

HOME IS EVERYTHING WE LEAVE BEHIND

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at George Mason University

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my family and my girlfriend Liz, without whom I could never have written this or anything

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ABSTRACT

HOME IS EVERYTHING WE LEAVE BEHIND

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This thesis attempts to explore through the lens of personal experience the role that leaving plays in living. The thesis pays particular attention to the people, places, and moments humans leave behind during their growing up and growing old. The first part of the thesis describes the narrator's childhood experience, which is depicted to seem as fleeting to the reader as possible. The awareness of losing or leaving things precisely as he loses or leaves them is fundamental to the purpose of the narrator in this thesis. Part two serves to reinforce the notion that living, by its very definition, is a form of leaving. Part three describes some of the people and places the now adult narrator has left behind.

PART ONE: HOME

LINGER

I've been here before. Stopped in the middle of the road in front of 147 Maple Street. I'm here to question my past.

Whenever I visit my family on Cape Cod, I drive past my childhood house. I can't seem to stay away. I always make my girlfriend accompany me on these trips because she keeps me moving; otherwise, I'd still be in the middle of the road.

When I'm feeling bold, we creep past my childhood house like the box turtles I remember my brother and I used to watch from the yard. It would take them nearly all day, it seemed, to cross the narrow street. It appeared dangerous to be a turtle. Sometimes, my brother and I would pick up the creatures when they lingered too long in the road, handling them the way we'd hold a quarter-pounder with cheese, and move them onto safer ground.

In the car, I don't hear anything besides my own beating heart and my girlfriend's toe tapping. I love my girlfriend, and she loves me, but she's tired of this detour. She's not shy when telling me my childhood home is out the way. I've seen it before, she reminds me.

I like to think that I bring my girlfriend with me so I can show her something she hasn't seen before. The post and beam architecture. The room I shared with my brother.

The attic turned playroom. The turtles of my youth. I like to think I can fill her sketchy image of this house, my past, with bright colors, sounds, smells, and tastes. If that's the case, I'm doing a poor job. I'm not sure she gets it. Mine isn't your average, run of the mill nostalgia. I'm distracted. Hopelessly bent on something that is gone and can never be again. Truthfully, I'm embarrassed by how much I'd give to be a kid in that house once more. I'd never tell my girlfriend what that would include.

I drive past my old house whenever I visit my family on the Cape, and my girlfriend makes a fuss, but she always comes with me. She gets how much she doesn't get it. She knows that I even though I can never return, I can't seem to stay away.

When I stop the car, I implore her to look at the house I grew up in. Look, I say, pointing. *Look*. And though I've no idea what she is seeing, we both look—and we look and look. It's only when I hear her foot begin to tap, softly at first, that I know I've overstayed my welcome. And I get it, finally. My girlfriend's purpose here, beside me in this car, is to keep me moving, to push me from the middle of the road where I've lingered for so long.

A HISTORY OF CLICHÉ

A young couple is building their dream house. They aren't *actually* building—the dad is not pouring foundation, the mom not hammering away at whatever needs to be hammered away at—but paying an arm and a leg for everything to be handled by professionals: carpenters, plumbers, electricians, tile men, brick layers. They're paying for the experience, and it must be done right. It must be done perfectly. They will only build their dream house once.

The young couple has two boys, four and eight.

The young family visits the house as often as they can. They're living in a rental for the time being. It's old and smells of damp wool, and the floorboards creak like tired bones beneath their feet. There's no *sneaking*. The boys can hardly wait to move-in to the new house and explore, explore, explore. Their parents are excited too. Whenever the family visits the house, they strut along posts and beams, posts and beams, dreaming. There's not yet a roof, and that adds to the immensity of it all, a dream coming true in front of their eyes.

The sky is the limit in a roofless house, and the sky is cool blue and cloudless. The snow has quit for the season. What's been dumped in buckets has been collected in the stately oaks at the far edge of their property, a canopy of fluffernutter all that remains. Maple Street is the future, and it's bright. All pools below ground. Driveways are long

and winding. Theirs is shiny bluestone that crunch beneath tires like name-brand potato chips. Rich, mahogany maple leaves larger than the younger boy's hand pile themselves beside trees begging to be climbed, summited, mounted and tamed like wild beasts— every branch, the rung of a ladder. Every step, up.

PORTRAIT OF THE FAMILY AFTER CANCER

We were living in a cold and cramped rental nearby the construction of our dream house when my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer. Almost immediately, her needs outgrew the resources of the local hospital on Cape Cod, and she was transferred an hour away to Boston to undergo a series of radical treatments. In a week, her thick, brown hair was gone, replaced by a cap of skin.

I was four years old, visiting her in her Boston hospital room. I considered, as a way to understand the whole experience maybe, that my mom's hair had never been there in the first place. That I'd dreamt up the whole affair, her hair, rich and buttery and past her shoulders. Had she not always been this way, bald as an uncle? I knew deep down that this was not the truth, that she had not, in fact, always been this way, and that this—whatever *this* was—was far from normal. Nothing convinced me of such abnormality like the blank space where her eyebrows should have been. Those, too, had been erased by the chemotherapy.

My dad, brother, and I didn't know if my mom was going to make it. She survived—she was saved by a bone marrow transplant, a last resort—but for the several months she lay sick and bald and bland in a hospital bed, we waited, anxiously, for bad

news.

Whenever we came to visit, like one would visit an animal in a zoo (don't go too close, don't touch; she's asleep now, don't wake her), the nurses would offer my brother and me Hoodsie cups and purple popsicles without our asking for them. Slurping my treats, I never entertained the thought of my mother's death. I remember believing that the team of doctors and nurses would "fix" my broken mother because that's what hospitals did. They weren't anything to be frightened of; they were where you went to get repaired. One day soon, I figured, my father and brother and I would arrive at my mom's room, her hair again shoulder-length and wearing real person clothes, something like jeans and a sweater because she was always cold. She'd be sitting on her made bed, her lunch tray untouched. "Let's go home," she'd say. And we would.

When I think of the time my mother nearly died, I think of my dad. How helpless he must have felt. How unavoidable it all must have been. I know, only because he told me years later, that he seriously considered a future without his wife. I know that he lived in a state of fear for so many months, attempting to distract himself by working long hours, utter exhaustion the closest he could come to relaxation. I know that he was not healed when my mom was released back to us—a survivor, a modern miracle—that none of us were "fixed," nor would be anytime soon, that we didn't even know ourselves how much we'd been changed in such a relatively short period of time, didn't notice on the backs of our necks the hair that had begun to stand on end.

THE DREAM

Is so convincing that the possibility of it not being real feels like the dream. And then it's over. What remains is a mood, an unfinished feeling, an image of a face of a person you can't put your finger on because this person is a blend of every person you know and so resembles no one you've ever seen. This is how it goes: You wake up, wet-lipped and staring at the ceiling, your hair electric and your eyes cracked open like an egg, and you remember only that something somewhere is *lingering*.

MUMMY MOMMY

She's the kind of bald skinheads only dream of. Her skin becomes pale after one night in the hospital. As a sheet. She wears a blue-speckled gown called a *johnny* that covers little and flails open without aid or consent. She can only sleep when she dreams of her two little boys, four and eight. Thank god for small favors. Her arms grow tubes fastened in place by wads of tape that wrap and wrap around her. There's no skin to be seen. When she's finally unveiled, de-tubed and sent home, her boys will hug her nearly to death.

HER BOYS

Saved her life, she'll say. Always her boys. They gave her the strength to survive round after round of radiation, the removal of a diseased breast, and a bone marrow transplant. Of course the boys had nothing to do with it. Look at their faces. They're about as in control as the wind. It's not their fault. A child's love does not save lives.

THE WAY SHE SAID IT

Told you more than you'd ever need to know about her. How much her home meant to her. Over the phone to her brothers, my future uncles, who'd moved to New Hampshire and South Carolina, respectively. During holiday meals with relatives who had the misfortune of living off-Cape. To recent transplants (natives called them wash ashores) she met at the post office or the grocery store. *The Cape*. Where she'd lived her whole life, except her first couple months and four years at college in Boston. *The Cape*. Where she'd been raised and intended to raise her own family. Where her father had been a doctor in Brewster, taking her along for house calls up and down the forearm of their very own island in his antique Jeep. *The Cape*. Somehow, you got all that when she said it. The way the "p" sound uncorked a life.

HALF-PIPE

My brother and I loved to skateboard, though if you happened to drive down Maple Street on a beautiful fall afternoon, crab apples like exploded doll heads, you'd more likely see us carrying our boards than riding them, the grip-tape scratchy on our fingertips. We weren't posers I don't think. My brother might have been. He was old enough to be a poser, to know better, to know how good he wasn't. I wasn't old enough to know what I didn't know. I liked to skateboard because my brother liked to skateboard.

Paul removed his helmet as soon as we got to Todd's house, probably before, just in case. Paul and Todd were the same age then. I was and will always be the younger brother.

Todd lived on our street. I loved to go with my brother when he invited me to Todd's house, more specifically, to Todd's half-pipe. I killed it on that half-pipe. Pride is the wrong word—too adult—but my brother seemed something along the lines of proud of me. He and Todd, standing in their flat-bottomed, wide-tongued and badly abused shoes, would watch me drop-in from a height that scared them. Because it was the only “trick” I could do, I did it over and over. Over and over again. I started at the top,

pressure-locking the tail of my board beneath the weight of my back foot. I checked that my helmet was buckled, the straps tight. Then I looked for my brother, his white-blond hair cow-licked and shiny, to be sure he was watching.

TRAIN CALL

My brother and I could hear the train for miles, minutes, before it passed by our house, wobbling the cupboards that weren't one hundred percent secure on the tile floor of the kitchen and the mudroom. A rumble like thunder grew louder and louder with each passing second. When the whistle blew, confirming what we'd hoped, we rushed from the house like we were the ones fueled by fire, and the screen door slapped behind us, each clutching a perfectly good penny we were bent on destroying.

Before we sold the house on Maple Street, after eight years that brought me from a preschooler to a teen, potential buyers seemed concerned about the house's proximity to the train tracks at the edge of our property, less than a football field away from the house itself. How often does it come?" They would ask. "Is it loud?" And, if they had kids or were thinking of having kids, which they always were—kids were the only reason to buy a house this size, this uneconomical: "What about children? There's no fence. Is it safe?" For most parents or soon-to-be parents, living this close to the train tracks was like having the interstate blasting through the front yard.

When the train's head had snaked around the bend, my brother and I knelt beside the tracks, which trembled and shook. Our hands were steady as we placed our pennies on the iron; the dates on the pennies determined which was whose because we couldn't

count on the pennies being in the same place after the train had roared past. Searching through the stone and weeds for our still shiny, flattened penny was half the fun.

We backed away, down the slight slope and off the stone onto the narrow strip of weeds that separated the tracks from our yard. The whistle had become a yell that rang our ears. The closer the train got to flattening our pennies, the closer it got to us, and the more excited we became. My stomach churned; my eyelids stretched. As always, I prepared to watch the moment of impact, to see the supreme crushing power of a locomotive transform Lincoln's head into a balloon.

The train came. The train went. I never saw it: the moment. Maybe I closed my eyes at the last second. Maybe it's not something that can be seen. As much as we had yearned for the train to arrive, we now begged it to leave, to hurry up and go already so we could examine our pennies, thank you very much.

If the penny somehow, amazingly, remained on the tracks, we peeled it off the iron like gum from the underside of a desk. It was incredible how cool to the touch it was. We expected it to be hot, or at least warm every single time, but it never was. More likely, the penny was no longer on the tracks but beside them on the ground where it had been thrown, where it lay among the weeds, a bent and misshapen light that seized our attention, stopping us in our own tracks. We'd wipe away the dirt and compare our trophies, my brother and me. His was flat and mine was flat but his Lincoln appeared more bloated than mine, and I checked the date to be sure, but the better, more destroyed of the two was definitely my brother's and that was that. And we ran our pennies back into the house to show our parents, who'd seen this one million times but always seemed

surprised by just how flat and perfect our pennies were this time. And we put our pennies on our bureaus or shelves, and we forgot about them as soon as we'd shown our parents. And we didn't think about doing this again until we'd think about nothing else but doing it again, when we heard that whistle louder than anything else in the world.

THE LIFESPAN OF A FIRE

On the coldest winter nights on Maple Street, my dad built a fire in the base of our chimney, its bricks so whole and square they looked like chimney veneers. From a stack outside, beyond the garage, my dad would carry the firewood through the mudroom and kitchen and into the living room as though cradling a child. Those babies weren't going anywhere. Once he'd reached the landing of the fireplace, he'd gently release the logs, which rocked back and forth, back and forth, before settling. Some of the blockier logs landed as upright and questioning as Meerkats. The wet prints of his boots were scattered across the hardwood floor of the living room like the footprints of an invisible man. Or rather a visible man who'd only just left. Turn back the clock, and it's the prints that weren't there, my dad standing, arms full, in the very place where these footprints would appear as soon as he'd moved along. After enough wood had been gathered, he crouched before the fireplace, stretching his blue jeans at the knee, and he added, one by one, the knotted-up newspaper rolls that my mom, brother, and I had been making while he fetched armful after armful of logs. There seemed to be no obvious strategy to how he built a fire, yet the result was always a teepee of fibrous wood that chirped in the flames. My dad stood when the job was done, and his knees cracked like the fire had begun to. All four of us watched the fire work from the ground up, first on the newspaper, quickly shriveling into wads of black, and then on the twigs and immature sticks my brother and I

knew enough to call kindling, and lastly on the firewood, the most important ingredient because it could withstand the flame the longest before turning to ash.

THE PRINTER

The thing about my dad is that for most of his early life he couldn't hold a job. By the time he was twenty-two, my dad had served—among numerous occupations that included frying food in over a dozen restaurants, selling vacuum cleaners door to door, hawking newspapers, driving cabs, parking cars, and a brief stint in a clock factory—four years in the United States Air Force. His hair was freshly buzzed. His uniform sagged like extra skin, and his boots looked two-sizes too big. He was the same height and weight as when he'd graduated from high school in the early 70's: 5 foot seven, one hundred pounds. He'd entered the Air Force as a photo interpreter but opted to become a clerk typist so he could be transferred from Blytheville, Arkansas to Otis Air Force Base on Cape Cod. Otis needed a clerk typist, and Cape Cod was near where he'd grown up in Somerset, Massachusetts. Plus, Blytheville was a pit—hot, buggy, and racist. After the transfer, my dad faced disciplinary action for having embellished his typing skills—he had none—and was sentenced to the top floor of a concrete building to work with Frederowski, the printer, which is where the story gets interesting. It was in that building surrounded by concrete where my dad found what he didn't even know he'd been searching for: Somewhere to land. For the first time, he was taught an actual trade, a marketable skill. He learned about primary ink colors—Cyan, Magenta, Yellow, Black—capable of producing almost every color in the wheel. He learned how to operate a printing press,

adjust ink levels, feed paper, clean the rollers that spun in the machine, quick enough and with enough power to break a middle finger. By his own hands, he produced pamphlets, business cards, flyers, newsletters. He was proud of his work. The tangible result of his efforts could not be denied by anyone. My dad could touch and feel and smell the paper, smell when the ink was still wet. He could hold a piece of paper and tell you its weight: 60 pound, 70 pound, 80 pound. By day's end, his fingers were dyed a rainbow of colors and he'd scrub and scrub at them but the ink remained. He thought then, for the first time in his young life maybe, that he might like to do something for more than a few weeks. A few months. A few years. A wife and a few kids later. He was a printer, he'd tell people, loving how solid the word sounded when he spoke it aloud, as if his story had already been written, his life already lived with two feet firmly planted on the ground.

