manage. "You can still help," she'd said when Wayne had finally moved out, too. "You're not going a hundred miles like your father." For eight years now he'd done the lawn and landscaping. "Your father," she said every summer, "if he ever drives by, will see it's perfect."

That afternoon, after he turned down her iced tea offer, she'd poured him a glass anyway. When he pushed it into the middle of the patio table, she'd said, "You're so angry. Until those girls, you never used to be so angry." She meant him to consider his recently broken engagement. His third one. "All within two years," she said. "How is that possible?"

"I wanted the hat trick," he said, and his mother clicked her tongue.

"Honest to Pete. You're smarter than that, Wayne. There's your father again saying 'we all have to take our medicine' like he was wrapped up in those chains the way that ghost in the old Christmas story was. I can hear him clanking when you talk like that."

"Not so smart that I'm working check-out at the grocery."

She picked up the glass of tea and sipped. When he frowned, she said, "There's no sense in wasting."

"I have to go," he said. "The yard will dazzle Dad if he picks today to make the two-hour drive."

His mother stood between Wayne and his car. "When I go through your line at the store, you know every vegetable and piece of fruit they sell there, even the okra and the fresh spices and all those things that look like roots. None of the other checkers know. 'What's that?' they ask me, as if lettuce only comes in the shape of a ball, and I always want to tell them it's something really cheap, some kind of cabbage, but I just can't even though they deserve it."

"Once we're on the job six months, we all get paid the same, Mom. I got the two weeks vacation because I've finished two years now."

"People will notice. You'll see."

"They already did, Mom. After a month they started calling me Mr. Produce."

"You're only thirty-two. That's not old, not these days. Forty's the new thirty. You have eight more years to be young unless all those things you let people feed you are doing something to you right this minute."

"I don't always take the real stuff, Mom," but it didn't stop her from rattling on while they stood in her driveway for another ten minutes.

His mother always forgot about the tests without drugs like the week he spent being examined for "Shift Work Disorder" back when he was working in the grocery warehouse, alternating day and night shift. He was unhappy every day, but he'd never thought he had a disorder. Extra money, though, was extra money, and all he had to do was tell the truth. Out front in the grocery, he was still on shifts, but the difference between 8-4:30 and 12:30 to 9 was the problem of getting his feet on the floor at 7 a.m. every other week.

This morning, just after eight o'clock, while he was longing for the coffee he'd had the night before, his last cup for nearly two weeks, his mother had called. "This might be the last time you're normal," she said.

"I've never had any of those things they say fast in the TV ads, Mom."

"Numbness in the limbs," she said. "Muscular weakness, swelling of the lips and tongue. See your doctor immediately."

"No four-hour erection?"

She made her clicking sound before she said, "Everybody knows that's impossible, so when it never happens those drug companies can pat themselves on the back like they're selling miracles."

"Somebody had one, Mom. Trust me."

His mother sighed as if he'd brought home a rumor about his second grade teacher. "That's what they said about Jesus on Easter."

"You'll make me late," Wayne said. He stared at the clock, choosing a time three minutes away when he would say "I have to go" and hang up.

"It's not too late to remind you it's a good thing you were born in 1981 and not 1961," she said. "I'm talking about Thalidomide. Those women who took it, they had babies with flippers for arms and legs; they had kids who had hands coming out of their shoulders. Don't you ever worry that your babies one day will have burdens to bear?"

"It doesn't look like that's ever going to be a concern."

"Don't do that hangdog act. It's not attractive in a man. You ever talk to your father on the phone? You'd think you'd just seen your first born son with toes sticking out of his ankles. What were they thinking, those women who trusted people who wanted to sell them something?"

"Back then," Wayne said, "the people who volunteered for the tests just showed up and took things. They didn't have a piece of paper to remind them that something could go wrong."

"Just because people are willing doesn't make it right. These rules they have to follow now should have been written down a hundred years ago when pills first got made. Or maybe two hundred or whenever it was pills and medicine started. Whenever anybody who invented something wanted the world to use it."

"I have to go, Mom."

"Sure you do," she said and hung up before Wayne had a chance to push *End Call*.

Now Wayne rubs his hands together and hugs himself, shivering. He looks to where someone renting this room would expect to see a coffee maker, but the counter is bare. He bets himself that counter was bare at least a year before the motel had closed. A moment later, he bets himself they haven't counted on a day this cold in June, what with the heat long since turned off.

His first job was when his father, a janitor for the school district, got him hired for the summer. "Remember who you want people to think you are," his father said as they walked into the

school Wayne had attended until the week before, and then, at 7:15, Wayne held a putty knife and lay down to scrape the underside of the high school gym's bleachers. "This will take you a while," the foreman said, and left.

Wayne had sat on those bleachers a hundred times. He'd stuck his share of boogers under his seat during ninth grade, giving it up when the longing for girls drove him to manners. In three months, Wayne had told the foreman, he was beginning college. "Well, until then," the foreman had said, and Wayne understood this scraping was the kind of job summer help got stuck with—unskilled and awful—what the full-time janitors would never do as long as there was a budget for summer work. He thought of urinals and toilets, what might be caked under the rims of each and how he would be instructed to clean them.

Summer, his father had told him, was when schools recovered from injuries, but all morning the job carved its initials in the air, spray-painted the *eat-me* and *fuck-you* of contempt. In the supply closet, Wayne found the extra-duty cleaner and a couple of rags because tiny obscenities were inked in the spaces between the wood slats—three ways to enter Courtney, a name Wayne couldn't match to a face; five ways to kill Mr. Wallace, an English teacher he'd had as a sophomore; and the one thing a printer wanted to do again and again to Miss Kane, who'd been a student teacher during Wayne's last semester.

