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Lex Williford

Nacogdoches

One

The day after Christmas, I find myself divorced and moving again, me and my cymbal-deaf
dog Whôdini, with a U-Haul trailer bouncing behind us for what seems like the thousandth time.
And because my sweet-voiced, suicidal sister Maddie called me last night from New York City to
say her ex-best friend Allyn Vanderbeck’s just moved back to her grandfather’s old home place at
the corner of Starr and Pearl Street, I decide, just for the hell of it, to take a detour
through Nacogdoches.

For two hours, I drive the two-lane highways east from Dallas through fog and freezing
rain, past ice-glazed silver oaks and cottonwoods, past fanning bare fields of black dirt plow rows,
then past stands of scrub pines dangling their roots from red-clay cliffs. Every twenty minutes or
so, Whôdini—Whô for short—wakes up and lifts himself onto his front legs to pull his hind end up,
then hobbles in circles over the same spot in the passenger seat, toeing and scratching at the ratty
bath towel I’ve spread out there, turning and turning in the seat. Then he lies back down to sleep
again in the same spot he was sleeping before, snoring and curled against the cold. Ten miles
outside town, he blinks open his rheumy blue-gray eyes, then arches his neck at a fleabite, but his
back leg just hangs limp over the seat, and he can’t reach the itch anymore, thumps the passenger
door with his back paw.

I feel a terrible tenderness for my dog and scratch his neck for him.

“Worthless damn dog,” I whisper, but, like me, he’s past insults. Already he’s asleep again,
his eyes half open and rolled back white.

Then, just past the fog and the wipers slapping away the sleet ticking against the windshield,
I see a sun-faded billboard pass to the right like an old dream:

My ’76 Volaré’s backend fishtails, and the trailer bumps over onto the gravel shoulder. I
take my foot off the accelerator and pump the brakes till I get the car and the U-Haul back under
control, back onto the slushing road. When I look up into the rearview mirror, I see my own face,
pink scars crisscrossing my lips and cheeks like faint baseball seams, and I shake my head, the U-
Haul trailer wobbling behind me.

1 (nâk-ə-dô-chiz) A town in East Texas, sister city of Natchitoches (nâk-ə-tish), Louisiana, originally founded in 1716
on the site of the Spanish mission, Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, near villages of the Caddo tribe, Nacogdoche.
I’m thirty-four and my dog’s fourteen—ninety-eight in dog years—and for a moment I feel almost that old, feel that all the years I’ve spent in Nacogdoches and other college towns since have all been dog years. It’s just the usual self-pity mixed up with a clean shot of adrenaline, I know, but I let myself feel it all anyway. Shake my head against the thought of starting all over, from scratch, after losing almost everything again, everything but this old dog and what I’ve got in tow, not much more than what I started off with when I first drove Highway 21 through Alto, Texas, and saw this same billboard ten years ago. My dog and I’ve had too much history in this town, and I wish now I’d not gone out of my way. I’ve wasted too much of my life in this town already. This town feels oldest of them all.

But once my tires thump over the railroad tracks and I cross over the Bonita Creek bridge—a rush of red flood water rising below—then pass Lone Star Feed and Seed and drive up the hill through the intersection at North Street downtown, onto the wet, red-brick paving, then past the Old Stone Fort Bank and the public library fountain on my right, I’m feeling a little better. The old Christmas decorations are still up, red candles with yellow flame bulbs and faded plastic holly mounted on light posts along the streets. My first thought is to turn around and drive by Allyn’s big-turreted Victorian on Pearl Street, maybe see her shadow against the kitchen window shade, but I decide against it, cut left onto Mound Street, where the Nacogdoche planted their dead, then drive slow past the old Ale and Quail club, then park my car behind the old Fredonia Inn. Whô sits up on the towel in the passenger seat, looks over at me, blinks, his stiff, bitten tail thumping the passenger seat.

“All right,” I tell him. “Just hold on. And please don’t crap on the seat.”