HIS AND HERS

As a teenager, my dad ran away from his parents in an act of protest. For that same reason, my mom ran back to hers.

HAUNTED HAYRIDE

I'm six or seven, eight or nine. Young enough to enjoy all that is Halloween night, including a bumpy and frigid ride in the back of my dad's old pickup, the bed covered in hay. My brother and I take turns sitting on the wheel wells and the ribbed bed of the truck. Too long in one place isn't good for our butts, which, by night's end will feel as though they've been spanked over and over again. Our faces are red and blotchy from the wind.

Our costumes—Peter Pan for me, Dracula for my brother—itch us like crazy. We're severely underdressed. The tights don't cut it against the sharp wind. The green felt hat is more for looks than anything else and it doesn't come down over the ears. Cold air is sucked up the back of my brother's cape like a vacuum. At least my brother has real shoes. I'm running to each house on stockinged tiptoes in fabric, elfin shoes. My bag of candy whips back and forth. I collect the goods and then dart off the front steps and into the dark.

A few more houses and we're in the back of the truck again, freezing but riding a serious sugar high. My dad starts up the engine and tells us to hold on. It's time to fly. In and out of neighborhoods we pass this way, like wraiths. We're cloaked in the slippery smoke of an aging truck's exhaust. We're not *really* here. We're just passing through to take your candy. The only evidence that we've even left our house this night and taken a

haunted hay ride with our very own dad as the driver is the candy in our bags and on our lips and soon that too will be gone.

DON'T THINK ABOUT IT

After I swing and miss again, I don't turn to face my dad, but I can feel his presence. He is standing in the sun behind the batting cage, inside of which I am doing my best power-stance—knees shoulder-width apart and bent just slightly—and clutching an aluminum bat like a battle-axe. I've swung and missed several times, and I'm down on myself.

From behind me, my dad can see when my hands drop too early or if my footwork is off, when I'm pulling away from the ball instead of tearing into it. My dad's fingers are interwoven in the chain links that are painted over in peeling black paint. These links are not *real chain-links*, though, which are silver and glint in the sun and mark the boundaries of the best Little League fields; these links bend and warp like chicken wire as my dad leans into them to watch me take my rips.

My head sags beneath the weight of an oversized helmet. I tighten my grip on the bat, and I feel flesh being removed, the rubberized handle now intimate with my second or third or fourth layer of skin. I stare, trying not to blink, through the big hole in the net over the smaller hole in the machine out of which the yellow ball will be fired.

“Don't think about it. Just swing,” my dad says before the next pitch comes whizzing at me.

Don't think about it. Just swing.

He says this, I think, because he believes that if he doesn't say something, anything, I will grind this borrowed bat into nothing.

I don't turn to face him, but I feel his presence. He wears shockingly blue jeans of which he must have ten pairs and thick-soled brown shoes with gel supports. I am wearing my rubber-spiked cleats that click like snapped gum on the cement. I lean over the chalk-drawn plate and think about all the things I'm not supposed to think about. When the pitch finally comes, I swing ferociously and miss.

My dad unfastens his hands from the links. He retreats a few steps and lifts a pack of smokes from his shirt pocket. I don't turn to face him before the next pitch comes. I can see him fine from here.

A MAN

You're eighteen. You're in between. On paper, you're one thing. Off, something very different. One arm is shoving you out the door and the other has commandeered your shirt collar. Which path do you choose? Whichever choice you make, you're giving up something. You understand, then and there, that this is that what it means to be a man.

THE ONLY ANSWER THERE IS

Until I was twelve, I shared a bedroom with my older brother. My parents' decision to ultimately move me into my own room was not made for me but for my brother who, at sixteen, yearned for his own private space. At that age, it's natural to want to be alone, but I didn't understand that then. I'd always wanted the opposite.

Between our beds was a nightstand, and on it, big-faced clocks overlooked our allergen-free pillows, illuminating the sleeves of the pillowcases and my brother's white-blond hair. Because my brother's bed was just out of arm's reach, I'd whisper to him when I couldn't sleep.

I only ever woke my brother on certain occasions. Never on the nights when I simply had too much energy (probably because I'd eaten junk food too close to bedtime), but on those handful of times when I was kept awake by something far more troubling, and I was terrified of being alone with my thoughts.

It usually took a couple of attempts to rouse him. On those nights, it seemed, he slept like a log. The more desperate I became, the louder my voice until whatever noise I made wouldn't be correct to call a whisper. When he finally woke, his drawn out "Whaaaat?" was both the best and worst thing in the world. It broke the spell of loneliness I'd been feeling, but it also made me feel like the worst kind of nuisance, something little brothers are particularly sensitive about.

I'd begin with the obvious.

"Why can't you sleep?" He'd snap.

"I can't stop thinking about what's going to happen when mom and dad die and when you and me die and"

"Don't think about it," he'd say. Then he'd roll over and yank the blanket tighter around his throat.

That was the end of it. I knew that if I chose to bother him anymore, he would become angry with me, and that that wouldn't make me feel any less alone than I already felt.

My brother didn't understand what I was feeling, I thought. If he had, he'd never have been able to return to sleep. He'd have stayed awake, like me. Praying for morning to come. I wish we'd had an actual conversation. I'd like to think I'd have told my big brother that "not thinking about it" didn't work. I knew because I'd tried. Whenever I told myself not to think about it—*don't think about death, death, death*—I would still be thinking about it until somehow sleep overtook me or the morning arrived and with it, distraction. Couldn't he see that that had been the reason I woke him in the first place? Couldn't he see that the words he spoke were only a hollow vehicle, something I paid little attention to, but that simply talking to me, his voice from a bed I couldn't reach with my outstretched hand, was the only answer I needed?

DETECTIVE JOE COOL, RETIRED

Detective Joe lumbered around the house like he owned the place, like he wouldn't have been blown over by a stiff breeze. Detective Joe was our addict-thin greyhound with tissue-paper skin and ribs as pronounced as xylophone keys. In another life, Joe was a racer—he had the slick moniker to prove it—but he was retired now, living the life of Riley with my mom, dad, brother, and me in our oversized post and beam house.

Joe liked an audience. Whenever my brother and I would take him for walks, he would plan, perfectly, his steaming dump for when there were the most people around to watch him.

Thanks to Joe's flair for the dramatic, there's a Christmas I'll never forget. My dad, brother, and I had only just secured the tree in its base. We were in the kitchen with my mother, all of us admiring the fullness of the tree, how nice it'd look with presents beneath, when Joe, feeling a bit left out, I guess, rose from his plush doggie bed, approached the tree like an old friend, and lifted his leg on it.

Never one to short change himself, Joe let loose a terrifically long piss. We watched from the kitchen, too stunned to do anything but let the kid finish.

On hands and knees, layering paper towel over the foul pool, we weren't impressed. We damned the stubborn fool. We scolded him there on his floofy bed. *Joe!*

Joe's been gone for many years now, but I often think of him at Christmastime, how high, like a ballerina, he raised his leg to pee on our tree, how the stream of piss kept going and going and going while we watched, in awe, and how there's no way we weren't smiling just a little.

THE SIZE OF MEMORY

Once upon a time, you loved being big. Your bone-smuggling classmates reminded you daily, as though convinced your body would have changed overnight, that you looked like an NFL linebacker, and what was bigger than that? You pictured yourself as Ted Johnson of the 1997 New England Patriots, number 52, and grin buffoonish, forcing chipmunk cheeks into hard balls that squinted your eyes and further reddened a flushed face. Ted Johnson was your favorite player because, one, he played on your hometown team, and, two, he had a neck like a science project volcano. What was better than that? Then.

PLAY/ GROUND

Remember at school, Barnstable-West Barnstable Elementary, how lunch was the center of your universe. The question always on your mind, “What’s for lunch today?”

Sometimes you’d ask the question out loud, to a buddy or the girl who shared her peanut-butter-coated rice cakes with you. When you could no longer bear the suspense—you never made it past first period—you’d peek into your own vinyl, zippered bag to see what Mom had packed. In this, you were not alone. You were an impatient bunch. And so hungry. Before lunch, you’d dream about the meal to be. After, about the meal that was, bubbling like molten lava in your too-full bellies.

Remember that the only thing better than lunch was recess. And it *was* better. The school was surrounded by playgrounds, and because of that you were the envy of children for miles around.

Remember behind the schoolhouse, the soccer field where you played Capture the Flag and Red Rover. Metal goalposts marked the field’s boundaries. Grass turned to mud. And to the east and west of the field were the baseball diamonds and their gravel base paths you were told never to slide on—but you did slide.

Remember not everyone knew how to play baseball, so you played tons and tons of kickball instead. If you got it just right, you *felt it* because the rubber ball would absorb

your foot before catapulting into the stratosphere, or at least beyond the half-dozen outfielders who played too shallow.

Remember the tennis court. Way back behind the soccer field, at the tree line, and fenced in by chain link. You could've climbed the fence—if you'd wanted to. The tennis court wasn't interesting, mysterious, magical. It was only a place to play tennis, and so you ignored it.

Remember “the wooden playground” was what everyone called the quarter-acre of wooden structures at the western border of the schoolyard. The swinging bridges and lookout towers and diamond-shaped tunnels called to kids from all over the state. This was a children's castle, complete with rock-moat.

And remember you'd do anything not to touch the ground. Leaping and lunging, crawling and ducking from tunnel to bridge, bridge to tunnel. All while running for your life. Seeking and hiding, hiding then seeking. Perched in one of the many castle towers, looking at names you didn't know carved into wood, you'd wait, watch. If you thought you might be spotted, you could descend part way down the secret ladder and hang there until the coast was clear—then climb back up. Stepping on the ground, everyone knew, was against the rules: Game over.

Remember how, from a wooden peak or two, you could see the whole schoolyard. Your domain. You could see all the way across the soccer field and to the metal playground. That was how they were different. One was wooden and one was metal.

Remember that you never liked the metal playground because it was too easy to fall from the cold-slick bars and poles.

Remember that the metal playground was more ground than play. There were no tunnels or hideaways or covered bridges, no lookout towers, no secret ladders, no way of getting from the see-saw to the monkey bars without your feet touching the ground and remember how everyone knew what that meant.

PART TWO: LEAVING TO LIVE

LEAVING TO LIVE

“Outward Bound is more than just an outdoor camp.” I’d read and reread the website’s description months earlier, from the comfort of my home. “It is more than just a wilderness adventure. Our courses are not guided trips. They are real expeditions that cross rugged, beautiful terrain with challenges designed to reveal your strength.”

Whoever wrote those words knew how to appeal to someone on the ropes. Give the reader hope of some hidden strength, dormant for too long. Provide this individual with an excuse for past failures while also offering a way out of the hole. *You are not strong*, it said. *But you could be. Sign up.*

I did.

I signed up for the course that began and ended in Greenville, Maine, a town on the southern edge of Moosehead Lake. Greenville is about three-quarters of the way into Maine from the south and is more or less parallel to Montreal, give or take a few hundredths of a degree. 70 miles north of the nearest airport, Bangor International, Greenville appeared remote, to say the least. And that was only where the expedition began.

The Greenville course was scheduled for twenty-two days during the month of August. Rock climbing and canoeing down (over?) whitewater rapids were the primary activities, the points A and B between which we’d be hiking, canoeing, and portaging

(carrying the canoes over our heads) on a daily basis. I much preferred a desert course in Arizona where I could have gone canyoneering; it would be both warmer and drier than Maine, I figured. Arizona, however, would have incurred an additional cost, the cost of the flight, so Arizona, warm and dry and comfortable Arizona—a place I had never been—was out of the question almost as soon as it was introduced. (Not to mention, comfort was not the objective here, but rather discomfort.) Greenville, then, became the only real option, the one course close enough to my home in Massachusetts for my parents to drive me, saving on airfare.

The website made it clear, too, that Outward Bound was well suited for troubled teens. This was a sticking point for me because I didn't consider myself to be troubled. Fucked up a bit, sure. Weak, definitely. But the troubled boys and girls I knew in high school and my one semester at college were nothing like me. Although supremely fucked up, they didn't appear weak in any way; they took immense pride in not appearing weak, it seemed. (Two of the eight campers I'd yet to meet would reinforce this distinction. First, there was Chad, an Oregon bully who bragged about being in the Crips or the Bloods and harassed the smallest one of the group, Kevin, shoving him to the ground at one point while the rest of us watched, did nothing. Then there was Sean, a wiry kid who wore sunglasses no matter the time of day and quit smoking cold turkey for this trip yet had more endurance than the rest of us put together. He could camp and portage for days. We huffed and puffed as he sprinted by us. Sean had tattoos up and down his arms like rash. He told us that he mixed cement in San Diego or San Jose, but I could never get

over the idea he'd walked straight out of a *Sublime* music video into the backwoods of Maine, only to show the rest of us how weak we were).

Troubled kids were committed to their crafts: turning one, drunken tattoo into a full-sleeve, for instance, or bringing a fight to the ground—doing whatever was necessary to finish what they started. No. That wasn't who I was. I couldn't be troubled because I was a quitter, through and through, to my very core.

I liked to think my reasons for going on Outward Bound were completely different than whatever brought people like Chad and Sean to the southern edge of Moosehead Lake or similar places across the country. I had *chosen* to take this trip whereas they probably had no choice in the matter (Outward Bound or jail, I liked to think). At least, I had—of my own free will—decided I must do this thing months earlier, when the experience was too far in the future to truly terrify me. When I'd read the Outward Bound description, over and over again, and thought I could be strong, too.

Here's what I supposed the experience would offer someone like me all those months back: the opportunity to become self-reliant in a place where quitting wasn't tolerated as it had been for the first eighteen years of my life, during which time the dominant philosophy in my household was “if you don't like it—quit. Life's too short to do something you don't enjoy.” Among other things, it was a lack of self-reliance I blamed for dropping out of college after only one semester. Outward Bound would make me more independent, I hoped, so I could go back to school and graduate, become an adult instead of an eighteen-year old child with an inferiority complex and no marketable skills.