Wayne was making "Robbie Kirkland is a faggot" smear and disappear when he heard the foreman shout, "Schuck!" He was on his feet before he understood it was his father the foreman was talking to. "Get the fucking lead out," the foreman said, sounding as if he was in the adjacent lobby, but Wayne couldn't hear his father's response. "What am I looking at here?" the foreman started up again. "Tell me so I can treasure it."

Nothing else. The foreman's voice shut off like a radio.

At lunch, an hour later, his father looked the same, eating his sandwich and his apple, going to the fountain once for a drink of water. "How's it going?" his father finally said.

"I can see why the teachers never wanted us to chew gum."

"That job is everybody's first day," his father said. "In a few days you'll be on your feet like the rest of us."

All afternoon Wayne lay flat on his back, soundless, scraping gum and snot, erasing wishful thinking. Ten minutes before it was time to punch out, the foreman showed up to inspect Wayne's work with a mirror on a stick, grading like a dentist. As if he'd scouted, the foreman went right to where the obscenities had been printed. "See you tomorrow, kid," the foreman said, tapping the mirror against Wayne's chest before he said, "Go and clock out. There sure as fuck's no overtime on this job."

Wayne and his father punched out with the rest of the crew, the foreman following them through the lobby toward the main door. "Wait for me by the car," his father said, but Wayne opted, after a minute in the full sun of June, for the shade of the front door's overhang. Inside, he could see his father kneeling to take scuff marks from the lobby wall. Before he could be seen, Wayne walked back to the car and stood in the sun.

He waited for eight minutes, his back turned to the sun that shone over the roof of the high school from a cloudless sky. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?” his father called from what sounded like fifty feet away.

“What wasn’t?” Wayne said at once, but when he turned, squinting into the sun, his father’s expression was fixed as if he hadn’t heard.

“Ok?” his father said, closing up the distance. “You ok?” and Wayne laid his bare arms across the car roof and gave his father a thumbs-up sign with both hands, holding it as long as he could against the heat.

The last girl he’d lived with, his third engagement, had left to go back to a community college where her parents lived sixty miles away. She was going to be a nurse. “I can’t do this anymore,” she said, gesturing toward the aisles of the grocery.

Looking down the rows of canned goods with her, Wayne wanted to tell her there were worse jobs. He’d delivered pizzas. Clerked at a convenience store. And worst, he’d been a dishwasher in an *open 24 hours* diner, lasting one day listening to everybody in the back room speak Spanish.

He didn’t go back to get his money for the eight hours. He kept hearing that jabber, and somewhere in those sounds they would be laughing at him—”The silent gringo” or “the pale motherfucker with the soft hands”—some joke about him that he didn’t want to have translated.

He didn’t say anything as she nodded at a sign that read “salty snack foods” before she went on. “And I can’t make a commute like that in order to stay here,” all it took to let him know his place in her future. A ring, thank God, was just a promise he’d made.

“They’re starting one of those community colleges around here in a year or two,” Wayne had said as if that was any kind of argument. It was like packing her suitcase for her.

It is nearly midnight when Wayne pulls the single hard backed chair up to the locked balcony door. He has a view of the parking lot and the Interstate. He is looking north, Wayne knows that much.

Wayne remembers that there is a Dutch Pantry less than a quarter mile to the west that he’d be able to see if he could get outside. He’s eaten there once with his mother, and though the food was unremarkable, he’d loved playing a peg game that sat beside the salt and pepper shakers on the table. It was a version of solitaire, jumping one peg over another, removing each jumped peg until, if you did it exactly right, there would be just one peg left. Wayne ended up with three, then two, then four and three again just as their orders arrived. “Almost,” his mother kept saying. He ate a hot turkey sandwich and French fries and watched his mother fuss with a ham slice, nicking off tiny edges of fat until she gave up and ordered a slice of shoo-fly pie, giving him a few minutes to play three more times, leaving two pegs twice. “You’re getting so good at that,” his mother said, half the pie still sitting on her plate.

Wayne replaced all of the pegs and pushed the board across the table. “Oh no,” she said. “You’re the expert.”

“You never know.”

His mother jumped the pegs without seeming to pay attention, but a few minutes later, she ended up with two pegs. “Beginner’s luck,” she said as the waitress approached.

“You’ll get it down to one peg after a few tries,” the waitress said. “You through with that pie?”

“Oh no,” his mother said, covering it for a second with her hands. “Wrap it up for me.”

“I’ll finish it,” Wayne said. He took the pie in one hand and the game in the other. The waitress shrugged and laid the check on the table. Three bites and the pie was gone. “I’ll buy you one of these for Christmas,” Wayne said, dropping a few dollars on the table beside the game board and getting up with the check in his hand.

He wishes he had that game right now. He’d have eleven days to figure out the pattern. If he won the very first day, he’d ask what was in the yellow pills.

He gets up and presses his face against the glass, trying to see the restaurant, but now that he thinks about it, that Dutch Pantry has shut down just like the motel he is in. He backs away from the door when he sees the two young women walking to a car parked in what he knows is the handicap zone just outside the front door. Despite the closed glass door, he can hear them laughing, and when the car starts, a song he doesn’t recognize roars from the speakers, disappearing, a few seconds later, toward where that abandoned Dutch Pantry stands.

He lies on the bed and picks up the puzzle book, turning to #99, but that one is ruined from all the erasures on the other side of the page. He stares at #98, trying to figure it in his head because he doesn’t have a pen or a pencil. His father left before anyone in the family ever heard of Sudoku. His mother thinks Sudoku is silly. And anyway, the answers are in the back of the book, so she wouldn’t be impressed, especially with #100 not being finished.