I reach to the floorboard for Whô’s red harness, slip it over his neck and clasp it around his chest while he pulls against me, always in the opposite direction, the direction of his own desire. I make sure no one’s watching, open the car door and my umbrella, and pick the dog up, carry him out through the cold rain under a stooping magnolia into the alleyway behind the hotel.

Whô sniffs a puddle at the wet tree roots, blinks up at me.

“Go on,” I say.

The rain’s coming down hard and he shakes it off, shivering a little, then tries to lift his back leg, but his rear end tilts and he falls over, sitting on his haunches in the puddle like a child. He looks up at me, blinks again, shivers hard for show, then pulls himself up again and pees in a steaming yellow stream that pulses against his left front paw.

“Great,” I say. “Excellent job.”

Back in the car, I wad up the towel in the passenger seat and dry the dog off, wipe the long, mucus-crusted bangs dripping down over his eyes, the gravy-stained whiskers curling from his mouth, the hair matted at the ends of his ears, at his back end where he’s chewed himself bald, then his muddy paws, trying to get him to lie down on the floorboard. The wet dog stinks beyond
imagining, like all the times he disappeared ten years ago, off in the wild woods of Nacogdoches, showing up at my front door, grinning, after weeks of rolling in road kill.

Whô’s fur is matted with burrs and twigs, already orange from the East Texas red clay. “Stay,” I tell him, like that’ll make any difference, and then I shut the car door. In the hotel courtyard, I hear the dog start in on his barking, then the same low and lonely moan I first heard when I left him by himself in my farm-room apartment.

I open the courtyard gate and walk by the swimming pool, cut through the hotel dining room to the service desk, hoping nobody hears my dog before I check in.

I lay my umbrella on the counter, wait for the clerk on the phone, a short college girl with blue-green eyes and a dark mole like a baby June bug in the arch of her left eyebrow. I feel a sharp constriction under my sternum when I realize how much she looks like Rachel, my first wife.

I glance over to the closed ballroom doors next to the gift shop, the hotel atrium with its concrete bench and two geese asleep in their plastic pond, then remember Rachel tossing her wedding bouquet backwards over her head in that same ballroom, then Allyn Vanderbeck letting out a little scream when the bouquet fell into her hands, fumbling it, stoned and drunk, like a wadded ball of newspaper flame, then hurling it at Maddie, who dropped it to her feet.

I glance back at the elevator doors, remember riding that same elevator up—a split lip, a loose tooth crown and an eye swollen shut—standing naked with Rachel in the honeymoon suite upstairs and trying to kiss her without flinching, throwing back the bed covers and seeing all the white rice Maddie and Allyn had scattered between the sheets, two boxes full. Remember the next morning, waking up with a throbbing skull, staring at Rachel asleep, a kernel of white rice stuck to the corner of her mouth, as I tried to shake off the terrible mistake I’d just made.

*Mistakes,* I think. *Or maybe just the same damn one, over and over. Another mistake coming here. Jesus.*

It’s just another two-hour drive to Shreveport and I could stay the night there instead, I think, head on next morning to my newest stint in the Dark Satanic Instructor Mills, the big state university Sherman burned to the ground, off in the stooped and looping kudzu-smothered pines of Alabama. I pick up my umbrella, start to turn around and leave, when the clerk who looks like my first ex-wife cradles the phone, looks up at me, turns the ledger around to face me.

“Single or double?” she says. Smiles.

I have to think a moment. “Single,” I say and shake my head, thinking to myself, *Again.* Then I put my umbrella back down. Pick up the ledger pen to sign in.

Fifteen minutes later, I’ve sneaked Whô around from my car to my hotel room along the backcourt facing the alley, the dog straining against his leash. I sit on the edge of the bed and switch on the T.V., watch the Weather Channel, the blue mass of freezing rain and sleet stalled at a right angle from Galveston to Texarkana, all the way northeast across the Appalachians to New York and Maddie’s sooty brownstone in Long Island City, across the East River from the U. N. I should call
her, I know, but last time I did she said she’d not gotten any auditions in weeks and she was thinking about cutting Xs across her wrists again, but I’m not up for hearing all that just now, just now starting to feel a little hopeful. If I leave early next morning, I figure, I can maybe outrun all this bad weather and make it to Shreveport, then drive the eight long hours through Monroe and Jackson to my new teaching gig in Tuscaloosa. Tuscaloser, I think. The thought gives me no comfort.