Outward Bound would generate this change by force. For twenty-two days in the middle of a New England summer, I wouldn't be able to call home or communicate in any way with family or friends; I'd have to piss and shit in the woods, digging holes for my excrement and then filling them back in accordance with the principles of Leave No Trace; there'd be no meat of any kind (this was a vegetarian experience) but only packs of dehydrated foods that would somehow become hearty meals with the addition of hot water; and there'd be nothing to drink besides iodine-treated lake and river water; hardships induced only so that I'd have something to overcome.

26 years old, I'm a reluctant adult. Whenever I come home between semesters at graduate school, there's a game I play with my mom. Except I'm the only one who really plays, and it's not exactly right to call it a *game*.

Basically, I parade in front of her wearing what I call my "pretend face." She sees this mask but cannot see through it. This face treats my mom as if she were anyone and everyone other than who she is, expresses to her how well I've adapted to a life without her. In truth, I have not so well adapted as this face suggests, but it would do me more harm than good to confess that to her. The wall that exists between us I've built for own my protection.

If my mom were to see me in my worst moments, her bitterness would only be justified and those proud mother feathers would fluff ever more against the world and its crazy expectations. "This," she would explain, drawing me in with her words, "is what happens when you become an adult." But all I would hear, no matter what she might say,

would be “leave what troubles you behind. Only do what makes you happy. *Come home.*” In seconds, I’d be easily folded into her embrace, and I’d have no choice but to submit.

These days, I often find myself rationalizing my actions, as if growing up were akin to committing some violent crime. As I ever had any choice in the matter. As if there had been an alternative. If there had been, an alternative I mean, I didn’t find it, though I searched long and hard.

My mom, despite how I feel (maybe because she cannot see how I feel behind this mask), believes we’re no longer the kindred spirits we once were. “We’re just different people now,” she recently told me over the phone, words spoken an entire region away but with the impact of a punch to the face.

I wish that during one of the handful of times a year I come home, I could tell her how I really feel, which is, in fact, exactly what she wants to hear. That I feel betrayed by life. Ripped from the comfort I felt so intensely during my childhood and into my adolescence. And we could, then, commiserate, repair what I’d severed by leaving home. We could say things like “at least we have each other” and mean them, but deep down, we’d still feel empty, I know. I know because I’ve tried this: stopping the train of progress. I know because it’s that thought of emptiness which prevents me from telling my mom the truth, everything she so desperately wants to hear. So I say nothing to her that I wouldn’t say to a neighbor, a passerby, you. Less, even.

If I could tell her the truth, this is what I’d tell her. I’d tell her that when I left home for my first year of college, growing up became about survival: “I’m not tough

enough to live in this world,” I confessed to her, then. I was 18 years old, and I’d called her from my college dorm room, which was a two-hour drive (my dad could make it door-to-door in 90 minutes, he liked to brag) from home, a warm bed, comfort in every form. My voice was strained. I was trying to hold back tears, but I was doing a poor job. She was obviously upset by my call. I don’t remember her response these days, but I’m sure I would have heard her rummaging around, unsteadily, or shouting to my dad to shut off the TV and get in the car. But I don’t remember. I do recall, though, how quickly my parents arrived. Sooner than should have been possible but what felt like just in time—I had taken to scribbling random marks in my notebook, hunched over my desk to pass the minutes—she was standing at my door, my dad waiting in the running car, pumping clouds of heat into the frozen air. They had come for me as I knew they would, always and forever.

An eighteen-year-old boy enters college four months after graduating from high school. He refuses to go out drinking with the guys in his all-male dorm, but doesn’t know why, only that something about drinking with these guys at these places feels *wrong*. He does go to the bars with them sometimes—his resolve, some nights, is shaky at best—but, then, he only drinks water from the tap out of clammy glasses. Acquiring a fake ID doesn’t faze him. His neighbor down the hall with the inkjet printer changes the boy’s last name, his birth date of course, and decides he’s from Indiana.

Where’s your drink, they ask him at the bars, but they must know by now that it isn’t coming. *Here, have this one*, they offer. He believes that whoever can coax him to

have a drink, or even a sip, will feel a sense of accomplishment. He's a challenge so many of them cannot pass up.

He has already decided—when he decided this, he isn't sure—that he needs to feel separated from these guys, and because they all drink, not drinking appears the easiest way to achieve his goal. So he politely says no. *No thanks. I'm good. Thanks anyway.* Refusing drink after drink at the bars, the awkwardness and the self-imposed alienation, makes him feel as though he's doing some great service to his soul.

This boy makes friends with people much like himself. One is another boy—tall, dark, and handsome but entirely too innocent to attract attention—and the other a girl, bookish in her glasses but more willing than either boy to forgo innocence. He considers himself both lucky and unlucky to have these two as friends. It's nice to have someone to talk to, but they aren't the sort of people he would ever be friends with outside of this place. Fortunately his time here, he knows, is only temporary.

My favorite photograph was taken months before my mom got sick: the four of us are standing on the second floor of what will soon be our new house. The roof is no more than a few cross beams, the house a skeletal frame. Snow dots the trees in the background: trees in which my dad will build my older brother Paul and me our own roofless house in a few years. In this photograph, the four of us are bundled in our winter wear, huddling together for the benefit of the picture probably, or the cold, but I like to think it's because we love each other so much. My brother and I are in our bloated Starter jackets like fine china enveloped in bubble wrap. My dad is wearing his ridiculous

sheepskin hat that my mom mocks him for wearing in public, which she has every right to do because he looks ridiculous. She, on the other hand, doesn't wear a hat but allows her hair, long and thick and deep brown, to fall past her shoulders and stiffen in the cold. Even though it's wintertime, she looks Caribbean tan as though she has just returned from some tropical vacation.

When you were a chubby little boy, you had a poster of *Rocky* on your bedroom wall. Often you imitated that triumphant pose: Rocky's body in the shape of a "Y", arms stretched to their brink. You even danced in place a little as if you were jumping over a rope, your heart racing, your body facing the wall. Your bare feet warmed quickly as you bopped up and down on the hardwood, creaking the same way as the bones in your feet.

It was the music in your head that kept you going. The song was "Eye of the Tiger," and it was by *Survivor*, but you didn't know that then. What you knew was the feeling of the words:

It's the eye of the tiger

It's the thrill of the fight

Rising up to the challenge of our rival

And the last known survivor

Stalks his prey in the night

And he's watching us all with the eye—of the ti-ger

You knew exactly how those words tasted, coming off your lips. Salt-rimmed and promising. And you believed that you and Rocky were so much alike. Both against the

odds. And like Rocky, your feet pumped up and down, up and down, to the highs and lows of the music. And you were in love with that feeling.

It's only looking back that you consider such running in place as an example of your resistance to moving forward: your fear of leaving the spot in front of that poster because no place else could ever be as beautiful. You couldn't imagine why you'd ever have to leave.

I'm inside the shuttle that will take me from Bangor International to Greenville. I feel almost too tired to breathe, certainly to speak, but I can smile, so I do. I smile at my dad and brother who are standing outside, waving, and I smile at the other people inside the shuttle with me: people I'm going to learn a lot about over the next three weeks. I smile at my mom who couldn't make the trip. She's unable to ride in cars for longer than an hour or so without becoming incredibly sore. Her body, wracked by an experimental amount of radiation all those years ago, is severely damaged. Once fit and healthy muscles have become spasmodic and harder than concrete, restricting the movement of her neck and back and leg and requiring monthly Botox injections to soften. She had a choice, then, if you can call it a choice: either an experimental amount of radiation that could cause an array of future health problems but potentially save her life; or, barring some miracle, death. Her husband and two very young boys made her decision an easy one.

It's she I feel I'm betraying today. It's her face I see in the window's reflection. Her cracking voice I hear. Her tears and breath I smell, so salty like marsh. It's the pit in

her stomach I'm feeling. And because I cannot pull myself away from her, from this life, I've signed up for Outward Bound to do so for me. Any minute, the shuttle will leave the parking lot, Greenville bound. I wave once more to my dad and brother. I smile. There's no turning back now.

I feel as though life, for the happiest people, is a series of diversions. Misdirection at its best: the effects of which are truly magical because these people see what they want to see, believe what they want to believe, which is no knock on them but more an observation about how mankind is programmed to survive. With blinders on. Some of us, however, have substantial bugs in the software, holes in the black velvet that cover our faces. We see shards of light and suffer intense migraines as a result. We are Human 3.0, both more and less evolved than the rest. We are dwellers, analyzers, and obsessive to no end. We, it seems, are only meant to witness what's going on around us without doing anything about it. We are bees in a hurricane. We are isolated by what we know but haven't the understanding to express. We focus, above all, on everything that will never change. Even back roads travel forward.

The earliest exam you can remember is a reminder that your childhood was more than roses and sunshine, swimming pools, and *Cool Ranch Doritos*. How much you've idealized your past!

In order to move onto first grade, you had to demonstrate that you could tie your shoelaces. The directions for how to tie them were told to you in the form of a short story:

Bunny ears, bunny ears, playing by a tree. Criss-crossed the tree, trying to catch me.

Bunny ears, Bunny ears, jumped into the hole, popped out the other side beautiful and bold.

Unlike Bunny Ears, you were neither beautiful nor bold. You were sloppy and panic-stricken. You struggled mightily with your laces that day, as you knew you would.

You remember the night before the exam this way:

You slept in a king sized bed between your mother and father. You slept like a good king should—which is to say you lay awake for most of the night with worry.

You remember the exam itself, more or less, like this:

Terrible. You were hopeless. It didn't take long for your kindergarten teacher, her brown hair streaked with silver and her fingers long and thin, to become aware of your difficulty. That was when she decided (did she have a choice?) to teach you a revised method. A shortcut, really. Your shoes on your feet, she knelt before you, yanking your laces and crossing them over each other. Then she curled the ends of each lace into a loop, crossed these loops, and yanked again. That was how you learned to tie your shoes.

In a way, you could say that on your very first exam, you cheated. No one else had been shown this shortcut. Or you could just as easily say that on the day of your very first exam, wide-eyed with worry, you were treated like a king.

Though I know I shouldn't, I bring it up when visiting my family in Massachusetts.

Flagstaff, Arizona: A place across the country from the only family I know and where I say my girlfriend and I could be happy because of the number of days of sunshine. I'm just so sick of the cold, I say, as if that—the weather of all things—were any justification for such a statement.

Whenever I bring up Flagstaff—which seems to be a lot these days—my mom crumples, curls up inside herself. After the next time I mention it, she will sit on the edge of my childhood bed, me tucked beneath the covers, sleeping late on my mini-vacation between semesters at grad school in Virginia, where I'm studying creative writing. Over the past few years, I've discovered an intense desire to connect with people through language. Any and all validation, now, comes from the written word. Without writing, I don't think I'd have ever even been able to *imagine* Flagstaff, let alone consider moving there. My mom's hair is short and thinning and cow-licked at the back and sides. Her shirt is wrinkled and stained. Her glasses are foggy. Her body is obviously tired from a quarter-century of being uncomfortable, dealing with chronic pain, but it's her outlook on life that has received the greatest blow. She doesn't look at me when she finally speaks. "It's like you're taunting me," she tells me, "when you talk about moving so far away." And I'll think, much too quickly, about writing these words down.

On a map, Cape Cod, my hometown—though it is not a town, exactly, but a collection of towns—very much resembles an arm. I was born and raised in Barnstable, the bicep.

Provincetown is the fist and Chatham the elbow. Because Cape Cod resembles an arm, I imagine it to operate likewise: both pushing away and pulling close.

For less than a year, while the new house was being built, you lived in a red house. “The red house,” you called it: a cold and sterile moniker. A rental, it was never yours to call home, which was fine because you never wanted to. The house was on a narrow street—it was difficult for cars to pass by each other without crunching the twigs and sticks that jutted from the woods—and tucked in front of a cranberry bog. The house was the color of cranberries, in fact: hard, wintertime cranberries that hurt your fingers when squeezed.

You were five years old when you lived in that house. Your mother and father and brother and you. You went to a preschool run by the West Parish Church only a few miles down the road, and often, your grandfather would pick you up from school and bring you back to that house. His car had one of those jerky seatbelts that attacked you the instant you shut the door. Your grandfather always had some type of sucker in his mouth too. He would offer you one from his palm or allow you to swipe it for yourself from the pack that lay in shredded foil in the cup holder. They were butterscotch flavored, you remember.

The reason that your grandfather picked you up from school so often was because your father was working all the time—he owned his own printing business and worked incredible hours to keep it afloat—and your mom was sick with Stage 4 Breast Carcinoma. You didn’t understand any of that, then. But you must have known—in the way that children know such things, like sponges, taking, taking, taking in more than they

release until they are fat and ripe with all the things they'll never remember—that your mom's chance of survival was only that: the buttery twang of a golden sucker.

It's weird, the things I remember. More so, I would say, the things I don't. The gaps, for example, between my memory of losing a stupid basketball game and the first movie I ever saw (age 5, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, in the “red house” with my dad and brother while my mother was upstairs, rocking back and forth, back and forth in her chair until she could coax her pain to sleep, if only for a second). I'm not sure exactly how we move from one thing to the next, but only that we do. It's scary to think that what seem like gaps in our lives aren't really gaps at all but times we've lived as fully as the periods we recall with such startling clarity. The longer I reflect on specific moments from my past, the more I see these holes. Even now, I'm scrambling to choke them with words and flood them with meaning.

Higher up the trail, there is a path that leads to the top of the rock wall from the opposite side. In thick, hiking boots and covered, head to toe, in scratchy wicking material (cotton has been outlawed here because it soaks up too much moisture and takes an eternity to dry), we march up this path to meet Elizabeth. Her head is bowed, and she's working her tools into the rock. She fastens a steel hook into the rock bed, securing a rope to the hook and then to herself with a series of loops and knots. The other end of the rope is attached to a harness around the waist of whoever is rappelling. She tells this person something I cannot hear over the wind.

I don't watch the others lower themselves down; I watch Elizabeth guide them to the bottom, threading rope as needed. Despite the wind and distance between us, though, every few minutes I am able to hear hooting and clapping from down below, where the other counselor, Wiley, and the growing crowd of those who've descended, applaud the most recent finishers.

At this point during my Outward Bound experience, there is only one week left, and I've stayed, and I will stay all twenty-two days, squeezing out modest comfort in being uncomfortable. But this is a lot to ask. Ever since I stopped climbing trees and leaping off the tree house (only to impress my brother), I've hated heights. I've grown into the kind of person who has nightmares of falling, the bulk of the dreams spent climbing higher and higher, rising so high only to make a more terrifying fall. I'm afraid of heights now, at least as much as I'm afraid of being uncomfortable, or living away from home, or being the only one in this group who doesn't understand something as simple as tying a slip knot. I don't think I can rappel down this sheer rock face, and I say as much to Elizabeth.