What his mother thinks is important are all those release forms and privacy pledges, the things that made you consider what sorts of danger you might be in. Whether this was an adventure that anyone could do like skydiving, where all you need to do is fall.

“Pay no attention to anything you see or hear in this place,” his father had said to Wayne that summer a month before he’d packed two suitcases and three liquor store boxes and left, but Wayne had kept looking and listening. He still felt his father’s breath on the back of his neck when the store manager unlocked his register when his shift ended. Or in the way women watched the prices he rang up, their suspicion. Or worse, in the way they clutched their coupons, the ones they carried like medicine.

He is still awake at two a.m., but he convinces himself the insomnia is from first-night jitters. His ears are ringing. Not exactly ringing, more like a high-pitched buzz, as if he can hear an alarm that is sounding inside a locked building half a mile away. If he has this for more than a few weeks, it will be maddening. He will never be able to be alone in a quiet place.

Unusual thoughts. He remembers the phrase from the side-effect list in a commercial for a pain killer. *Confusion. Fear.* Wasn’t everyone confused and afraid? Didn’t they have unusual thoughts?

He stands and leans against the glass door, watching the thruway and remembering the boy in a nearby town who stepped into the path of a truck a few miles from the motel. Because he was

bullied at school for being effeminate. Because everybody thought he was gay. Wayne tells himself *suicidal thoughts* is a side effect, but *suicide* is something different altogether.

The squeal in his ears stops. Wayne tears the answer pages out of the paperback and tosses them on the floor. He will borrow a pencil tomorrow. Nobody will worry that he might gouge his eyes out. And nobody will care whether he walks off with the book after he signs himself out. He pages back to the beginning and rips out the page that said *answers to each puzzle on page 102*.

He's been doing this long enough to know it isn't about getting through the pills or shots without a scratch. No matter what his mother and all the smart people who test him worry about, he's already proved that nothing he takes will change him.

Head Case: My Hair Journey *Michael Milburn*

I

My son Dev phoned from college the other day to say that his hair had begun to fall out. He asked when my own hair loss had begun, and whether I'd been mistaken in telling him that the baldness gene was inherited from one's mother. Dev has always taken solace in the fact that his maternal grandfather possessed a full head of hair until his death at eighty. He has treated my accelerating condition with gentle sympathy, advising me on how to comb my remaining strands so as to conceal or at least not call attention to the sparseness. As he described the quarter-sized bare patch on the back of his head, he sounded both indignant and betrayed.

I assured him that the maternal gene rule was sound and that his bald spot was probably caused by stress. I doubted that it even existed. My own preoccupation with hair loss had begun in my freshman year of college, and I knew that one could worry the tiniest gleam of scalp into a portent of imminent baldness. In my case, that portent is still coming true, but I'm confident that Dev will enjoy lush growth well into middle age, with nothing more serious to worry about than how to make his curls lie down on his head, when to wear a hat to tame or shape his waves, and whether to minimize washings so that his hair won't ruffle outward like feathers.

At his age, I had already spent years tending to my own intractable hair, and would still be doing so today so if my genes hadn't made anything more than a quick swipe of the comb unnecessary. Dev doesn't confide in me about much, saving most of his emotional, romantic, and academic distresses for his mother, but he knows that on the subject of hair I offer the benefits of both experience and empathy. I can't remember a time when I haven't been obsessed with what's going on on top of my head.

When I was eleven, my mother began cutting my hair herself, not to save money or because she was skilled at it—she wasn't—but because my father considered the job too important to leave to a stranger. Like many parents in the 1960s, he associated long hair with depravity. This view was understandable in that era of sex, drugs, and Woodstock, but the intensity of his opposition has always baffled me. When Dev was growing up during the height of post-punk fashion, his phases of bleaching his hair or wearing it in a Mohawk never particularly alarmed me. If his chosen style flattered him I was pleased, and if it didn't I knew he'd tire of it soon enough. Mainly, I empathized with his passage through those teen years when one feels pressured both to stand out and to fit in.

I had certainly felt that way at his age, and had hated not being allowed to follow the latest trend. I not only had to cope with my mother chopping away beyond our agreed-upon length until I fled her bathroom in tears, and my father ordering a trim a few weeks later, but I was turning out to have exactly the wrong kind of hair for my times: thick, immobile, susceptible to the pressure of hats and pillows, and insisting on sprouting outward as soon as it reached a modest length. The Irish woman who looked after my sister and me loved to tousle my hair and gush, "look at these beautiful curls," but I knew that those eruptions would never earn the admiration of my peers.

On my thirteenth birthday I spent my gift money on a pair of professional thinning shears, thinking that the way to convert my hair from a thicket of waves and curls into the straight,

swinging tresses worn by my rock and roll heroes was to keep thinning it until it cooperated. The style of the day was long, limp—what my mother contemptuously called “lank”—hair, parted only enough to reveal the eyes. My models were James Taylor, Jackson Browne, and, later, Peggy Lipton, the impassive blond actress on the t.v. show “Mod Squad.” By the time I went off to boarding school in 1971, the cool thing for a boy was to look like a girl.

The most popular boys at my school had straight hair that rested on their shoulders like curtains brushing the floor, or jounced in ponytails behind their hockey, lacrosse, or football helmets. One unfortunate white kid in my class had such tight curls that his hair went from crew-cut to Afro in a month. Watching him walk into chapel on parents week-end, my father asked in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear, “What’s that?” My hair was almost that bad, determined to grow out rather than down. I had to pull it straight to make it touch my collar, and when I tried to grab it back into a ponytail, my head looked like a golf ball with the cover ripped off and the rubber bands springing free.