Whô sits on the floor at the foot of the bed in the cold room, stares up at me, panting, his long tongue lolling out the side of his mouth like a turkey wattle. He arches his neck against another fleabite, but his back paw just thumps the matted red shag rug. He jerks his head around to chew, snorting, at the base of his tail. Then he looks back at up me, blinks.

“All right,” I say. “Okay.” I scratch him a moment, then reach into the plastic trash bag I carried in from the car, feel around two weeks of dirty laundry, then pull out two plastic bowls and a mildewed bag of Gravy Train from the bottom, my dirty clothes scattered everywhere across the floor. At the bathroom sink, I fill the bowl with water, set it next to the food bowl by the toilet, then watch Whô slop and gulp down chunks of food without chewing, drooling gravy all over the bathroom floor.

“Good job,” I tell him. “Nice work.”

While the dog’s occupied, I step outside to my Volaré to get my suitcase, reminding myself to do my laundry in Shreveport or Jackson, Mississippi. The cold rain falls around me in the parking lot, and I try to remember what I did with my umbrella. I unlock the hotel door again and start to open it, but Whô’s already nosed his way out through the crack.

“Not so fast.” I nudge him back into the room with the toe of my Hush Puppies, then drag my heavy suitcase backwards inside and heave it up onto the bed.

“Sneaky little shit,” I say, bending down and ruffling the dog’s hair, and he belches a loud, evil cloud into my face. “God, that was attractive.”

The dog pants at me as his back end falls over, and he settles onto the carpet where he’s fallen, resting his head on his front paws, grinning up at me.

“I’ll be right back, okay?” I look around for my umbrella again, don’t see it, stoop to pet the dog between his eyes. Bend to kiss him on his head, but he just stares off at the wall. “Damn stuck-up dog. All right, then, be that way. Just don’t start in on all your howling while I’m gone, okay? Get us both kicked out of here.” Hearing my own voice, I realize that, ever since I rescued him last night from his back yard banishment at the house my second wife and I shared for four years— “He’s just a dog,” she’d said when she kicked him out the back door—I’ve fallen back into my old habit of talking to my old dog, and he’s fallen back into his old habit of ignoring me. “Ungrateful cur,” I growl like a melodrama villain and open the door, step outside. “Be good now, all right? And don’t crap all over the place. I’ll give you a bath when I get back.” I close the door, wait, think about driving by Allyn’s place for just a moment, then shake off the idea. Then, just as I start for my car, the dog starts in on a long, lonesome howl from the hotel room.
Twenty minutes later, I’m parked at the flooding curb in my Volaré next to the Mandalay Apartments across Pearl Street from Allyn’s big double-turreted Victorian, eating a shrimp Po Boy from Yakofritz’s, where my old friend Chris Grooms once played his Martin in the storefront window while Maddie sang Randy Newman’s, “Louisiana, Louisiana. They’re trying to wash us away. They’re trying to wash us away.” I could just go up and knock, I think, just say hey to Allyn and stand there for a minute or two, make sure she’s all right and leave. It’s just that simple, I think.

“No,” I say.

I can’t see much past the naked gray pecans and mimosas and the tangle of dead honeysuckle vines, through the dark and heavy downpour or the fog rising up from Bonita Creek, just one light slatting through closed blinds in the living room downstairs, Allyn’s battered white Ford F-100 pickup parked in the carport like an Appaloosa with all its gray-primered Bond-O spots.

Any moment now, I expect a cop to drive up and arrest me. Imagine the Daily Sentinel’s headline tomorrow morning: “Clueless Fool Stalks Lost First Love.” I look up at the scarred face in the rearview mirror. For some reason I can’t figure, I want to see Allyn one more time before I leave Texas for good, just a flash of her blond hair at her hips.