She doesn't move. Both knees rooted to the stone. She has heard this before. Looking at me through polarized sunglasses that hide her eyes, she tells me I have a choice: I can either trust in the fortitude of this ancient rock, which has successfully held countless climbers, she says, or I can trust in my own fears. Elizabeth's ultimatum—her perspective, really—is convincing in the way that it shrinks, if only for the time it takes to strap on that harness, the monstrous gap between what I know and what I'm able to

understand. Moving away from one thing means moving towards another. Independence is its own form of dependence.

In his essay “Clappers,” David Gessner, a part-time Cape Cod resident with a full-time Cape Cod perspective, discusses the cabin he built in the backyard of his North Carolina home: “Anyone who builds a cabin, no matter how modest, is required to quote that famous cabin-builder from Concord, and here I fulfill that obligation: ‘The life that men praise and call successful is but one kind.’ A perfect epigraph to carve into the beam above my screen window.”

Five-hundred miles from home, I find myself comforted by the idea that mankind yearns for the same thing. After reading Gessner and Thoreau, one might be inclined to say that the thing for which we all yearn is to retreat, withdraw, separate, isolate. Move. Each writer’s actions would certainly support this claim. I’m not sure about all that, but I do know reading this essay makes me feel better about moving further from my family and the comforts of childhood; it makes me feel as though leaving home was done instinctively, an act beyond my conscious control. The essay offers justification, validation, but the skeptic in me is unsatisfied. Is this just something we tell ourselves, so we feel better about leaving the people and places we love? Is this how we survive? Is it both?

It’s no longer raining when I wake up. My skin has dried beneath the wet clothes. I take stock up my rations and realize that there’s little left: the bag of trail mix is mostly a bag

of air after all the snacking I've done. I walk to the edge of my little island and place my feet, warmer without the rain-saturated socks, into the water. The water is dark blue and barely even stirs.

Using the water as a guide, I can find some of the other islands where the rest of the campers have been deployed. Like me, they will spend the next 36 hours alone on an island. This is referred to, in Outward Bound lingo, as *the solo experience* and is, supposedly, the heart of the wilderness program because it produces independence where none existed before.

While I'm here, I won't see or hear any of the other campers, which is in fact the point of all this. The forced isolation. The bag of raisin-heavy trail mix, and the few essentials stowed in my pack: tarp, rain jacket, rubber mat, headlamp, whistle. During this time, I will hear only the voice inside my head, which now wonders how the others have made it through last night's downpour.

I move my gear deeper into the woods where the ground is level. I'm hoping that tonight's sleep will be drier than last night's, during which I woke up (had I fallen asleep?) in a pool of water higher than my elbows. This only happened because of where I'd chosen to make camp: the first plot of land I saw on which I could easily spread out my stuff. Before it was too dark to distinguish the water from the earth last night—and before I had completely lost the resolve afforded me by the counselors' pep talk—I had settled at the base of what, in high-noon light, would have clearly resembled a capital "V". The ground on both sides of where I laid my mat sloped downward toward me at

severe angles. When it started to rain, then, less than an hour after I had lain down, water funneled furiously onto me.

But this morning, I'm relatively dry. The rain has stopped, and I can't help but feel better because of that. I strip down to my underwear, and I hang the saturated clothes on tree branches exposed to full sun. I walk again to the island's edge, where I crouch to splash water onto my dirty face. The lake water is startlingly different than the rainwater, although I can't determine why. Warmer? Softer? I allow it to run wildly over my eyes and down my chin.

I don't know if it's the crouch or the near-nakedness or the way I'm thrashing my face with lake water, but I suddenly feel like a Native American before the Europeans arrived. I think, for the first time, about fishing and hunting for survival. About what it means to have true quiet. These thoughts, however, are quickly replaced with a memory I have of watching the *Last of the Mohicans* with my father. This is one of his favorite movies, one we've watched together countless times. It's not a fully-fleshed out memory; I can only recall a single image from the film. A blur, really. A man is running through the woods, a musket slung over his shoulder. I can tell he's running, even though I can't see him very well, because I can hear the leaves and branches scratch against him as he sprints. I can hear his body creating wind. Whether he's running towards something or away, I don't know. Perhaps both.

PART THREE: WHAT'S LEFT BEHIND

CALL AND RESPONSE: A FATHER-SON STORY

Today, I talked to my dad on the phone three times for a total of sixty-six minutes. This is not unusual for us; we can get carried away. Work, sports, movies and books. You name it. I called him once from my apartment, and he called me twice from work.

When my dad calls the first time, I am fifteen minutes into *Collateral Damage* and watching Arnold Schwarzenegger attempt to tease out a tear for his wife and son who've been blown to bits by a Colombian terrorist known only as El Lobo. I pause the movie and answer the phone.

We live farther apart than ever—he in Massachusetts with my mom and brother, and me in Northern Virginia with my girlfriend. My dad likes to check on me often, to make sure I'm okay, which I don't mind because it gives me a chance to do the same.

He wants to know if I've received his money in the mail. It's not my birthday or a holiday, but he knows I can use it.

“Not yet,” I tell him.

“Shit,” he says back, concerned.

We may be in different stages of life, but my dad and I speak the same language. We're worriers by nature. I'm twenty-seven years old, completing my Master's in Creative Writing, and I worry about catching Ebola on the train, public speaking, and the prospect of working a real job after I graduate—among other things

Next month, the month of my graduation, my dad will turn sixty years old and although he's more than twice my age, he's no less anxious than I am. Life experience, apparently, does nothing to ease folks like us.

My dad worries. About the past, what he could and should have done differently. About the present and the future. About his elderly parents, his disabled wife, his two sons, his printing business, mailed checks that don't arrive when they're supposed to.

I often tell him not to worry about the same things that keep me awake at night, bring me to me knees, make me scream and cry about what's happened to my family and what hasn't. What will happen, someday, to all the people I love.

I tell him, when he calls about the money, not to worry. That I'm sure it's on its way, that it's only been a few days since he mailed it, but telling my dad not to worry is like ordering a dog not to bark. The instinct is always there.

Because he's my dad and I love him, I want him to relax, but also because he's my dad, I like to wind him up and get him going for no good reason.

I put on my woe-is-me voice and go for the jugular. "No big deal," I say about the check. "I just won't eat this week. I could lose a few pounds anyhow."

"Haha. Very funny," he says. Then silence. "What *do* you weigh now, anyway?"

He thinks I don't know what he's doing, that I don't do the very same thing with him. We're both backdoor information gatherers when we have to be. I tell him what I weigh. "Something like that," I add.

He laughs easier no longer imagining me rail-thin and starving. "A big boy, huh?" He says, chuckling. It's funny because we both know I'm not.

When my dad tells me he's weighed himself this morning, something he does every morning on the digital scale beside his bed, I make a *Come on, Dad*, face because I know what he's about to say.

"I gained three pounds," he tells me. "Since last night. Three pounds! Shouldn't have had that Chinese food. Stupid, stupid." He scolds himself.

"You shouldn't weigh yourself everyday," I say for the millionth time. I'm trying to appeal to his often-overwhelmed rational side when I tell him that body weight fluctuates. "It's normal to go up or down a few pounds, Dad."

"And you know,"—he hasn't heard me at all—"the food there isn't even good. I don't like Tiki Port anymore. The chicken quality has gone way downhill."

I happen to agree, yet Tiki Port remains a favorite of my brother's, so he and my dad eat there once a month or so, just the two of them. Because the MSG in Chinese food gives my mom headaches and because she's always known that Tiki Port chicken was suspect, she stays home, lets the boys do their thing.

Once a month, it seems, my dad forgets this morning after poundage, the stringy chicken. Or maybe he doesn't. Maybe he just remembers more how much my brother likes the food and so he goes anyhow.

"At least it's cheap," he says, which is the be-all-end-all for my dad. Besides his family, money is what he worries about more than anything else. He can deal with a mediocre meal so long as it doesn't cost much. Which reminds him. "How're you doing with money, bud?" He asks.

"I'm fine, Dad. Good."

“Okay. Let me know if that changes. I can send another check.”

“I will.”

The last time we talk, I tell my dad about our recently discovered rodent problem.

His laughter sounds sympathetic, as much as laughter can.

I let loose all my frustration in one bitter breath. “There’s mouse shit in the cupboard under the sink and under the oven and we had an exterminator come by and he said it would cost five hundred bucks for the service and our landlord didn’t want to spend that much so my seventy year old landlord is going to take care of the problem with traps and sprays from Home Depot and when I asked the exterminator about the shit he said, no, it wasn’t the shit we needed to worry about but the urine that could give us salmonella and I’m just done with this whole thing and looking at apartments on the internet.”

Inhale. Exhale.

My dad is calm on the other end of the line. Cool and collected. I want him to be as flustered as I am, but he’s not. He must not understand the magnitude of the problem, I think, so I repeat myself. *They’re in our kitchen, Dad. Where we eat!* He tells me, when I’m finally out of breath, that everyone’s got mouse problems and no one dies.

And then without pause he says he and Mom and my brother are coming to my graduation next month, which is a surprise to me because two weeks ago he told me they wouldn’t be coming for reasons I already knew: it’s the busy season for his work, and my mom isn’t well enough to drive that far and no one in my family likes to fly. Informing

me that my family will, in fact, attend my graduation should make me happy, but it doesn't because I'm hyper-focused on the mice in my kitchen and want to keep talking about that.

I manage a “Good. Great.”

“The letter from your school, the one I called you about before, I showed it to Mom,” he says, “and she was all excited to go. Plus, it's like she tells me, I've owned the business for thirty years and if I can't take two days off to see my son get his Master's, then I've done something wrong with my life.”

“It's not a big deal, Dad,” I say. I know how hard he works to keep his business successful, six, sometimes seven days a week, and I know how proud he is of having built something from nothing, and I also know how much he wants to be there for my graduation.

I remember the times he's driven by himself the ten hours each way in a single weekend just because he wanted to see me, and I honestly don't care if he or the rest of my family comes to some ceremony. I know they're proud of me.

Because I don't want my dad to work late every day for the next three weeks to make up for seeing me on stage in a gown, I tell him “thousands of people get their Master's every year.”

“Ya,” he says, “but they're not my son,” and that ends that, which is good because I really do want to see my family, graduation or not—and also because I want to get back to the mice.

“So you really don't think I should be panicking?” I ask.

“About the mouse thing?”

“Yes, Dad.”

“It’ll be fine, pal” he says, and I believe it because I believe he believes it. He's not just saying this to make me feel better, I mean. Though I will feel better as soon as we hang up. I almost always feel better after our phone calls. It’s reassuring when I talk to my dad, as though I’m speaking to my future self, the one who’s survived despite his fear and managed to live a good life.

After he tells me not to worry, before he hangs up and goes back to work, there is an opportunity for me to fill the silence. I’m torn between uttering *it’ll be fine* back to my dad, to reassure him in some small way, and saying nothing, just allowing his words to carry me until tomorrow, when I’ll stop whatever I’m doing and answer the phone.

SERVICES RENDERED

My phone buzzes in my hand. The number is one I don't recognize but have been expecting. I answer with a "hello," the inflection on the "o" as though I'm surprised by the call. The man on the other end says more than a few words—the most, in fact, he will speak to me before we go our separate ways—but all I can decipher is the word "uber." The voice belongs to Masud, the *Uber* driver assigned to pick me up.

It's not because of Masud's accent that I can't understand him, though he has what I would guess to be a Middle Eastern cadence; I can't hear what he's saying because of the armored case on my iPhone. My LIFEPROOF case offers unrivaled protection for my cell phone, for when I drop it on the pavement or slam it in the car door, but what I've realized is that you can't have a phone cover capable of deflecting bullets without losing some of the sound quality. Everything is muffled all the time. When I'm talking to my dad, he often asks if I'm standing too far away or if I have my hand over the mouthpiece. I'm constantly shouting "What!" like a crazy person. Sometimes, because I'm frustrated with every conversation becoming a guessing game, I say to whomever is on the other end of the line at the time: "I have no idea what the problem is. It's probably your phone."

I requested an *Uber* car through the *Uber* app on my iPhone as I was standing outside Ronald Reagan National Airport in Washington, DC. I needed a ride to my

apartment in Arlington, Virginia, maybe half a dozen miles away. The app flashed a picture of Masud along with an image of a car on a map so I could see where the car was in relation to me. Following along with the image of the car as it gets closer to where I am, the blue dot, is one of the best parts of the *Uber* experience. I watch the minutes countdown as the virtual car approaches the virtual me. It's all very exciting.

Before I touched the button for "request an uber," I was told to expect a call. The GPS had the blue-dotted me at an airport and with all airport pickups, *Uber* drivers are instructed to call their customers for an *exact* location.

Masud is on the phone now, and he needs to know mine.

"I'm standing in front of Terminal B, between Delta and American," I say. Then I add, "in Departures."

"Departures?"

I say yes, and then I realize how odd it must seem for him to pick up a customer at Departures rather than Arrivals, so I explain. "You see, I've dropped someone off and left my car." This lie doesn't make any sense—why, if I was dropping someone off, would I no longer have my own car?—but it's the quickest way to disseminate the accurate information, I think, which is that I'm in Departures and I'm without a car, and I can tell by Masud's tone that he's in a hurry to learn my exact whereabouts. I'll fill him in later, I decide.

"What are you wearing?" He asks this question in such a fact-finding way that it doesn't even register how funny the question *could* be—in a different context, of course.

I tell Masud that I'm in black pants and a black sweatshirt. I add, chuckling, "I'm wearing all black." I'm trying to establish a rapport with my soon to be driver, but Masud is all business.

"I'm in a gray Camry," he says.

"Gray?"

"Yes. Gray. I'll be there in a few minutes."

Before Masud hangs up, I want him to know I can see his car on my phone app and that I'll be looking out for him when it tells me he's close.

*

If it isn't obvious, I love *Uber*. I love everything about it. I love that every driver's picture is a smiling one. I love that every car seems to be a charcoal gray or black Toyota. (I did see a Mazda with an *Uber* sticker drive past me one time, but I quickly ushered it from my mind.) I drive a Toyota myself, and I have for the last ten years, ever since I was seventeen. I come from a Toyota family, and I appreciate the understated reliability of the Japanese-made cars. So too, do the *Uber* drivers, it seems. I love that the inside of their cars always smell good. I love that you don't have to tip, because not tipping allows me to believe that my driver is generous and fresh scented and kind to me only because he wishes to be that way, and not because he's after more money. I love that the service is charged to a credit card on file so no money visibly exchanges hands, which makes the whole experience feel less like a transaction. I love that there is no tick-ticking meter to watch like a hawk. I love that the ride often feels like a couple of friendly strangers taking

a spin through town, albeit a pre-determined spin between two very specific dots on a map.