Still, I *had* to have long hair; it was socially mandatory unless one was a math prodigy with one’s own set of unfashionable crew-cut friends. Away at school and free of my parents’ oversight, I felt blessed to have months to let my hair grow between visits home, and even more months if I could get through a vacation without them forcing me to get it cut. I knew that my mother would sigh and plead and try to insist, but doubted that she’d force me into the bathroom and onto the toilet seat for one of her traumatizing hack jobs.

Instead, my father tried to humiliate me into getting a haircut. He mocked the way my hair surged out from my head like ice heaves, and said I looked like a girl, rechristening me Alice. I wished I did look like a girl, or like the rock star Alice Cooper with his dangling black strands. According to a rumor at school, Cooper (born Vincent Furnier) had once played the role of Eddie Haskell, the clean-cut friend of Wally Cleaver on the t.v. show “Leave it to Beaver.” That transformation from All-American boy to Goth prince was just what I aspired to. Cooper’s hit song during my freshman year of boarding school became my personal anthem: “No More Mr. Nice Guy.”

My hair only reached a satisfying length when it curled over the tops of my ears and the outside of my shirt collar. Unfortunately, it wouldn’t do this unless I pawed it into place with oily palms. I envied boys who constantly needed to flick their hair back or tuck it behind their ears. Sometimes in my dorm room I’d pull a lock of my bangs down over my eyes and peer through it, fantasizing about what it would be like to have hair that did that on its own. When I let go, the lock would spring back into an untamable, side-skewing curl.

My hair obeyed every force except gravity. After a shampoo, it erupted in wavelets or electrostatic spasms depending on when, where, how, and how long it had dried. Weather influenced its behavior, as did how I slept on it, the greatest torment of all. I spent more time struggling with my bedhead than with any other aspect of my appearance—that is, until I discovered that the overnight hours were also my best opportunity for sculpting. I might never make my hair lank and flickable (though my hopes for the thinning shears persisted into my twenties), but I could, by wetting it before I went to bed, parting it the wrong way, and sleeping in a tight ski cap, ensure that when I woke up it would be gloriously, if rigidly, straight.

I hit upon this method one winter after observing that if I wore a hat for an extended period, my hair looked really good when I removed it (good to me, at least—my curl-coveting Irish nanny

would have sighed that my best feature had been effaced). Even today, with barely enough hair left on top of my head to comb, I wear a baseball cap to protect my scalp from the summer sun, and when I take it off the tamped down look delights me.

I suspected a classmate of using the same nocturnal strategy. His coarse blond hair angled down in two corrugated slabs from the part in the middle of his head. I felt certain that his hair, if left alone and slept on unattended, would bulge outward as wildly as mine. In fact, one of the few black students in our class had his hair straightened with a professional “process” that looked just like the blond boy’s homemade one. So great was the pressure for boys to have long straight hair that nearly all of my classmates grew theirs out, even when the results were aesthetically disastrous.

The boy that my father had mocked in chapel was nicknamed “Bush” for his bouffant style. His puffy, untended hair made him instantly recognizable on campus and gained him some respect for adhering to the 60s ethos of individuality and eccentricity. I just saw him as ridiculous. He wasn’t black cool like the black students with voluminous Afros, or white cool like the preppy kids with shoulder-length straight hair. He looked more like a circus clown, and served as a caution of what could go wrong when the urge to be fashionable collided with the misfortune of having been born with bad hair.

My longest stretch between haircuts occurred during my senior year. Two photographs from that period document the only times when my hair, to my eyes, looked perfect. In one, taken after I had removed my helmet following a football game, it’s impeccably straight, covering my collar and seeming as if it might even consent to be brushed away from my eyes and tucked behind an ear. I suspect that some sort of headgear was involved in the second photograph, too. Here, my hair lies flat over my ears and collar, and for once looks a bit mussed without having exploded into its usual finger-in-a-light-socket chaos. But this picture’s main appeal is that I think I look like Jim Morrison of The Doors, though so far no one else has perceived the resemblance.

Toward the end of high school, I began to make peace with my hair’s recalcitrance. If I could ignore it, maybe others could too. When a female classmate confided that I had been “discovered” by girls during senior year, I was thrilled to have attracted interest in spite of my handicap. Equally encouraging was the fact that the fashion had begun to swing away from long hair. No longer would I have to choose between being uncool and looking like a hung-over clown. Cut short, my hair behaved quite nicely. I continued to long for ponytailable straightness, but concluded from the popularity of musicians with hair similar to mine—Bob Dylan, Jerry Garcia—that curls possessed their own appeal, and might even be considered, as my Irish caretaker had exclaimed, beautiful.

II

No sooner had I settled in to enjoy my stylish short hair than it began to exhibit reduction plans of its own. I don’t remember any time elapsing between my first substantial haircut in years and the discovery of my first bald spot—not even a week when I could strut around thinking that I finally looked presentable. The summer after my sophomore year of college, as I prepared for a year abroad, my sister joked that she should take a good look at me while I had any hair left. Her

comment followed months of me agonizing over the fact that my forehead had begun to expand upward.

The locus of my concern was two inlets above my temples. According to my daily mirror check, they were receding so quickly that I would be bald not just in my twenties, but (a couple of my classmates had this horrifying problem) while still in college. Since hair had everything to do with attracting girls, I made a quick pact with God. I reasoned that by age thirty-five I'd either have a wife who loved me for my inner self, or I'd be seeking to attract women too old to be picky about their boyfriend's hirsuteness. So I told God that if he postponed my baldness until then I would relinquish my hair gladly.