Just a quick knock at the door, I tell myself, to make sure she’s all right, and then I’ll be gone. Yeah, yeah, right, I think. The hell with it.

I drop my greasy wax paper wrapper to the floorboard, open the door, step outside, walk in the rain across Pearl Street, down the gravel drive past Allyn’s truck, then up the steps of the screened-in veranda that wraps around her house. The screened door slaps shut behind me, making me jump, and I stand in the dark at the front door, my finger an inch from the doorbell.

What the hell am I doing here? I think, wet and cold to the bone. Then I turn around fast, step back out into the cold rain, walk back up the gravel drive. I stop a moment in the downpour on Pearl Street when I see a yellow flash, a black-bearded face in the sulfur flare of a match as a man lights a cigarette in his blue Karmann Ghia convertible parked at Allyn’s curb. Then I turn away fast, splash to my car in the rain.

At the Fredonia Inn I unlock my door, ready to get my dog and get my gear and get the hell out of Nacogdoches.

Nac-a-no-where, Beck’s girls used to call it. Allyn and Marilyn and Sherilyn Vanderbeck, all girls I loved in one way or another, until two of them killed themselves. Nac-a-way-the-hell-out-in-the-middle-of-nowhere, they used to say.

They hated this town where they were born and raised up, like their mother Lynn and their father Beck before them, like their grandparents, like their great- and great-great grandparents, long before Spindletop and the great state of Fredonia, long before even the Old Stone Fort and the Texas Revolution, their mestiza blood mingling Scandinavia with old Spain, Tennessee pioneer with the Caddo nation, the lost tribe of the Nacogdoche. Moonshine-blond and long-rifle rape.
They couldn’t wait to escape to the big city—Big D or NYC—but Marilyn and Sherilyn and have been gone for years now, suicides like their father Beck, and now their mother Lynn’s gone, too. Hung herself two months ago from a high-bedroom beam in their old Victorian on Pearl Street.

Last I heard, Allyn was living in a rent-controlled artist’s loft not far from Maddie’s brownstone in Queens, having herself big gallery shows in the East Village and Soho, selling her dark and muddled mermaids at three thousand dollars a pop, but now Allyn’s back—the last of the Vanderbecks—back in Nac-a-no-where, to finish the business of the dead.

In my hotel room, I shake the rain out of my hair, shrug off my coat, see my gray umbrella lying on the nightstand next to the bed—and next to it a pink Post-It note stuck to the bedside table:

Dear Mr. Truitt,
You left your umbrella at the checkout desk.
Hope you didn’t get wet!

Tracy

Wadding up the note, I toss it at the wastepaper basket and miss, then glance at the hotel carpet to see if my dog’s left me any gift turds—either because he likes to punish me for leaving him alone or because he’s incontinent and can’t help himself anymore—but I see nothing.

“Whô!” I shout.

The dog probably can’t hear me anyway, so I walk into the bathroom, expecting to find him hunkered down behind the shower curtain in the tub, where he used to hide during East Texas thunderboomers. I take a bath towel from the towel rack and ruffle-dry my hair. “Might as well give you a bath while you’re in there,” I say. “Good dog.”

I throw the shower curtain back, but the tub’s empty.

“Bad dog,” I say, calling for him again, a sinking feeling rising up under my armpits like gumbo-dark East Texas swamp water. I drop the towel to the bathroom floor, run back into the bedroom, flip on the closet light, kneel down to look under the bed.


I run out to the parking lot. The wind swirls freezing rain around me and I shout, “Whô!” clapping my hands together till my cold palms sting, the only sound my half-deaf dog might hear.
At the front desk, the clerk who looks like my first wife says, “Oh, hi. You get my note?” She looks me up and down. My hair drips into my eyes. My jeans drip to the hotel carpet.