*

Masud arrives right on schedule. His car idles between Delta and American, and I hop into the backseat. I toyed with the idea of riding shotgun, but at the last moment thought better of it. I say “thanks” to my driver before we’ve even started moving because I’m grateful to be picked up where I want and when I want. Masud checks his GPS—already synced to the address of my apartment—and we’re off.

The first thing I notice is the pleasant smell of the inside of the car. It smells like an old-timers barbershop, the ones where turtle-skinned men shave your day old stubble with a straight edge and warm shaving cream even though you don’t ask them to. The car smells, I assume, like Masud. My driver is probably in his late 40s; his black hair has grown white above the ears, by the temples. Although he has a coaster-sized bald spot on the back of his head, his hair is otherwise thick and combed and provides excellent scalp coverage. He is a big man, I notice, too big for this car, and to keep his head from hitting the roof, he leans either to the left or the right as though he’s steering the vehicle with his body.

*

The worst part about *Uber*, the only negative I’ve found thus far, is the guilt. Whenever I see a cab or taxi nowadays, I feel terrible. Along the lines of what I feel when I shop at Home Depot instead of my local hardware store because the box of screws I need is 88 cents cheaper at Home Depot and doesn’t have to be special ordered.

I feel guilty that I'm helping to endanger the taxi driver profession, that I'm complicit in so many drivers' struggle to make ends meet. I feel extra bad because my dad used to be a taxi driver when he was in his 20s, specifically one of the ones without two nickels to rub together. Driving a cab was how he survived. Bringing people to and from bars and shops and airports. Getting tips. He barely scraped by, and he was working in a tourist town with a pretty lively nightlife. I know it isn't easy for the taxi drivers I see. I look at them, and they look disheveled to me. I can smell the cigarette-soaked air they breathe, and I can feel their stale bench seats beneath my buttocks, and I don't like it. I feel bad, but not bad enough to pay more money for a lesser experience. To engage in the dehumanizing act of handing someone a three-dollar tip for carting my ass around town. It's awkward, but worse than that, it makes me feel like people are nothing more than the services they provide.

*

Masud is awfully quiet. He maintains a sleepy focus on the road, except for the times when he checks the GPS in the center console to see where to turn next. We're roughly five minutes into the ten-minute drive, and so far he's said nothing. In an effort to engage my somewhat uninspired driver in conversation, I launch, unprompted, into an explanation about what really led me to require his services today. "Drove back from Charleston, South Carolina" I say from the back seat. "In a rental car. Had to return it to Budget."

Masud looks at me through the rearview mirror. "At the airport?"

"Ya," I say. "The Budget rental place at the airport."

Masud says nothing before turning his attention back to the road.

We don't speak again until we arrive at my apartment building. On the way, I've been anticipating having to tell Masud which streets to take because our neighborhood isn't exactly GPS friendly. There are lots of little roads, and the buildings aren't numbered in a fashion that makes any particular sense. But Masud made every turn I would've made myself. He never asked for my help. He didn't need it.

Masud says "thank you" before the car is fully stopped in the parking lot of my apartment building. That's my cue. I thank him back, tell him to have a good day, and I get out. Masud spins the car around in the parking lot, and drives away, headed, I guess, to his next fare as quickly as possible. More fares equal more money. The day is only so long. This is his job, I seem to have forgotten. I don't look back at my former driver because if I do, I'm afraid I'll wave because I tend to do that sort of thing at times like these.

By the time I reach the front door of my apartment, I've already been emailed the bill for today's service, provided by Masud. The details of the trip are all there: The total charge, \$11.68; total distance, 6.64 miles; total time, 9 minutes and 32 seconds.

There it is, in black and white. Masud's and my entire interaction. I don't feel cheated—the price is far cheaper than the same ride in a cab and Masud made excellent time—but I don't feel good either. I feel as if I were a job. Freight. As if I were only a fare, which, I guess, is what I was. All that I was: A paying passenger who should stop being so damn melancholic because he got exactly what he paid for. Nothing more. Nothing less.

SUBJECT AGREEMENT

I. She

“The Queen Bee must always be surrounded by her subjects,” I tell the girl who already hates me. She sits to my left; I’m close enough to tug on her soggy, brown ponytail like a ripcord. We are both sitting hunched over in thinly cushioned chairs, yanked up to a wooden table. Color-coordinated chaos in the form of blue, pink, and yellow handouts is strewn across the wood in front of us. Her hair drips, creating a necklace of moisture on her grey Salem State sweatshirt. Her sleeve cuffs are nearly black. I’m wearing a green collared short-sleeve and beginning to shiver.

The MTEL Center at Salem State University is housed in a poorly insulated cottage, awkwardly located *between* Central and North Campus, not part of either one. The University’s shuttle doesn’t stop in front of the building’s crumbling walkway. The building doesn’t have its own mailbox; there are no identifying signs that mark it as university property. It is simply the building known as 35 Loring Avenue. Parking is limited out front—meaning if you drive anything larger than a go-cart, find somewhere else to park. In the foyer of this two-story relic, you’ll find no place to “check in”, no place to hang your wet jacket, no main desk or receptionist—only a copier that beeps as if constantly in reverse.

The MTEL Center is on the first floor. It sits diagonally across from “The Conference Room”—which is the size of a child’s bedroom (probably used to be) and holds nothing besides water cooler, matching fold up table, a couple of chairs (the kind that are bought in a hurry when more people show up to a party than expected), and a refrigerator. I have never seen a conference in there, and the fridge always has plenty of space for my yogurt or PB & J. Sometimes, I offer to go in there to get students a cup of water. Most of the time, they tell me, “no thanks.”

The girl has a packet with her—the one I’d given her last week—and it hasn’t been touched. “I’ve been real busy,” she says.

“We can work on it together. No big deal,” I tell her. Because she doesn’t have a pen out—and she ignores the decorative holder of our pens in front of her—I commandeer her packet, silently agreeing to jot down my advice so she doesn’t have to.

I write the word, “BE,” in capital letters and circle it. Next, I add the word, “subject,” to both sides of the state of being verb, asking her to treat this verb as if it were an equals sign.

“The first subject is the same as the second subject,” I plead with her. “They are the same things. When describing a subject, use a subject pronoun.”

She nods, so I’m green-lighted to quiz her. Skipping to practice question ten of her packet, we—rather I—read off the choices:

- A) It is **us** clerks who work hard.
- B) It is **we** clerks who work hard.

I slide the packet in front of whatever her eyes are focused on besides the packet. At least she is looking down and not off in space; otherwise, I'd have had to hold the sheet up in the air, maybe wave it around for emphasis: my white-flag. Still, she makes no perceptible movements acknowledging either me or the packet thrust in front of her. Maybe I should grab her a cup of water?

The girl holds out—she says nothing for several seconds.

I give in. “It is **we** clerks who work hard,” I tell her, “B. You have to use a subject pronoun when describing the subject.”

In an effort to illustrate this concept, I stalk over to the file cabinet for some reinforcements. Somewhere in the middle of the top cabinet, there is a folder with sheets that should help her, or at least help me with her. Somewhere. My fingers slide over lifesaver colored folders: “that vs. which;” “who & whom;” “indefinite pronouns.” *Where in God’s name did I put the Subject and Object Pronoun Sheet?* My hands move towards my hips. Her silence encourages me to linger here at the file cabinet. She condones whatever stalls my returning with more worksheets, more bolded headings, more italicized examples. I’m happy to oblige; I can’t seem to find the damn folder anyhow.

Ideally, these folders would be sorted alphabetically by concept, or sorted by some distinguishable characteristic. Realistically, however, there are only two of us on staff at the MTEL Center, my boss and me, and neither of us has the time to organize anything. My boss, Rachel, officially titled MTEL Test Preparation Coordinator, is also an adjunct professor in the Psychology and Education Departments; she often parks out front illegally, and sometimes, when no one else besides me is in the office, she doesn’t

wear shoes. The idea of her having “down-time” is mythical. I, who have no official title—but am occasionally referred to as “Maril,” “Marilyn,” “Derek,” one time, or “that guy”— spend the majority of my hours across from the “Conference Room” tutoring students on the Communication and Literacy portion of the MTEL. Although I do have time to put on shoes, I similarly have no time to organize or file worksheets. I am too busy trying to remember what concepts students are working on and whom I like the best.

MTEL is an acronym for “Massachusetts Tests for Educator Licensure.” The Communication and Literacy subtests are just two of these many tests, but they are the only ones I tutor. Fondly abbreviated “C&L” in our Google Calendar, the Communication and Literacy subtests evaluate students on writing, particularly grammar, and reading comprehension. Most of the students I sit down with need more help on grammar than reading comprehension, which suits me perfectly: I’d always found difficulty tutoring students on the best ways to read. Which could be the reason why I often do the reading for them.

Sitting beside her again, I nudge the new sheet between us. Play with me, I beg. Her elbows are now athletically planted on the table; she must have shifted position while I was at the file cabinet.

“You don’t have to memorize which pronouns function as subjects or objects,” I tell her. “Just ask yourself if the pronoun can do action; ask yourself if the pronoun can lead a sentence.” Ask me. For the love of God, ask something! I point to the sheet: “can **us** drive a car?” I ask. Can **me** go to the store?”

She shakes her head but not intense enough to spray me with the rain drops still pooled in her ponytail. Her stretchy pants crease as she folds deeper into the red fabric of the chair. Her arms fall to the narrow armrests. My arms are already perched on mine.

I had mistakenly thought she came in for tutoring: to learn how to stop misplacing her modifiers and splicing her sentences with unnecessary commas. I had thought the slippery decline from North Campus or the soggy ascent from Central meant that she'd wanted to learn something. I just didn't understand the "I don't want to be here," attitude. Desperate for dialogue, I took her fidgeting as the words: "you can't make me." She's right: I can't make her, and I don't want to make her. She's the one that needs to pass this test in order to become a licensed teacher, not me. I couldn't care less about teaching. I'm not even an Education major; in fact, I've never even taken this test that I'm tutoring her for.

After a year of tutoring, I have been persuaded by students like her to sign up for the November 19th C&L Test. I have invested one-hundred dollars towards taking an exam that is neither mandatory nor in sync with my current career objectives. I have chosen to sit in silence for four hours on a Saturday in a local high school: in a chair probably more uncomfortable than the one in my office.

Some people think I'm crazy for taking this test. To them, I respond with the fail-safe: "I might want to teach someday." I might; you never know. I might want to join the circus or become a fireman someday too. How can I be expected to know what I'll want to do when I grow up? But this answer is more to disguise the truth behind my insanity than to satisfy a plausible hypothetical scenario. Really, the reason why I've signed up for

this test is because I want to feel connected to the students. I'm taking this exam to encourage the students to meet my gaze, to respect my suggestions, and most importantly, to acknowledge a mutual interest: camaraderie through sacrifice. I'm taking this exam so I can say things like, "I have to take it too," and, "it's coming up soon, I know." Because students like her don't agree with what I say—and don't care to—I have to agree with them: *This test is unfair. Homework sucks. Grammar is pointless. This building is weird.* And I have to say, this agreement is quite comforting.

II. He

I can hear the synthetic fabric of his windbreaker before he enters the office. When he finally "swooshes" in, I saunter over to greet him. In one hand, he clutches his folder as if it were a delivery. I shake his free hand, half expecting him to ask me to sign for something. I guess that he's in his early-forties and that his tightly drawn baseball cap covers significant balding. He sits down, legs sprawled out and back relaxed.

"Let me ask you something," he says.

I pull out a chair to sit beside him.

"All I gotta do is pass this test to become a teacher?"

"Well, there are a couple more tests, too, depending on what you want to teach," I say.

"Ya, but then I'm licensed?"

"Yes, but..."

“Unbelievable,” he cuts me off, shaking his head in disbelief. “Let me ask you another question. How far do they check into your background before you get hired?” This is another loaded question, and I honestly have no idea what the answer is. Also, I’m uncertain to whom “they” is referring.

“I’m not sure. I guess they would do a CORI check and...”

“I got a misdemeanor on my record. Alcohol possession as a minor,” he interrupts.

I nod. “I don’t think...”

“It wasn’t even mine,” he continues. “It was my girlfriend’s. She’d put it in my car. We were parked at the time. Cop parks right next to us. He stares at us for a few minutes. I assumed he’d wanted us to leave, so I start up the car. Cop jumps out of the car, and he screams at us to get out of the vehicle. He finds the alcohol and calls to have another cop come and arrest me. I swear he did it so he could drive my girlfriend home by himself.”

“Wow,” I say, shaking my head. How am I going to transition to *understanding main ideas and vocabulary in context*?

Luckily, he does it for me. “I did those questions,” he tells me. He places his *Summary Test* on the table.

“Did you correct them?” I ask. He hasn’t. “Let’s go over the answers together then.”

I’d given him the *Summary Test* the week before. Designed to be completed in one hour, the *Summary Test* has twelve sample multiple-choice questions for both the

Reading and Writing sections. When I'm not meeting with someone, which is rare, I'm correcting these *Summary Tests* with contrasting ink and a grimace. The average grades range from fifty percent to seventy-five percent correct.

Understanding the main idea is vital to being successful in the Reading section of the *Summary Test*, which is the section he has completed for today. The test pages are crumpled, but his answers are neatly circled. I examine his work. In the opening passage about "The Special Olympics," he has understood that the main idea was not about Eunice Kennedy Shriver's brother, Senator Edward Kennedy. Also, he discovered that Camp Shriver was established prior to the first Special Olympics Games. Good. And because the "modest number of participants in the first games **belied** their importance," he has correctly chosen "understated" to be the synonym for **belied**.

The answer key to the Reading section lists "A, D, C, B, D, C, B, D, A, B, C, C" as the correct responses, which are identically represented by the circled letters on his test. Unfortunately, I have yet to devise an acronym or mnemonic device to expedite the Reading section's grading process, as I have for the Writing section:

"A...BAD...CD...B."

I reread the answer key, double-checking my work: checking his work. As it turns out, he has correctly answered all twelve multiple choice questions. "You got zero wrong," is the last thing I tell him about anything related to the *Summary Test*. For him, the tutoring session is over, but the appointment has only just started.

He tells me his girlfriend is jealous that he could become a teacher just by passing a test. He tells me about when he was a bartender on a golf course in Arizona and the time he worked for a phone company on the North Shore that was screwing people.

I learn that he is currently a bartender in Beverly. He wants to teach high school mathematics. He is a Salem State graduate, which is why he's here. His degree is in Business.

Although he doesn't ask, my major is English. The C&L Test is all about English, which is why I was hired to work at an Education center despite having no background in Education. Yes, Rachel initially hired me because I had demonstrated proficiency in the language (through diagnosing errors in sentence construction), but she also required proficiency in a skill similarly vital for tutoring the *Communication and Literacy* subtests: communication.