To my surprise, he complied. My sister's first comment after I returned from Europe was that my hair hadn't vanished after all. The two inlets had retreated a modest distance and halted, and while my hair thinned gradually and evenly over the next decade, my appearance did not change noticeably. It wasn't until I was in my early forties that the bald spot in back began expanding to quarter and then hockey puck size. And only in the past few years has the top thinned to the point where a strait of bare scalp threatens to break open across the middle of my head. Interestingly, though, my wispy widow's peak and the original incursions on either side remain faintly distinguishable, as if God were striving to exceed his original promise.

Today, at fifty-three, I envy men like my friend Don, whose gray thatch shows no signs of betraying him as he approaches sixty. Like the female speaker in Randall Jarrell's poem "Next Day," I mourn that younger members of the opposite sex no longer "see me." Glimpsing myself in a mirror (something I rarely do intentionally any more), I'm incredulous at how my once abundant hair has deserted me. I don't miss the burden of vanity, however, and having endured one girlfriend who badgered me unsuccessfully to try Rogaine, I'm happy to have found a woman who's comfortable with—or willing to overlook—my looks. I even admire my skull's handling of its new circumstances. I'm not one of those men—the actors William Hurt, Ed Harris, and Patrick Stewart come to mind—whose cranial and facial structures make them as handsome without hair as with it, but I wear my baldness tolerably well. It's neither the first thing others notice about me nor a cause for cringing, titters, or averted looks.

Still, mine is the most delicate stage of hair loss, when recession turns from mild to severe, with increasing swaths of bare acreage. I estimate that only a couple of years remain before my lifelong habit of combing my hair left to right will result in the dreaded combover look. In moments of discouragement, I think that shaving my head would be preferable, but aesthetic considerations stay my hand. Certain skulls look good bare, but to me a bumpy shaved head is the worst look a man can have. As I touch around my frontal lobe, fingering back along a central ridge as prominent as the one that delivers climbers to the Everest summit, I conclude that I lack the cranial symmetry to take it all off up there.

Besides, I haven't admitted defeat in this battle, though on days when I'm masochistic enough to angle two mirrors to reflect the top of my head, my fate is hard to deny. I'm just not ready to think of myself as a bald man, or even as one of those tufty types with hair only on the sides. I have yet to fail the most conclusive test, that of being identified to strangers as "the bald guy over there." I hope never to hear myself described in this way, but am perpetually alert for it and for reassurance of the most sycophantic kind. As long as the woman who cuts my hair protests "You're not bald" when I vent my insecurity during our ever briefer sessions, my self-esteem—and her tip—are secure.

Why is baldness so distressing to men? Unlike weight gain, that other change to our appearance that distinguishes us unflatteringly from our youthful selves, baldness is neither reversible nor our fault. Yet young men (my son is a good example) dread it more than any other symptom of age; this most masculine of conditions confers the most unmanly of stigmas. Men don't think this about other men, but assume that women place hirsuteness near the top of their lists of manly qualities. We're repeatedly confirmed in our fear that baldness is a major handicap in the sexual sweepstakes. On the t.v. show *Seinfeld*, when George lists his disadvantages as a boyfriend, the audience laughs at his triple misfortune: he's short, fat, and bald. But shortness and baldness are hereditary, whereas fatness can be a symptom of self-indulgence. By conflating these attributes, the show reinforces the image of baldness as a character flaw.

For a man of my age, hair loss is no longer reasonable grounds for romantic rejection or even self-consciousness. Still, I hate my condition, which I see as just another setback to my lifelong desire to be cool. In this respect, I remain a child of the 60s, whose hit musical, "Hair," opened the year my mother first took her shears to my curls. The title song sums up my expansionist philosophy:

Gimme a head with hair, long beautiful hair
 Shining, gleaming, steaming, flaxen, waxen
 Give me down to there, hair!
 Shoulder length, longer (hair!)
 Here baby, there mama, Everywhere daddy daddy

Hair! (hair, hair, hair, hair, hair, hair)
 Flow it, Show it;
 Long as God can grow it, My Hair!

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On Fire Keith Rebec

Pyromaniac Tendencies

When children get the urge to create fire, according to Freud, he or she does so to gain power over nature and fulfill a primitive desire. The inflicted yearn to feel the heat, to get close to the licking flame, to watch it rise and burn. And when the sparks die, when flames turn to ash, the adolescent naturally seeks tinder and stokes the fire.

Tonka

I am seven and alone, and I am behind my grandmother's house searching for an innocent Garter snake to chop in half with a spade shovel when I find a gas can. I lift the metal housing, shake it, feel the slosh. After heading into the house to grab a box of Ohio Blue Tip matches, I return and lug the can across the street to the neighborhood playground where Tonka trucks and matchbox cars lay haphazard in the sand and crabgrass. I rearrange the toy vehicles, setup plastic soldiers as makeshift construction workers. When the ideal community is constructed, when the foreman begins to bitch at the grunts with a deep voice, I dowse it with gas, then reach for the matches. On the first pop the flame goes *whoosh*, rises and touches my face. It engulfs the men, covering their molded bodies, while their unsuspecting wives probably laze at home nipping vodka. Soon the fire crawls over the Tonka trucks, the '57 Chevys, eating at their windows, at the drivers who clutch AR-15s and struggle to flee, their charred faces and muffled cries now stuck to the Plexiglas.