“Yeah, sure. Listen, did you see a dog?”
“A dog,” she says.
“In my room.”
“There’s a dog in your room?”
“There was a dog in my room.”
“When?”
“Before you opened the door.”
“I didn’t see any dog. How’d a dog get into your room?”
“Never mind,” I say.

Back in my hotel room, I grab my coat, my gray umbrella. Outside, I lay the umbrella on the roof of my car, get in and start the ignition, jam the car into reverse, tires spinning out on ice-slick asphalt. The U-Haul trailer jackknifes in the parking lot and almost sideswipes a Volkswagen bus. I take in a breath, let it out, then make a wide turn around the van, circle the hotel parking lot twice, looking for my dog, the escape artist.

I turn left onto Fredonia, then make a sharp right onto Hospital Street, then drive five miles an hour, looking left and right. Flip my high beams on, my wipers on high, then hunker down in my seat, as the wipers slap back the freezing rain and sleet coming down hard against the windshield. I can’t see a thing. Try to imagine where my dog might’ve run off to, circle the block again, turn back onto Fredonia, then right again onto Hospital.

Just as I turn, I see it, the flash of something gray in my headlights in front of my car, then feel it, the thump thump thump of first the front-left, then the back-left, then the trailer tires, bumping over it, before I can stop.

“No,” I say. “Please.”

In my side view mirror I see something flattened out onto the road, lit up gray and red by the trailer’s brake lights. I throw open my door, run behind the U-Haul trailer in the street, look down.

It’s an umbrella. My umbrella. I look back, remember laying it on the roof of my car. I pick it up. It’s bent a little at the handle, but otherwise it looks all right. I open it. Close it. Rain falls all around me.
The yellow bug light next to the front door on the screened-in veranda blinks on, two deadbolts unlatch, and the door bumps up against an intruder chain. Through the opening I can see her left eye, the glowing blue iris like a cracked cat’s eye marble with bright flecks of green.

“Travis?” she says, her voice hoarse and smoky. “What are you doing here?” She pushes the door closed to unlatch the chain, then opens the door a little more, glances past me. “Did anyone see you?”

“Anyone? See me . . . what?”
She looks up the drive, her eyes wide and shining like spoons.
“Nothing.” She shakes her head. “It’s . . . nothing.”
Allyn’s barefoot, wearing long johns and no makeup, smoking a Camel filter. She looks like she’s not slept in days, the moony shadows under her eyes a bruised blue, like weeks’ old shiners. She palms her furry pale scalp, looks down a moment.

What used to be long, straight hair to her waist is gone. All that’s left is stubble hennaed a reddish blonde like Maddie’s, cut close to her scalp like a Boy Scout’s. She’s gained a little weight since I last saw her in New York—What, five, six years ago?—and she looks more like her mother than her old self. I’ve forgotten how beautiful Allyn’s mother was, how beautiful her mother’s daughter.

“He’s gone,” I say. “Run off again.”
“Who?”
“How’d you know?”
“Huh? What are you talking about?”
I feel trapped in a bad Abbott and Costello routine: I Don’t Know’s on third. Who’s on second.
“Oh.” Fresh oil paint smears her cheeks like war paint. “That dog’s still alive? I thought he’d be dead by now.” She shakes her head. “Sorry. Didn’t mean it to come out like that.” Rain clatters the tin roof of the screened-in veranda above me. “What’s he doing here?” she says. “What are you doing here?”

I shake my head. “Who knows? Listen, I got to find him. He had surgery last year. Hip dysplasia. His back legs don’t work worth a damn anymore and he’s had a couple of strokes and he’s half deaf and half blind. And this weather. I’ve been driving around half crazy trying to find him. He could be just about anywhere.”

Shivering, I remember my umbrella in the car and wait for Allyn to invite me in, to hand me a warm dry towel, but she just stands there at the threshold, behind the screened door, her arms folded under her breasts against the cold. She looks up at me as if she’s just recognized me, then glances over my shoulder again, like she’s waiting for someone, something.