"Sometimes it's just talking people off the ledge," she told me a few weeks after I'd started tutoring.

I'd complained to her specifically about people like him: people who wouldn't let me get a word in, people who just came to chat, vent, or "shoot the shit." I'd complained that I couldn't help them if they didn't want to hear about the best ways to find the main idea or evaluate an author's objectivity. I couldn't help them if they didn't allow me to go over instructional packets for reinforcement or further clarification. I couldn't help them if they didn't want to discuss the content they'd be tested on.

What Rachel had suggested was that maybe I could.

He and I talk about signing up for the next C&L Test.

“How much is it?” he asks.

“It’s a hundred dollars for both tests. I think it’s around seventy if you just take one. But you have to sign up before the regular deadline ends. Otherwise, the price goes up,” I shake my head, disapproving. “It’s just a way for them to get more money out of you,” I tell him. He’s the kind of guy who appreciates this comment. “They finger print you too,” I finish, excitedly. I’m beginning to enjoy myself.

“What? What do you mean by that?” he asks.

“At the test site, you have to give them your finger print.”

“You’re kiddin’ me,” he says.

“Nope,” I tell him. The tone of my voice sounds as though I plan to support this statement with *my Mom told me so*.

“Let me ask you a question,” he says.

Please do.

“How long does it take?”

“Four hours,” I say, shaking my head again.

“For the Reading?” he asks.

“You can either take the Reading test in four hours or both in four hours.”

“Really?” His response to this odd bit of information is not uncommon.

“I know. It’s crazy, right?”

What’s truly crazy, though, is that our hour together is nearly finished. We’ve talked about exam dates and that we plan on going to the same testing facility location: Swampscott High School (he seems unaffected when learning that I’ve never even taken

the test). We've discussed teaching shortages and why people should go back to school, as he did. We've discussed goals, regrets, and relationships. In fact, I'm confident we've discussed everything he wanted to.

He gets up to leave. He grabs his *Summary Test*, a reminder of his success so far. I stare at the thin packet—two pages, double-sided—and I feel concerned. The real test will be so much thicker. There'll be kinds of questions on that test that he's never even seen, that we've never had time to discuss.

I shake his hand. He smiles. "Maybe I'll see you at the test," he tells me.

"Ya," I answer. Maybe he will. Maybe we'll even go out for drinks afterwards, shoot the shit.

The test is coming up, and I hope to see other familiar faces at Swampscott High School. If I do, I might sit beside them, say *I'm tired. I'm hungry. This sucks. 7:45 is way too early. This building is weird.*

Only if they ask, will I give them last minute advice or pointers: underline key phrases; read the passages *before* the questions; determine if the pronoun can do action. "Can **we** lead a sentence?" I'll ask, "as in **we** will take this test. Is **we** the subject here?"

If I see them, I hope to reassure them with a smile. I hope they'll smile back. I hope calmness will permeate through my bulky sweatshirt and elastic sweatpants and into them like the first sniff of the coffee they didn't have time to buy. After all, I'm only taking this exam so I can better communicate with them. It's so much easier when we're on the same page.

UNDERWHELMED

My first time in New York City, I was twenty-seven. By then I thought I might never see the City, which didn't bother me in the slightest, but my girlfriend, a five-time visitor, wouldn't have it. Better late than never, she said.

Our first day in Manhattan, it rained from sunup to sundown. I'd never seen so many umbrellas. Sulking, black behemoths. Giant insects, dripping and downtrodden and ominous, leashed along like tiny storm clouds.

My girlfriend and I walked the crowded streets beneath her travel-sized umbrella, which left her left shoulder and my right uncovered. They were quickly soaked to the bone. Fortunately, umbrella salesman had sprung up around us like worms from wet earth.

A man in a full-length trench coat and standing beside a silver bin of umbrellas ushered us underneath an overhang. He didn't want us to get rained on, now that we were customers. The man offered two sizes: a big one and a small one. I selected the smaller size for myself. "What a cheapskate," he said, laughing. Then he handed me a small, plastic-wrapped umbrella.

He asked where we were from without missing a beat.

"Virginia. She and I are from Virginia," I told him, shivering

“Cool. Cool. I’m from West Virginia,” he said. He made some reference to West Virginia that didn’t ring any bells, but I nodded along like I knew what he was talking about.

Emboldened by this city interaction, I asked the umbrella man where was a good place to eat breakfast. It was nearly eleven am, and we hadn’t eaten. We were hungry hippos. Not to mention, it’d be nice to get out of the rain.

I had thought asking locals was how out-of-towners like my girlfriend and me learned about the diamond in the rough type places, the real hidden gems. I was wrong. The umbrella man mumbled a name I couldn’t hear over the downpour. “It’s a deli,” he continued. “Ain’t gonna be like what you’re used to. Those big, hot breakfasts in Virginia. Hmm. Hmm.”

We ended up at an Irish pub down the street because we didn’t want to walk too much farther in the rain—even with our umbrellas. The pub advertised breakfast all day, but we immediately found the menu to be limited. The few breakfast choices were basic lunch options—grinders and other bulky sandwiches—with egg added. For example: “Steak and Cheese and Egg.” Everything came with French fries.

Our waitress, a thick-accented Irish woman with ropey red hair, was the only server in the place. It didn’t take long to see she was overwhelmed. The place wasn’t packed by any means, but there were maybe ten full tables. A lot for one person. At one point, I heard the couple next to us complaining that their orders were wrong.

We asked for waters, which never came, but when the food finally arrived, the eggs were warm and the toast buttered. It’s pretty hard to screw up breakfast. I slurped

my coffee mug dry in minutes, but the coffee was never refilled. More than once, I brought the mug to my lips and sucked air, imagining the warm liquid filling my mouth.

We paid the bill, and threaded our jackets over long-sleeve shirts. Then we unsheathed our umbrellas, still dripping, and prepared to enter the downpour only slightly less hungry and wet than we had been an hour before.

ROADSIDE RELICS

For days on my way to campus, I've driven past the same dead raccoon. Rigor mortis appears to have set into its body, erect and brittle on the road's shoulder. The black and white striped carcass is like a footstool tipped on its side but with child-like hands facing the traffic instead of carved wood. There is no bend left in the animal that I can see. It exudes the rigidity I imagine sought by deer hunters, strapping full-grown deer to their roof racks as one might fasten a bicycle or kayak.

There is a deer, too, farther down Fairfax County Parkway, going south. Dead as a doornail. Like the raccoon it is bloodless, and I'm not sure if the animal hasn't bled or if its blood has evaporated by now. The deer's skin is golden, and because I can't see any antlers, I assume it to be female. Unlike the raccoon, however, the deer did not have the decency to die on the road's shoulder, and so I must swerve around the body—and then the head.

I've been living in Fairfax County, Virginia for three months, and I've never seen more road kill in my life than on my southerly drive from Herndon to George Mason University in Fairfax City. Big, beefy animals with thick heads of fur, bodies completely intact or in pieces scattered like flashing lights along my commute. Deer, coyotes, foxes, dogs, raccoons. Most on the shoulders or medians. Difficult to ignore.

Fairfax County Parkway is a four-lane highway, and it's the road I'm on for the longest stretch every day I drive to campus. Construction—in the form of paving, lane widening, line painting—is ongoing. Dirt-carrying trucks and men in hard hats and orange vests are visible nearly my entire commute. As are dead animals.

I'm more than surprised that no one has scooped up the raccoon for either personal or sanitary purposes, particularly because its hardened body would fit perfectly in a square shovel and there are so many men about with shovels. The carcass could, I imagine, be rolled by a boot onto a co-worker's shovel; the raccoon's bloated belly would be easy to roll. The metal edges would sit under the animal's armpits on one end and beneath its privates on the other, like a child's boogie board beneath a full-grown man.

Removing the deer would be more difficult. The procedure would be two-part, as is the dead deer, and traffic would have to be diverted or stopped altogether to allow the orange-vested men to walk safely across the Parkway. Perhaps they'd cart a wheelbarrow up to the deer, or a gurney even, dragging the body up the canvas or metal: shoulders, legs, shoulders, legs, shoulders, legs.

A month ago, on my way to school, just prior to the off-ramp leading to Braddock Road, I saw a blue motorcycle. The kickstand was down, the bike in good condition as far as I could tell driving sixty past. Because it was parked on the road's shoulder, I thought little of it. The next day, however, I saw it again—in the exact same position, kickstand down

and seemingly untouched since the other day. It had rained the night before, and I found it unfathomable one would purposely leave a shiny motorcycle out all day and night in such weather. Unless of course...Some compulsion came over me then, some inner voice to the effect of “you must do something or else you’ll regret it”. A voice difficult to ignore. As soon as I reached campus, I called the Fairfax County Police and told them about the blue motorcycle. The dispatcher’s voice was cool, placating. *Thanks for letting us know*. She seemed unmoved by the urgency in my voice, my call for help.

The dispatcher took down my number and told me someone would check on it—which was all I wanted, to know that someone else was now responsible if anything had gone amiss. I was off the hook. The next day when I saw the bike in the exact same position, I didn’t call back.

To get to Fairfax County Parkway, I take a right out of my apartment complex onto Sunrise Valley Drive. Instead of staying straight on Sunrise Valley, however, which meets Fairfax County Parkway a couple miles up, I steer my car onto Monroe. Almost always, I turn right on red. Monroe is also where I start to exceed the speed limit as a matter of course, pushing sixty to make the briefest of green arrows that put me on Fox Mill Road. Two lanes become one. One lane becomes three at the lights where I take a right onto Fairfax County Parkway.

I didn’t always take this route. When I first moved to Virginia, I would stay straight on Fox Mill Road, which would deposit me close to the university. Fox Mill was windy and hilly, but serene. Horse farms appeared to the right and left. So too, wooden

fences and grass and overturned land and single-family homes. There were even signs for deer crossing, the silhouette of an antlered deer rising on its hind legs. One day, I was driving in the only lane that headed south, taking in these new surroundings, when I had to slam on my brakes. Two feet on one pedal. Arms taut. Butt hovering over the seat for leverage. The car in front of me had braked hard, forcing me to either do likewise or crash into it. Not one, but two deer had run out in front of this car. The animals' movements were nothing like the mid-action still on the sign; the deer were much less brazen. Terrified, I would say. The first deer ran straight, as if shot from a cannon, and disappeared into the woods on the far side, but the second deer bucked and kicked like a crazed bull. It stayed in the road for far too long, pacing back and forth across the pavement. Finally, this deer crossed the road into the woods where its partner had gone, and the car in front of me sped off, continuing at the same rate of speed as before. I drove away then too, my heart thump thumping, but I drove a good fifteen miles per hour below the speed limit for the remainder of Fox Mill Road. In no time, the car with Virginia plates disappeared completely out of sight.

During the fall, the only season I've experienced in Virginia, my late morning drive is ablaze with foliage. Burnt reds and oranges and yellows. Leaves seem to remain on limbs much longer down here than in New England. This is probably because the fall weather up North is more severe, violently shaking leaves from limbs and limbs from trunks. Ripping roots from the earth. What does make its way to the earth down here begins to linger, I've noticed. Begins to stink and pile up, demanding to be seen. I'm used to a

place—a mindset, really—where the fallen is quickly raked into piles by active hands, stuffed into black trash bags and shoved out of sight. Out of mind. So all this knocks me back a little.

School days, I spend nine miles each way on Fairfax County Parkway. Besides the dead and abandoned, I pass the Chantilly Highlands, Lee Jackson Memorial Highway, Fair Lakes, Interstate 66, and Lee Highway, in that order and at that speed. Before I take the exit for Braddock Road, leaving the Parkway for good, I search for the blue motorcycle, which hasn't been there for days.

My time on Ox Road is brief, leading me to campus in a matter of feet rather than miles. I have reached the university, safe and sound and relatively no worse for wear.

Car parked, I slip my backpack over my shoulders and trudge across the parking lot; the physical load redirects my mind's eye. The world narrows, becoming both more and less manageable. I plan the day's schedule as I walk: *class, homework, work*. A mantra I'm used to. Tunnel vision is comforting that way.

MY WAY TO THE DANGER ZONE: A CINEMATIC DIVERSION

Less than three minutes into *Top Gun* (1986) rumbles “Danger Zone” by Kenny Loggins and with it, perhaps, the greatest montage of the American workperson since *Flashdance* (1983). Floating somewhere in the Indian Ocean is the *USS Enterprise*, the crew of which resembles a swarm of *drosophila* flies, covered as they are from head to toe in dark clothing and thick mitts and helmets with giant ear-buds. These men are seen through a shimmering lens—as if the camera itself is a fiery jet engine—pumping fists, jogging in slo-mo, rolling up tubing, dragging and yanking massive black hoses, crab-walking, saluting no one in particular, talking on phones like quarterbacks after the big throw, patting each other on the backs, twirling their fingers and pointing and jacking up peace signs.

Cut to a room aboard the Carrier. There are blinking red lights and super-sized computers and maybe seven people just standing around. In the background is Commander Tom Jordan (James Tolkan), call sign “Stinger”. Jordan has a prominent chin that seems to drag down his entire face, the most hairless thing I’ve ever seen. He is, unsurprisingly, a tough character. “Who’s up there?” Jordan growls to a sweaty airman with a tiny headset.

“Cougar and Merlin—and Maverick and Goose,” replies the airman.

“Great,” says Stinger, mock-happily, standing with hands on hips: “Maverick and Goose.”

Enter Maverick, as though he’s heard his name spat from Jordan’s lips. Maverick is piloting an F-14, mouthpiece dangling like an ignored seat belt. His first words of the movie are spoken to his best friend and Radar Intercept Officer: “Talk to me, Goose.”

During one of the first combat exercises at Top Gun, Maverick (Tom Cruise) descends below 10,000 feet (something he is expressly told not to do) to “kill” Jester (Michael Ironside). Because of this infraction, Maverick and Goose (Anthony Edwards) are called into the commander’s office to be reprimanded. Their Top Gun commander Viper (Tom Skerritt) explains to Maverick –and also to Goose, but sometimes Goose has this beautiful way of drifting into the background, 80’s porn star mustache and all—that he “broke a major rule of engagement.” Maverick and Goose are dismissed, and in their absence, Viper asks Jester’s opinion of Maverick: He’s a “wild card, unpredictable, flies by the seat of his pants,” says Jester. Presumably what Viper was thinking as well—or else he wouldn’t have asked for his second’s opinion. Viper, however, can’t help but be impressed by Maverick’s flying: “He got you, didn’t he?”

Once established in Miramar, Maverick becomes a sort of demi-god. By virtue of being the movie’s protagonist, he’s more developed, and thus, seemingly different from the other elite pilots, whose stories we know little about except how they intersect with Maverick’s. This creates the impression that Maverick is more like us, more developed,

more human. In truth, however, he is no more like us than any other pilot at Top Gun, including de facto villain and Maverick's rival Iceman (Val Kilmer).