When the blaze dwindles and flickers like a child's tongue, I splash it again with gas and catch the can on fire. I panic, shout for help. Nobody is around. I heave the metal housing—wait until it bleeds out and burns.

Pyromania Symptoms

According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV 1994), pyromania is determined by the following characteristics:

- The deliberate setting of fires on multiple occasions.
- An onset of arousal before the deed.
- A desire for or an attraction to fire and its consequences.
- The individual seeks pleasure, fulfillment, or release from fire setting and witnessing its destruction.
- There is no money to be gained; no criminal mischief to cover or anger involved. The culprit is not suffering from a drug-induced hallucination or impaired judgment such as mental retardation.

- The acts of setting fire are not better attributed to other conduct disorders such as manic or antisocial. In other words, he or she isn't touched; rather it's merely a desire to set fire.

Homemade Flamethrower

A month after the Tonka truck mishap—when the wives along our block recommence to their morning gin martinis and no longer watch from verandas with a suspicious eye—I get another urge to create fire. I take a purple can of Aqua Net hairspray to the backyard and search for ant holes, the soft mounds with miniature working armies. When a colony is found—where hundreds of leggy specks carry the dead home on their backs—I flick the lighter and press the spray valve. A stream of hissing fire bursts forth. The ants curl, smoke, pop. Their carcasses reduce to ash. The living scatter, seek shelter under blades of switch grass. When the mouth of the hole is blackened and nothing moves, I scout for something else to burn.

The backyard is double city lot. A 1966 Buick Le Sabre four-door rusts in the open; high weeds wilt around its dead tires, its sagging frame. I move my Reeboks through the gaunt vegetation along the driver's side door, uncover a toad. It is the size of a woman's fist. I nudge it with my shoe away from the car, kneel close, hit the valve on the homemade flamethrower. The toad squeals. Its warty skin ruptures, blisters. A white film forms over its eyes. During the toad's attempted escape, its sacrificial burning, the grass ignites. I say, "Oh shit," and stomp the flames. It spreads. I stomp harder. Within minutes the festering fire is out. The charred earth looks ruined, desolate like the underbelly of a barbecue grill.

At this point I am hip deep in a world of shit. I drag an algae-filled kiddie pool atop the scorched earth, rake around it. When the makeshift disguise appears somewhat believable, I head inside—flip on Inspector Gadget—await detection, the possible belt blisters, when my parents get home.

Prevention

I am eight and in the third grade. It is October and National Fire Prevention Week, so a local volunteer firefighter visits our classroom. He struts up to Ms. Nowicki in a wrinkled uniform, shakes her hand, winks; he has a huge gut and a tiny body, a cleft chin. He speaks in monotone. "Learn not to burn," he says, "learn not to burn." Little Bobby Timms raises his hand after the firefighter has finished repeating the phrase for the sixth time. The man nods and Bobby stands. "Mark burned his sister's leg while camping this summer with a hotdog stick," he says, "and his daddy whipped him on the bottom for it." The man thumbs the stubble on his chin, says, "Learn not to burn, son, learn not to burn."

After watching a cartoon about a dog named Sparky and why not to play with fire, we get to go home. When we hit the alley adjacent to the school, a few of us smoke menthol cigarettes behind a row of juniper bushes. The smoke burns our lungs, makes our chests feel full, cold. We cough and mock Bobby and the fireman, and when the red glow of our cancer sticks reach the filters, we flip the butts into the grass, head our separate ways.

Almost Every Child Experiences Fire at Some Point

It is a humid summer day and I am foraging for sticks in a small pocket of woods near the city limits to build a fort, a hideaway to smoke cigarettes and peruse Hustler magazines. When the ideal location isn't found, and I reach the end of the dense expanse—where forest gives way to field—I notice, at the edge of the high grasses and swollen hills, a 55-gallon burn barrel smoldering in a yard adjacent to a clapboard shack. A heavysset woman in a tarp-like yellow dress is outside hanging wash on the line. She has clothes pins sticking from her mouth, and sometimes, before she reloads, she yells at two young girls, who shriek close by in only underwear, to hush. The girls do not listen. They keep chanting, "Mother may I," then leap and skip before laughing and falling. I creep through the woods to get closer. The gray haze from the barrel lays feral over the field and smells of burnt plastic, and I have the urge then to stoke the fire.

When I get twenty yards from the woman, I sit on a seasoned log and smoke a cigarette, and as I finish and stomp it out in dirt and dry leaves, the woman begins to shout. It startles me and I stand to run. But she is only shouting at the girls. They are standing next to the burning barrel, and some of the fire has spilled over the side, igniting the brown grass around their feet. The woman slaps at the flames with a pair of blue jeans but the fire rages on. She cusses and the girls watch and soon fire is swallowing the yard, the small hills which rise throughout the field. I am conflicted with whether to help or run. And while I stand there the town's fire whistle moans and then uniformed men arrive and wrestle large hoses from the trucks, begin dousing the flames. When it is clear the men are subduing the fire, I slip back into the woods and head for home with a burning smoke pinched between my lips.

Freud and the Legend of Fire

When a man first discovers fire, he feels an urge to quench a puerile desire by urinating on the tonguey flames. And, perhaps, most every man—lost somewhere in the natal fantasies of those more primitive before him—stands above the blaze, makes the embers hiss and smoke and pop, and subconsciously contends with other men at being the strongest, at lasting the longest, in order to subdue the earthly force and become a God.