I wait. Try to stop shivering but don’t know how to stop. Try to think of a way to tell her how I’ve gotten here but can’t. Fight my old fright, my old ache, my old urge to hold her, or escape. Try to think of a way to begin. Again.
The first time I saw her at our green-shuttered rental house in Dallas, Allyn just stood there like a stray at our front door, her childish, perfect face tanned, oval and bland, her straight, lemon-colored hair falling to the backs of her frowning brown knees, her eyes bright and dry as Sunday funnies.

She was twelve and I was fourteen.

“You all right?” I asked her, thinking she’d just fallen off the banana seat of her oldest sister’s Schwinn—me, the protective big brother, eldest of five, just the four of us now since our kid brother Jesse had bled to death in his Baylor Hospital bed. She was a perfect blue-eyed blond child just like him, the kind who made you stare too long at any imperfection: the yellow-blue bruises along her red-scraped shin, the smear of peanut butter across her cheek, the tiny spit bubble of milk pressed to the point of bursting between her lips.

“Who is it?” Maddie said behind me, always behind me, tugging at my belt loops, our three-legged Sheltie Reveille barking at our feet.

“Don’t know,” I said and glanced back to the front porch.

But the girl at our door was gone.

I heard a high laugh and stepped off our front porch to the sidewalk, glanced left to see her sun-white hair swing behind her as she walked barefoot across our lawn and around to the side of our house, her footprints blue-wet shadows in the Johnson grass. Then I looked down and saw the perfect prints of her bare feet like they’d been pressed into wet concrete, the color of her own bright blood.

“Stay here,” I told Maddie. “Stay!” And I pointed an index finger at her and Reveille like our father, Deuce, barking out orders to us all.

When I spotted Allyn again from the back of our house, she was walking bloody footprints down our driveway to her own, past the vinyl-lined pool in her parents’ new two-car garage.

She stood there in the dark of her kitchen doorway and stared at me without blinking, knowing I’d be right there behind her. I glanced back to see if Maddie had followed but didn’t see her, then stared at Allyn a long time, her green-flecked eyes so blue I thought I was looking up through leaves to the summer-bright Dallas sky.

I ran my fingers along the pool’s vinyl edge, touched the lukewarm pool water, the closed-in, new-house smell of two-by-fours and freshly-poured concrete and chlorine sharp in the air around me. Then I followed Allyn inside.

In the Vanderbeck’s new avocado kitchen, a half-eaten peanut butter sandwich lay mashed onto the floor, a shattered jelly jar glass spilled to pooled milk, bloody white footprints smearing the new linoleum to the door. The ugliest dog I’d ever seen, Garçon, Mr. Vanderbeck’s grizzled, gap-toothed Mexican hairless, was tickle-licking the bloody milk around Allyn’s bare feet.

“You cut your foot,” I told her, then pulled her crinkle-skinned dog back by his collar to keep him from lapping glass shards into his tongue. I stepped around the shattered jelly-jar glass to the blue-princess phone on the counter. “Is your mom here?” I asked her. “Your dad?” I lifted the humming receiver to call home.

Allyn laughed and pointed out through the kitchen door to the den. Then she disappeared again without a word.
I cradled the phone without calling, glanced down the hallway to the foyer and called out, “Hello? Anybody home?” hoping her mother or sisters would show—I’d seen them all move in from a big Bekins truck two weeks before—but no one else was there in the house but Allyn’s father.

When I first saw him in the den, shirtless in his summer shorts, he was sprawled out like a buzz-cut clown with a goofy grimace on his face, and I almost laughed, too, till I saw his tanned, bloody back smashed across the glass coffee table like an archer’s broken bow, the tips of his fingers and toes on either side just touching the red-shag rug.

Allyn sat cross-legged on the floor next to her father’s head—unpacked boxes from their move from Nacogdoches still stacked all around them—and she petted his sun-stubbly hair, laughing, her blue eyes crazed and luminous as moonstones.