Iceman "flies ice cold, no mistakes," Goose tells Maverick over drinks and beer nuts. The bar, straight out of *Miami Vice*, is teeming with white jackets and buzz cuts. You can almost smell the tonic, sealing up nicks from tight shaves. Like Maverick's, Iceman's reputation precedes him; Iceman appears seconds after being discussed, his ears burning. "You figured it out yet?" Ice, chewing the hell out of a beer nut, asks Mav. "What's that?" Mav says, taking a swig from his bottle and avoiding eye contact. "Who's the best pilot," Ice replies.

In the previous scene, the airmen are seated in a dark room (the blinds are drawn) being lectured on the importance of air combat maneuvering by Jester. The room resembles a cozy, independent movie theater except instead of a projector screen is a white board and instead of movie-loving patrons, the room is filled with slippery-faced, cigarette smoking airmen in beige suits. In the background, being shown on a monitor is something that resembles the video game *Counter Strike*, and there are plaques, flags, and black and white photographs all over the walls. When the blinds are opened as Viper walks in, we can better see whom we're dealing with. Iceman wears a gargantuan blue-tinged ring and works a silver pen around in his fingers. He stares straight ahead, says nothing. Maverick's head is on a swivel, on the other hand, prompting Goose to ask what he's doing. "Just wondering," Maverick says, "who's the best." While this is going on, Viper explains about a particular plaque, which, coincidentally, lists the best pilot in his class from previous years. "Do you think your name's gonna be on that plaque?" Viper

addresses the room, rhetorically. “Yes, sir,” Maverick responds. Slider and Iceman grin like buffoons. “That’s pretty arrogant—considering the company you’re in,” Viper tells Maverick. “Yes, sir,” replies Maverick. Viper, his mustached face collapsing on itself, says, “I like that in a pilot.” Now Maverick and Goose grin like buffoons.

Entering *Top Gun*, Iceman is considered to be the best; Goose tells Maverick (and us) as much. Not only that, but Iceman appears unblemished: blonde hair, blue eyes, 6 feet, a feminine softness to his face and exceptional posture. Compared to Maverick—brown hair, 5’8” at the most, made *Top Gun* by the skin of his teeth—Iceman is clearly superior. Such a contrast is intended to further humanize Maverick. Both men are clearly arrogant, but Maverick, we’re supposed to believe, is justifiably so; he is arrogant only in order to compensate for whatever Iceman has that Maverick doesn’t. (In reality, there is nothing Iceman has that Maverick doesn’t). Regardless, we’re expected to give Maverick a pass, to applaud his bravado while condemning Iceman’s hubris.

By the next scene, at the bar, both Maverick’s and Iceman’s bulges have become more prominent. Their dicks are razor-sharp and preparing to sword fight. Wearing his aviator sunglasses (the only one wearing sunglasses in the dimly-lit bar), Iceman leans against a wall in the corner; a woman with a big, blonde poof and strapless dress rubs against him. Iceman faces forward. No words are exchanged between the two, and Iceman’s face suggests such attention is business as usual. Meanwhile across the room, Maverick is attempting to woo Charlie (Kelly McGillis) by serenading her with “You’ve lost that lovin’ feelin’,” the 1965 Righteous Brothers hit single: evidently a popular song among the Navy boys because the fellas in white and beige and blue sing back-up vocals

without any direction from the lead. By the end of the song, nearly the whole bar is in on the singing, and Charlie has no choice but to invite Maverick to sit beside her and have a drink. Forgive the pun when I say that the bar proves to be filled with wingmen.

Maverick's fleeting insecurities giving way, as the scene calls for it, to his daredevil machismo is simply too obvious to be believable. We understand that Maverick has been constructed in such a way as to resemble a real person, like a much too perfect clone exhibiting only the black and white aspects of a human being. The truth is that we live much of our lives in the gray area, *between* fight and flight.

But Maverick doesn't.

Maverick's character, as it is, helps us experience the movie in the way we wish to experience it, satisfying whatever we were looking for when we chose a "high-octane" flick like *Top Gun* from the shelf or at the box office rather than its contemporaries *Gandhi* or *Driving Miss Daisy*. The by-product of Maverick's living his life at the extremes is that his character is never in danger of convincing us that he's a real person with real feelings.

This is incredibly freeing for viewers like me.

Watching Maverick, I'm more selfish than empathetic. I don't have to feel as he feels. When he's high, I'm happy, and when he's low, down in the dumps depressed, I can still be happy. I know his failures are not my own. Throughout the movie, I use him, guilt-free, to do whatever bidding I desire, whatever fantasy I wish fulfilled. What I'm saying is that Maverick is effective as *Top Gun's* centerpiece because he makes a better window than door.

My favorite scene in the movie, maybe one-third of the way in, is the beach volleyball scene, which takes place at what has to be the only spot in Southern California nowhere near a beach. This is the best part of the movie, hands down. Kenny Loggins' "Playing with the Boys" humping and hiping and bleeping like an arcade game. What I love most about this scene is that it represents my idealized version of playing with my friends. Maverick and Goose and Iceman and Slider (Rick Rossovich) are really just like my buddies and me. Except, of course, they're much, much cooler.

These Top Gun guys are cut and shirtless (besides Goose), oil slick and barefoot. At one point, Slider actually howls at the moon, though it can't be more than a few hours past midday. Their pecs flicker to the beat of the music they aren't supposed to be hearing. Iceman spins the volleyball on his index finger like a Harlem Globetrotter. On one side of the net, there is Maverick and Goose: on the other, Ice and Slider. It's like the battle between my high school football and baseball team that I always prayed would take place, but it never did because the jocks hung out with each other.

The teams are well matched during the opening volleys. But that's what's expected and so has all the excitement of watching your friend play *Pong* in slow motion. What really excites me is when Maverick and Goose appear, suddenly, to be on the ropes, their backs against the wall, at the wrong side of "game point," it would seem. Iceman's spike has just sent Maverick diving to the sand, who stands back up without a grain of sand on him. From this point on, Maverick and Goose are Misty May-Treanor and Kerri Walsh-Jennings, three-time Olympic Gold Medalists in beach volleyball and masters in

the art of last name hyphenation. A spike here, an ace there, and the good guys have it. The win is then reinforced with the Top Gun High Five.

Albeit a romanticized representation, this is, we'd like to believe, how someone like Maverick (a romanticized figure himself) hangs out with his boys, and in a sort of call and response to this scene, I can't help but imagine my best friends and me getting down on some beach volleyball a la *Top Gun*: Joe and I on the near side; J-Henn (our nickname for the other Joe) and Dan across the net. In this fictional scene, we're all roughly 17 years old. Joe is the only one in good shape, the recent protein-smoothies putting him just north of scrawny. His shirt is already off, his chest and back virtually hairless. I'm peeling off my soggy shirt, which is sweat-logged and chafes my nipples. Unlike my friends, I'm at least ten pounds overweight and the only part of my body without hair is the inside of my mouth. J-Henn stands about 6'2", four inches taller than me and Joe and six inches taller than Dan. J-Henn is sickly pale and of Irish-heritage (last name Hennessey) so he keeps his shirt on because otherwise he will burn to a crisp. It's because of this, I like to think, that he spends so much time indoors. Dan's real name is Thang; he's Vietnamese. Besides appearing undernourished (he is not), Dan is light brown and has a concave chest. His nipples are dark-brown, which amuses us pink-nippled white boys. His black hair is tall and stiff—in fact, he has the best hair of the group. His shorts are baggy and slung-low, revealing boxers. Dan thought that when I called him up for a game of volleyball, I was joking. All of us have a good case of bacne.

Despite our looks and at least half of the group's general distaste for athletics, I can imagine us being sick at volleyball. I think of Dan crouching low to the ground

(channeling his old Karate days, “hi-ya!”), dropping down for a perfect set to J-Henn and J-Henn like a streak of white lightning leaping into the air and ripping a thunderous spike, the ball landing just between the outstretched hands of Joe and me, both in mid-dive, muscles flailing against our skin like kenneled dogs. I think of J-Henn, then, throwing back his head like he’s in a shampoo commercial, roaring at the sky, fists clenched. I think of Joe and me making an improbable comeback worthy of a documentary film, capped with our own special high-five. After the game, I can see our silhouettes marching into the sunset—or to wherever we parked our Kawasaki’s—to the beat of every hit single of the decade simultaneously. Instead of what we were, in other words, I think of four hard-bodies, covered in oil, moving in the sand like we were born in it: nowhere to go but full-speed ahead. Kicking ass and taking names.

Goose’s death is a reminder, although short-lived, that *Top Gun* is not all glitz and glamour, chicks and slick, six-pack abs. *Top Gun* is not, in other words, outside the governance of the real world. Nothing says that more matter of factly than the accidental death of a loved one. But it’s much too late in the movie for this sentiment to ring true, which I suppose is the point. *Top Gun* didn’t win the 1987 People’s Choice Award for its accurate representation of the fragility of human existence. The opposite, actually.

How Maverick responds to this tragedy is a pivotal aspect of the film. If death is the great equalizer, then it’s how a person responds to death—or the idea of death—that separates one from another. Maverick has every right to shut down, to feel sorry for himself, to binge drink or carb-load. Will he swallow antidepressants? Begin recording

his innermost thoughts in a journal per advice from a new age, military-appointed therapist? Or will he bounce back as the same old Maverick, Goose's death a temporary setback? How does someone like Maverick cope with loss, in other words?

Charlie, for one, pushes Maverick to move on. She finds Maverick sitting alone in a bar, presumably day-drinking. His hands cradle his head. Surprisingly—or not so surprisingly—Maverick's glass contains only ice water. He's both everything and nothing like we expect; his unpredictability is what's so predictable.

"It's not your fault," Charlie says, taking a seat beside him. She has seen the evidence from the flat spin that killed Goose; what happened has been ruled an accident. "You're one of the best pilots in the Navy. What you do up there—it's dangerous," she says, leaning closer to him, trying to find a way in. "When I first met you, you were larger than life. Look at you. You're not gonna be happy unless you're going Mach 2 with your hair on fire, you know that."

"It's over. It's just over," says Maverick.

"To be the best of the best, it means you make mistakes and go on. It's just like the rest of us," Charlie explains.

But of course it isn't like the rest of us at all. Not when you fly a jet plane for a living and your best friend has just died in your arms.

Regardless, Maverick responds as Charlie (and we) need him to. He doesn't retreat or withdraw; he doesn't journal or knit or crochet. Instead, he does something we could only ever dream of doing if somehow found in his situation: he saves the day. Responding to a surprise attack, Maverick flies brilliantly, shooting down several enemy

planes and saving Iceman's ass to boot. He brings the people to their proverbial feet, which is how I've been watching since the opening credits. Ready for takeoff.

NOTES ON *THE HOBBIT*: A LITERARY DIVERSION

Dearest Bilbo,

I hope this letter finds you in time—for tea. The Middle Earth Post is none too reliable these days.

If Tolkien knew I was writing you, all would be lost. As you are aware, he holds the rights over your tale, and he, in his *infinite* wisdom, sought fit to reject my proposed revisions for *The Hobbit*. I believe at one point in the letter he wrote to me, he even called me a *dolt*. He claimed my proposals were *amateurish* and accused me of mixing metaphors. He said I overused *italics*. In one passage, he described me as “clinically insane.” Clearly, the man didn’t understand me, which is why I’m writing to you—Halfling, humanoid, star of the Shire.

I’ve taken the liberty of attaching my revision suggestions to this letter. Please give them a read.

For ease of reading, I’ve outlined only the *most* un-heroic chapters as they appear in the original, followed by my revision suggestions. A “what has been done/ what could have been done better” approach. I’m certain that you, Dear Fellow, will find your way.

With a few modifications here and there, you can be the hero I always wished you were.

—A (*Highly*) *Critical Fan*

I. An Unexpected Party

(Alternatively titled “An Unexpected Parry”)

If you don't mind my saying so, you're quite flustered in the early going. You pout in an empty pantry as thirteen dwarves and a fast-talking wizard demolish your bread, wine, and table. This is unacceptable. When a band of thugs enters the home of a hero, uninvited, and at mealtime no less, there must be hell to pay or else the readers will find him dodgy, and they will be thoroughly confused about just how seriously he values proper manners.

Revision suggestions (I have two):

1. Look at *The Odyssey*. Begin *in medias res*, the dwarves already in your home. Not: “In a hole in the ground there lived a hobbit blah blah blah,” but “In a country estate built into a magnificent hillside, there lived a hobbit, and he was busy tossing dwarves out his oaken, circular door.”

2. Sneak out of the house, taking with you an old, dusty blanket. With the blanket as a cloak, return disguised as a beggar. At this point, the dwarves should be good and drunk. That's when the beggar (you) challenges the leader of the company, Thorin of Oakenshield, to a contest only you can win—say, fitting one's entire body inside your oven (turned off of course) while still being able to shut the door. Losing to a beggar demoralizes Thorin and by extension his band of munching misfits, and they leave, replacing the plates and utensils where they found them. (I don't have to remind you how important honor is among the dwarves.) If that doesn't work, however, the beggar (you)

must slay all thirteen dwarves with your walking stick because you lack a sword or even a sharp knife.

II. Roast Mutton

(Alternatively titled “Troll Huntin”)

Gandalf-less, you make your way into the woods, the Shire’s pollen-like haze only a memory. A sneeze. The journey to destroy the dragon Smaug and steal back his treasure officially begun. And then it stops: You stumble into three carnivorous trolls huddling around a campfire. What a remarkable opportunity for you to show your grit! What will you do? I wonder. Will you set them ablaze in their own fire? No. You are spotted immediately and snatched up. While you hang upside down, clutched in massive troll hands, you reveal that your friends are in the woods, just there beyond the fire’s light—and then you realize how stupid that was. Before the entire company is eaten, Gandalf returns from *godknowswhere* to keep the trolls bickering until dawn arrives, the sun turning them to stone where they stand. The wizard’s arrival is so precise that I wonder if he’d disappeared for the sole purpose of giving you the opportunity to act heroically, but seeing that was not in the cards, involved himself so you would not be used as toothpicks. At least by chapter’s end, you finally have a sword.

For revision, I’d suggest, rather than stumbling into the trolls, you announce your presence with a How *You* Doin’ and a loud belch. Huck a Shire-sized loogie and hike up your belt, forever sagging. Channel your inner-Bilbro. Ask if the trolls are game for a round of high-stakes Texas Hold ‘Em. Explain that the losers have to stay out in the open

until dawn and be turned to stone. It is *high-stakes* after all. This is a win-win for you. If you actually win the card game, the trolls become chess pieces at dawn's early light. If you lose, you will not turn to stone, of course, and the trolls would be sure to stay in the open with you to make sure you don't back out on the deal; that would be the worst. They *really* don't want to look stupid.