Starting Fluid

It is February and Steve and I are in his parents' garage working on a 340cc Arctic Cat Panther motor pulled from a snowmobile. We are trying to get it to run but aren't having any luck. The engine is on the workbench and the gas lines, two plastic hoses, snake from the carburetors to the tank on the floor. Steve sprays more starting fluid into the carbs, yanks again on the recoil rope. The engine fires and flames shoot out the exhaust. During the ignition the bench and gas lines combust from the dripping fluid. Now the floor is on fire, and when the flames eat through the plastic gas lines, it leaks along the cool concrete in a rolling, purple flame. Steve panics. He runs out into the February night and comes back with chunks of packed snow, drops it onto the fire. It does nothing. The flames rise, spread atop the snow and inch toward his mother's Dodge Daytona. I panic, bolt. When I reach the blacktop thirty yards away, I turn and Steve is still

scrambling to dump snow on the fire, and the inside of the garage glows orange; I feel sick and run like hell for home.

Two hours later Steve calls. “I wish you wouldn’t have skipped out on me, man,” he says. “I could’ve used you.” We both go silent. “Did the garage burn down?” I ask, finally. “No,” he says, “but my daddy’s pissed about his workbench being burned up and my mom’s car needs new tires now, which I got to pay for somehow.” Then he hangs up.

I sort of feel guilty, but it isn’t my fault. I decide to wait a week, until the smoke clears, before heading back to Steve’s house.

The Day the Clowns Cry

It is July 6, 1944, and thousands of men, women, and children are corralled underneath the big top for the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus at the north end of Hartford, CT. It is 90 degrees outside the tent and 106 inside. Spectators are pinched tight in the bleachers—choking down corndogs lathered in mustard and ketchup—with sweat running down their faces, elbowing one another. Lions pant down in the ring, and saliva drips from their corrugated tongues. The Flying Wallendas clutch ropes high above, preparing to toe the high wires, mere feet from the lions’ femur-crushing jaws.

Near Section A of the bleachers, a flame the size of a buffalo nickel gnaws at the tent’s canvas cover. In seconds the fire spreads. Smoke fills the inside of the tent. People shrug, shriek, squirm. Some start in on their second or third corndog and wait for the Wallendas to begin, sip Coca-Colas. But the fire intensifies; it roars and hisses and swallows much of the tent. When people realize the blaze is not part of the act, they push and shove. Women and children fall, skid head first down rows of wooden bleachers, some split their skulls, get trampled at the bottom; others jump from the pinnacle of the bleachers’ steel rails. Bones break. The canvas rains atop the people in wet, fiery patches. It catches hundreds of them on fire. The melting cotton canvas coats their necks and arms, their hair, and erodes their flesh; it blackens their tender bodies like burnt marshmallows. People continue to scream, run. The exits are blocked with animal cages, with spectators who are crushed, stacked, three or four deep, in tangles of busted limbs. The band plays “Stars and Stripes Forever.” The fire rages on.

In less than nine minutes the entire tent burns to the ground. Witnesses, with gauzes stretched over their aching physiques, peel chunks of canvas from their skin and describe the chaos, the pleas and echoes from those who are believed to be dead somewhere amongst the ashes. The pine tent poles smolder, pop, and bodies lay across the crippled earth like twisted airplane propellers.

Muffler

I am riding my YZ 80 motorcycle in circles around our house trailer on Deer Lake Road. It is summer vacation and I am in shorts and a t-shirt and the wind feels good on my face, my legs. I shift the bike into third gear, pop a wheelie, and gun it through the field full throttle. When I reach the end of our property, I turn low to the ground and the foot-peg snags a buried strand of barbed wire. The bike spins 180 degrees and I cling tight to the handlebars, try to ride it out, but

before I can react the bike is laying on top of me, still running. I try to shove it off, but my leg is stuck and gas is pouring from the tank. I can't get the leverage or gather enough strength to jerk free. I buck and push and now my leg is burning underneath the bike. The leg feels hot and wet. After a few attempts I wiggle free, scoot away. A patch of skin, about the length and width of a man's hand, is missing from my thigh. The injury is russet-colored, the skin leathery. It stings. Gas still drips from the tank, but the motor has quit running. I grab the handlebars and stand the bike upright, untangle the mess of barbed-wire from the foot peg; my thigh skin is stuck to the face of the muffler, smoking.

I push the motorcycle home, limping the whole way. When I get inside I lay on the couch; the pain is severe, like a never ending pinch, and the burn has begun to dry and crack. I ice it but that doesn't help much, so I apply two fingers' worth of petroleum jelly and position the lesion in front of a box fan for three days. And, twenty years later, I still carry a scar on the inside of my thigh that resembles a baked potato.

The Investigation

The following morning after the circus fire, the State's Attorney, H.M. Alcorn, Jr., announces that 168 people are dead and over 675 are injured. It has been determined that the tent's canvas had been waterproofed with paraffin wax and three parts gasoline, and five circus employees are being charged with manslaughter. Tensions around Hartford reach a melting point. After a lengthy trial the men are found guilty of not having adequate fire equipment on site and for blocking the exits with animal cages, among other offenses. All the men serve jail time, except one, and those jailed are let go shortly thereafter to resume work and help the circus pay off millions in insurance claims.

The Confession

Six years after the Hartford fire, in 1950, Robert D. Segee, while serving time in an Ohio prison for arson, confesses to starting the blaze. He tells investigators that an Indian on a fiery horse urged him to ignite the tent. He also admits to crushing the skull of nine year old girl with a stone during a fit of rage along the banks of a river in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, in 1938. On both instances he is never charged and years later he recants these statements. To this day nobody knows how the fire reached the tent. Some believe a cigarette butt in the dry gas is the culprit, while others say it is Segee. Regardless of the cause, fire is to blame, and the dead are still dead.