I sat on the carpet floor next to her, thinking her father was dead. Stared down at the deep-cut calluses on the bottoms of her bare feet bleeding into the carpet. Then I looked up and saw Maddie standing there behind me, holding poor shivering Garçon. She’d been there behind me all along.

“Go get Dad!” I told her. “Now!”

Then I reached out to touch Allyn’s shining hair, to press it slippery between my fingers like oil.

“Don’t go breaking your goddamn back showing off for my girls,” Mr. Vanderbeck joked with me three months later, laughing, summer thunder still booming out over steaming streets. He’d been doing a Hatha Yoga headstand, showing off for Allyn, when he’d fallen backwards across the coffee table and broken his back.

He winked at me next to the pool in his garage, then coughed, coughed again, unable to get his breath in his new wheelchair, then lit up another Lucky Strike from the one he’d been smoking and flicked the sparkling stub out into the alley.

“He’s always showing off, Beck,” Allyn’s middle sister Sherilyn said, rolling her eyes at me and laughing.

Allyn’s oldest sister Marilyn splashed water into my face and said, “He shows off the most to me.”

Since he’d gotten back from Baylor Hospital, Allen Vanderbeck—Beck, he insisted everyone call him, even his girls, to prevent a confusion of names, after Jeff Beck, his favorite guitarist in the Yardbirds—had let his crew cut and sideburns grow long, had pulled his hair straight back into a stumpy blond ponytail and grown a thick mustache, the first Fu Manchu I’d ever seen except for Charlie Chan’s, and everywhere he pushed himself around the pool in his chair, the joss-stick stink of patchouli oil and pot smoke followed him around like a napalmed jungle.

“Males are the dumbshits of the species,” he told his girls, leaning forward in his wheelchair outside the pool’s sheet-metal edge, straightening his stick legs like a ventriloquist dummy’s. He’d
moved his family to Dallas from Nacogdoches to be a Marine Reserve pilot and a new Assistant Professor of Anthropology at SMU till the accident happened, and he was always throwing around words like *ape shit* and *Australopithecus*. “Take your old man, for example. Take Travis here. You hurt yourself, son?”

Beck had just caught me high jumping from one of his barstools into the vinyl-lined pool, the sheet-metal sides still heaving from the high waves I’d just made, splashing half the water in the pool, it seemed, all over Beck’s smooth-troweled garage floor. I stood, a little shaky, the skin along my shoulders sting-tingling like Allyn tearing wisps of freckled sunburn off my back.

Beck had just caught me high jumping from one of his barstools into the vinyl-lined pool, the sheet-metal sides still heaving from the high waves I’d just made, splashing half the water in the pool, it seemed, all over Beck’s smooth-troweled garage floor. I stood, a little shaky, the skin along my shoulders sting-tingling like Allyn tearing wisps of freckled sunburn off my back.

I rubbed the knuckling ridges along my spine and told Beck I was all right.

“You sure?” he said and laughed.

Allyn hugged her goose-pimpled arms and laughed with him, wearing Maddie’s white one-piece bathing suit, tears in her chlorine-red eyes, her long, wet hair like seaweed skirting her tomboy’s hips in the pool.

Maddie shot me a blue-lipped grin, teeth chattering, shivering in Allyn’s mermaid bathing suit, her red freckles dark against her pale skin.

“Dumbshit,” Maddie said.

All that spring and summer—before RFK died in June, then Beck in late August; before my father and I went to war over Vietnam; before I got thrown through my windshield driving to visit Allyn in Nacogdoches; before sex, drugs and rock and roll—I’d spent a lot of my time in storm sewers with Beck’s girls, kissing them in their father’s dark garage while all my buddies were still talking about cooties, singing along with the Beatles and the Monkees and Simon and Garfunkel from my dead brother Jesse’s red record player in Maddie’s room while Beck lay on his broken back in traction in his Baylor Hospital bed, just down the hall from the hospital room where our brother Jesse’d bled to death.