IV. Over Hill and Under Hill

(Alternatively titled "Running Bilbo's Goblin Kill")

Inside the cavernous Misty Mountains, Gandalf disappears only to reappear behind the Great Goblin, slaying him in a blaze of glory. Meanwhile you are carried like a knapsack on the stooped backs of both Bombur and Dori, respectively. That is until you fall off, plummeting ever deeper into the Mountain's depths.

If I were to suggest only one change to this chapter, it would be that you, Mr. Baggins, run *alongside* the dwarves. For maximum output, breathe in through the nose, out through the mouth. If I were to suggest two changes, the second would be that you clamber up Gandalf's tree-like body, perch yourself upon his shoulders, and dive elbow-first onto the Great Goblin in the style of World Wrestling Federation Legend, Macho Man Randy Savage.

VI. Out of the Frying-Pan into the Fire

(Alternatively titled "Out of the Frying-Pan and onto Your Trousers")

Travel continues. Empty stomachs ache. Hobbit feet are bent and bruised. You nibble at berries from passing bushes but are unsatisfied. You hear howls, as if a great many of the Shire have simultaneously stubbed their toes on extra-large (are there any other sizes in the Shire?) barrels of ale. Panic. Your company scrambles up trees, but not you. Here is as good a place as any to make your long-awaited stand, to prove to the others that you're more than just a carry-on. The wolves are coming. Unsheathe your sword. At the very least, slip on the ring and run for help. Do something besides scurry "about from trunk to trunk, like a rabbit that has lost its hole and has a dog after it." Or not.

You and your comrades are quickly surrounded. You are ornaments on a Christmas Tree, but instead of children hungry for presents staring up at you with swollen eyes are Wargs, hungry for your flesh, waiting for you to drop into their mouths like ripe fruit. Before you can even *think* about how to get out of this pickle, there goes the blasted wizard again. Glory-glutton Gandalf flings flaming pinecones as if they are Molotov cocktails. You shudder in the sharp wind so high up in your tree, your hobbit hands cold and numb. Before you fall to your death, you are plucked from the treetops by eagles. As night draws to a close, you will rest in an eagle's nest and claim to be *dying* of hunger.

As for revision—oh, revision—I'd steer you towards the red-hatted and rosy-cheeked David the Gnome from TV's *The World of David the Gnome*. He is friend to all woodland creatures, and you can be too. Look at it this way: The Wargs are ultra-wolves and wolves are wild dogs, so you're surrounded by Lassie twice removed. Befriend them, I say. Allow them to nibble your toes, swipe crumbs from your breast pocket, filch a top

layer of skin from your generous hindquarters. Flip them over and scratch their wild bellies. And when the goblins arrive to witness the Wargs slurping the salt from your faces, they will definitely flee.

XII. Inside Information

(Alternatively titled “In Moderation”)

You, Mr. Burglar, follow the tunnel inside the mountain that leads to Smaug. There he is. You’ve never seen one before: a reddish-golden dragon clad in armor. But then again, only a short time ago you’d never seen a troll, elves, Giant Spiders, goblins, evil wolves, eagles, wizards, dwarves, or a grown man cry—you still haven’t seen that one. Anyway, there he is. Wings draped over hills of jewels, armor, gold, coin. He’s fast asleep. What will you grab? An emerald? A ruby? A diamond? Another precious gem? No. You snatch a two-handled cup because you think you’ll be able to drink from it twice as fast.

But the Beast. He awakens. He cannot see you. You are invisibilbo. But he smells you—all that wine and cheese on your breath. Smoldering Smaug asks who you are, and you cannot resist:

“I am the clue-finder, the web-cutter, the stinging fly. I was chosen for the lucky number [...] I am he that buries his friends alive and drowns them and draws them alive again from the water. I came from the end of a bag, but no bag went over me.”

You are not *entirely* without art. By bragging, you engage the Beast to do the same, revealing to you the one spot his armor does not protect while showing off his shiny scales. You, Mr. Braggins, scamper away, the Mountain gossip that you are, and reveal Smaug's Achilles' Belly to the dwarves. You are overheard by a bird. A thrush that wishes to steal your glory. By chapter's end, you are sealed in the tunnel, and Smaug flies off to torch Lake-town.

For revision, I'd remind you that a little modesty goes a long way. And kill that fucking thrush!

XIII. Not at Home

(Alternatively titled "A Hot Bath and A Comb")

In the abandoned—for the moment—treasure trove, you pocket the gem of all gems: The Arkenstone of Thrain. But you don't tell the dwarves you have it. What is one-fourteenth of so much treasure, anyhow? Your share should be at least *one* stinkin' gem.

In my revision, I'd advise you to prepare for the dragon's return. Set a trap. First, you must bathe. With water and soap. Erase the odor of yesteryear's dinners and hobbit luncheons and stale ale. Lather, rinse, repeat. Then, *Stink*-bearer-no-longer, you shall dig a hole in the mound of jewels precisely where you saw the dragon lie. Cover your body in gold, coins, *cups*. If necessary, demand that the dwarves further bury you. Then politely tell your crew to hit the bricks and hide themselves in the tunnel because you can smell *dwarf* from there. Slide on the ring. Keep your sword hand free. Once you are odorless,

invisible, and armed, wait for the dragon's return. Wait for his bare breast to fall on your blade. Slay the Beast.

XIV. Fire and Water

(Alternatively titled “A Dragon to Slaughter?”)

Scrap the entire chapter because, for one thing, you aren't even in it. Three-quarters of the book finished and we are introduced to a new character, Bard the Bowman of Lake-town. A major player he suddenly becomes too! Smaug isn't slaughtered by you, Dearest Bilbo, as I'd always hoped—the result of the preparations which I've so carefully outlined in the previous chapter—but is felled by an arrow from Bard who'd been told of Smaug's Achilles' Belly by that damn thrush! Where, I say, was this Bard character when you stumbled into the trolls? Giant Spiders? Wood-Elves? Wargs? Mustn't he pay his dues?

My drastic rewrite (forget *revision*) would find Smug Smaug sweeping home, tired from a day spent destroying Lake-town, in particular Bard's house. (We would thus have never heard the name, Bard, issued into this narrative in a parenthetical on page 249—my copy). The dragon would waggle over to his favorite spot of gold and pointed weaponry, preparing to lie down and drift off to sleep. His bare breast would fall onto *your* blade. You—not some woebegone archer—would be the Great Dragon Slayer. I thought *The Archer's Tale* was a different story?

XV. The Gathering of the Clouds

(Alternatively titled “The Blabbering of the Crowd”)

Bard. Thanks for nothing. Because of *Bard*, the Lake-men believe they have earned the treasure beneath the Mountain. These men, led by *Bard*, have aligned with the Wood-Elves and march towards you. Thorin, of course, believes only the dwarves (not *Bard*) are entitled to that which Smaug had pilfered, which is why you have spent the last few days further fortifying your fortress. Phew! Here comes *Bard*—and the elves. And in typical Middle Earth fashion, a face-off is preceded by song. One, during these heavy choruses, searches for an Applause-o-Meter for aid in determining a victor, but there is none to be found. So, war is declared.

Revision suggestion: Anything Bard can do, you can do better. If Bard still lives, give the man a limp and a beer belly. Age him thirty years. Splash a bit of jam on his tunic and stick crumbs in his beard. Splatter thrush-shit atop his shoulders. Explain to the man that the tribe has spoken, and *you* are running this dog and pony show. Then, out of spite, tell him he has a weak chin and his mother never loved him.

XVII. The Clouds Burst

(Alternatively titled “Bard’s Still the Worst”)

Bard’s offer of the Arkenstone isn’t enough for Thorin to lay down his guard. Before more singing ensues, however, Gandalf speaks. He warns of an approaching goblin horde and Wargs. Y’all unite against these villians, and the Battle of Five Armies ensues. (Really, Five Armies and One Hobbit). We hear little from you in these pages, Bling-Wearer. You are a Master of Avoidance, if nothing else.

EAGLES ARRIVE = END OF BATTLE.

In any revision of this chapter, all I would ask is that you kill something or someone, preferably Bard, who would have suddenly aligned with the Wargs and goblins in an effort for Middle Earth Domination. He stands at a podium made of Elk-antler and preaches filth about gun control, women's rights, same sex marriage, and where Middle Earth would be without the Bush Administration. *HALLIBURTON* is sewed onto his leather cap. He screams like a banshee and refers to Hobbits as "little people" and Elves as "fairies." The man has become a villain of the worst sort and when you kill him, you will become the story's hero by default. Not the most inspiring ascension in literary history, true, but it all looks the same in the box score.

STROKE

I. HANDS

Few people are ever willing to barter with the boy: to trade a back rub for a neck rub, for instance, or a foot massage for a scalp massage. And those who even occasionally entertain such requests, he abuses without a second's thought. He becomes animal. He nudges and whimpers and lies down for them, his belly flat on the carpet.

The hair on his back, the boy has seen from pictures, is cropped like the ears of a Pit Bull. It has the shape of an angel's wings at rest. But there is certainly nothing angelic about his back hair; it is curly and thick and has twice been waxed off, only to grow back at least as curly and thick as before. It gives him fits in the hot summer months. The back of his shirt is always the first spot where gray becomes navy with sweat. When the sweat dries and the residual salt cakes his skin, he itches like a madman. He must be scratched.

This wolf-hair on his back is a trait he shares with his father. And his father itches too. Unlike him, however, his father is content with scratching his own back; he keeps a ruler-sized wooden instrument, five-fingers carved into the end, on his bedside table. He can thread this wooden hand down the collar of his shirt, past the tufts of hair that peek out, and scratch and scratch and scratch until he is satisfied. More than once, when the boy has come to his father for a scratch, his father has offered him this tool. But he always declines. "Please. Please. Only for a second," the boy pleads. He even bends a

little to further entice his father, shimmies lightly up to his bedside—his father is always reading the thickest books in bed, he thinks—so his father has to move only minimally. When his father’s hands begin to scratch under the shirt, as requested, the boy closes his eyes and shuts out the world.

Sometimes the boy—now older—can get his girlfriend to scratch him as they lie in bed together. He runs his nose up her arm, down her stomach like the Tramp pushing a meatball before the spaghetti-kiss. This may seem romantic to anyone but him or her. His desire is motivated by something different, more primal, than romance, and she, she wants nothing to do with him when he’s like this. Needy like a child. But she’s very clever, his girlfriend, and she considers all her options. If she does not scratch him, he will continue to beg; if she says “in a minute,” he will turn sour and pout, which embarrasses her to no end; if she says “yes,” he will grin from ear to ear and tell her how good they are together. Perfect for each other. It is easier, she knows, to say yes.

The boy’s relationships seem less symbiotic than parasitic. It appears as though he is not trading touch for touch, but stealing. This is true, he knows, but it doesn’t have to be this way. He is more than willing to reciprocate with his own hands, small as they are, yet people rarely accept his medium of exchange. What is it, he wonders, that makes his father and girlfriend reject his hands? He knows they itch, his father in particular. What drives them to scratch by their own hands and contraptions instead of his? And what else, he wonders, do they do for themselves that he does not?

II. MASSAGE

Whenever he gets a massage—a birthday gift from his girlfriend, a gift for both of them, really, because this is a day off from her massaging duties—he is amazed by the therapist’s hands. He is amazed by how easily this person gains control over his body. In seconds, he is a puppet and couldn’t care less who’s pulling the strings.

These hands of his cannot relieve the tension in his body precisely because they are his. They are small and weak. He has tendinitis in his wrist from a childhood playing baseball, swinging aluminum bats and flipping balls to lanky first basemen. On extremely cold days, even a decade after playing the sport, the weakness beneath his palm spreads to the tips of his fingers like a tide supplanting the shore, and his hand hangs heavy. His are not ballplayers’ hands.

Nor are they the hands of a laborer. Sure they can do the job, laboring that is, and they have in the past plied and planted, hauled and heaved, sawed and scissored. But with padded gloves and friction-reducing tools. Without such protection, his hands too easily crack and bleed and stiffen. Instead of hard-packed calluses sprout weepy, fluid-filled sacks.

But none of that matters, really. These hands could relieve the tension in his body perfectly well if only they weren’t his.

III. DESIRE

He must never touch the girls. This is the most important rule to remember at Zachary’s, a strip club twenty minutes from where the boy went to high school and a spot

he sometimes goes with his friends from back home when he's in town and the gang is too riled up to be pacified by the more traditional haunts. The boys are back in town.

Zachary's is a one-story building that seems to sag, as if the roof might collapse on both the girls and the boys at any minute. The inside is dimly lit and the hallways are narrow, so narrow, in fact, the boy brushes shoulders and hips with other tongue-waggers on his way to relieve himself in the bathroom. But he never touches the girls.

They dance on a stage better suited for cock fighting (no pun intended) than stripping. The stage is canvas-dressed, the surrounding vinyl ropes barely thigh-high. One girl—no, woman—with sharp-angled bangs as though she has trimmed them herself does a special move in the ring. Dollar bills are folded tent-like over the highest rope, catching her attention, which is precisely when she sinks, slowly, to her knees and drapes her breasts over the dollars, snapping the vinyl as she backs away, now clutching the money between breast and rib cage like a spent mouse trap. By the time she's standing on high-heeled feet, more bills have appeared, placed atop the highest rope with Jenga-like precision.

Between turns on the stage, naked women with names like Candy and June and colorful puckered lips ask the boy if he wants a dance. Never to dance. Always a dance. Nothing the two could ever do together, but a good to be sold. He knows this and yet finds these women—girls, really—difficult to resist.

During a dance, she bends and twists on him, but he doesn't touch her; he cannot touch her. It's a rule in this place, and a good one, the boy knows, but it defeats the whole purpose for him. He wishes, more than anything else, for a meeting of the flesh. His

hands to her bare shoulders or, better still, her hands to his. The boy has come here to make some sort of connection.

He, realizing this too late, always too late, has come to the wrong place.

As these naked girls—no, women—dance on top of his clothed body, he never feels more disconnected. Most of the time, these women dry-humping the void between them, he starts a conversation about his girlfriend, his job mowing greens at the local golf course, a tough thing to be good at, he says, because you have to be sure to keep the lines straight and not scalp the edges. He's doing all the talking, it seems, so he asks her questions. How does she like it here? Where is she from? Then, he sees, for the first time, maybe, the looping dragon tattoo that begins on her chest and ends on her back. He points to it, keeping his distance as if her skin might still be sore. Did it hurt? He asks.

BIOGRAPHY

Merrill Sunderland was born and raised on Cape Cod. He attended Salem State University, where he received his Bachelor of Arts in English in 2012.