Fracture

We are in the fourth grade and on a class camping trip to Camp Daggett on Walloon Lake. The trip is scheduled to last two days, and on the first evening, after a busy day of snake exhibits, nature walks, and swimming lessons, we hunker down in our bunks, await sleep. The night is cool and crickets chirp and moths bang at the window screens. A whippoorwill calls somewhere far off, and I wonder what it is like at the girls' cabins. Are they in soft nightgowns and whispering about their budding breasts or, even better, us?

At 3 a.m. a thud and a moan wakes me. I sit up. The moans are soft and carry through the darkness. I slip from the bottom bunk and make my way toward the noises. What's going on, what you doing? I say softly. It is Chris and he's on the floor, cross-legged. Again, he only grunts, moans. Now, other classmates are up, inching closer. We huddle around Chris, and Dougie hits his flashlight, shines it on Chris through semi-translucent fingers. Chris squints and his right hand grips his left wrist; he opens his eyes and lifts his left arm chin level. It is bent like a 9-volt flash light, the small square type, and he regards the arm, stretch before him, like some divine trophy. In unison we howl, say, "Oh" and "Ah," and jump and squirm; we jostle, then wedge in to better study the grotesque bends in Chris's radius and ulna bones. Little Bobbie Timms says, "Holy shit, good Christ, it's bent like a flashlight." Chris just holds the arm steady and now our counselor is up and getting us to move away. When he notices Chris's arm, he says, "Hot damn," and grabs a blanket, lays it over the busted arm. We can still see the shape of the flashlight through the fabric and the counselor ushers him down to the main lodge and somebody rushes him to the hospital.

The next day there is no Chris. Later, around the campfire, we rehearse the expressions on Chris's face, how he held the bent arm before us and moaned; how he seemed kind of stoned when examining it in the light. We laugh and take turns acting out the incident before the counselors tell us to hush, and be respectful. We grow quiet. The orange light dances over our cheek bones, and our eyes, in a moment of brief brilliance, glow like those of beasts laying patient in the dark.

The Morgue and Burial

At the State Armory in Hartford, the dead are lined on cots a foot apart. The stench of paraffin wax and burnt flesh permeates the room. When husbands arrive and push through the barricade to identify their dead wives and children, nurses give them shop rags to cover their noses. Inside, 168 bodies are stretched wall to wall and only a thin cotton blanket covers them. Police and military personnel escort families down rows. The interior of the building is hot and humid, and residual water drips from the dead and vomit coats the floor. Most of the victims are unrecognizable, and their semi-cremated bodies are dark and brittle like a raven's wing. It is hard to tell if the remains are male or female since most are now reduced to shards of bone and teeth. One father, after locating his eleven-year-old daughter, sobs in front of the military men and pulls the blanket away, crawls onto the cot. It sags, creaks. He hugs her, though she is stiff from rigor mortis and her face is half gone. He whispers, "Oh my darling, my little peach," into her ruined ear, then lays his head against hers.

Over the next several days, when the majority of the dead have been claimed, funerals are held every 15 minutes. The entire fleet of hearses in the Hartford area is in use so a quarter of the victims' coffins are loaded into livery vehicles or pickup trucks and delivered. The funerals go morning until night and span the entire week, and the grieving often remain on site to attend the funerals of friends and loved ones throughout the day. The community congregates and disperses and congregates again until the final miniature coffin is lowered into the ground and the last fistful of dirt is tossed over the dead.

Gun Powder

I am not sure whose idea it is to pack the steel pipe full of gunpowder. It is bingo night so my grandmother is gone, and we are across the street at the neighbor's. Carl kneels next to the mouth of the explosive. It is two-inches in diameter and a foot long and chuck-full with smokeless gun powder. Only one end is capped, and Carl is using a powder trail along the ground for a wick. The rest of us are ten yards away, leaning against clapboard siding, sipping Yoo-hoos and eating Ding Dongs, awaiting the detonation.

"You dickweeds wait until you get a load of this," Carl says, and lights a hunk of rolled newspaper, touches it to the trail. Then he tries to run; there is a *whoomph*, and a cloud of smoke devours him. When the haze clears and the fiery pipe has ceased breathing, Carl is on the ground, mollycoddling his arm. We rush over. The burn, from wrist to bicep, is green and hairless. Black bubbles swell along the outer edges of the flesh wound; the center is cherry red and raw, and powder residue is ingrained into his arm. Carl digs the heels of his Chuck Taylors into the grass; he mumbles, squirms, and begins to slip in and out of consciousness. Nobody attempts to help. A green Ford Tempo swings alongside us on the lawn, and two towheaded boys in the backseat hang their arms outside the car.

Now, I am nervous. The driver shouts for us to get help and we scatter in opposite directions. I head for my grandmother's alone. I lock the door, run upstairs, and watch from the spare bedroom. Lights flash. Men in dark uniforms lug big handled boxes with a red cross on the side. They drop them in the grass and slip to their knees, shout, work on Carl.

When the ambulance and the Tempo are gone, I open the window and climb onto the roof. Two policemen are on the scene; they wear rubber gloves and examine the pipe, stop to write things in tiny notebooks. One of them spots me on the roof. He walks over. "Howdy son," he says, "do you know anything about the incident across the street?" "No sir," I say, "just heard noises so I came out to see what happened." "Are you sure?" he asks. I nod, act cool. "Come on down," he says.

This time I have no way to run. I survey the roofs of rundown houses, their cankerous shingles that have curled under the sun. Somewhere someone is burning leaves, and the cloud and stench of that hovers above me, and it follows me still where ever I go.

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