That summer, almost every afternoon, rain fell in flashfloods, the wet-wool heat of the day piling up thunderboomers on the horizon like dark, distant Rockies, and I’d splashed with Beck’s girls through cold rain and warm, pollen-yellow curb water, swimming with them for hours in their garage pool, holding my breath underwater as they counted out the seconds and minutes, worried I’d drown, then coming up for breath and taking each of them one at a time—first Marilyn, then Sherilyn, then Allyn—into their father’s dark tool closet, shutting the hollow core door behind us and throwing my half-wet towel over their shoulders like Kirk Douglas throwing his robe over Gene Simmons in *Spartacus*. Then I warmed them each in my arms and gave them all one at a time long, shivering-wet movie star kisses in the dark.
I didn’t have the first idea what I was doing, only that I liked it—a lot—and Maddie didn’t.

“What the heck’re you doing in there?” she’d shout from the garage pool, then beat her fists against the tool closet door. “What’s so funny? I want to see.”

“Go away!” I’d shout, and, “Get lost!” Then I’d press Allyn wet against the closet door with a tightlipped kiss, to keep Maddie from shouldering her way in, and I’d shout, “Marco!” from the dark closet, and Marilyn and Sherilyn would shout back, “Polo!” laughing so hard they sometimes peed the pool.

Our fingers grew wrinkled and soft from being in the water every day—Maddie’s with a white spongy froth of dead skin along her nails where she chewed her fingers till they bled, like the jungle rot Beck said humping grunts got in their boots in Vietnam—but our bare feet grew calloused and tough from walking the rough streets, toe-popping black bubbles of sun-hot asphalt in the street cracks till, by the end of the summer, we could step out with our foot sole’s tender arches our father’s or Beck’s butts still smoking in the alley, and never once flinch.

Summer mornings while their father was still in the hospital in traction, Beck’s girls followed me around—Maddie just ahead of them, a troop of rowdy tomboys—to shoot off horned toads and yellow jackets in my Estes X-Ray rocket, or to explore the abandoned limestone quarry in the cotton fields north of our houses, where road crews scraped out black-clay roadbeds in yellow Cats for L. B. J’s big new freeway, where from crumbling chalk cliffs we chipped out whorling nautiluses and flint-sharp sharks’ teeth and watched tiny shad fan their fins above their shadows in the warm shallow water and held bacon strips tied out over tall mud chimneys along the creek beds, big claws reaching out and clamping shut, then crawdads dangling in the air, tails snapping, from frayed kite strings.

Allyn was fearless, the first to follow me into the storm sewers, yard-wide concrete pipes that mazed their ways under our subdivision’s streets, washing street-warm storm water under the half-built freeway to the creek. She ducked into the dark, narrow pipes behind me, back-humped and barefoot, then crawled bare-kneed in the algae-slick trickle water, her hands slapping concrete, the boom of her girl’s shrill laugh echoing down the dark beyond my flashlight beam.

When we’d crawled a long time on rough, red knees, the bright coin of sunlight showing Maddie’s head far off disappeared after a turn of pipe, and I stopped and sat, turned off my flashlight, my back against the cool curve of concrete, and I breathed in the clean scent of bubbling algae and silt, listened to the echoing drip of creek water like Allyn’s tongue echo-clacking in the dark next to me. Then I felt her warm peanut butter breath on my face as she kissed me, the smell of her sweet girl’s sweat like fresh-cut clover and wild onion along the creek banks.

Maddie’s shout ricocheted all around us like an echoing shot: “Hey, what’re you guys doing in there?” Then she was on her hands and knees, crawling fast to catch up with us, Marilyn and Sherilyn crawling right behind her, laughing and shouting, “Don’t go so fast,” and “Don’t leave us here in the dark!”
Deep into the pipes one overcast afternoon the first week of August, a turn and then a turn and then another turn under our subdivision’s streets, I stopped barefoot with them all bunching up behind me and turned off my flashlight, like the park ranger in the Big Room at Carlsbad Caverns the summer after Jesse died, and their shrill shrieks pierced the pipes, swirling the air like the smoky column of bats rising from the mouth of the cave at dusk.

I covered my ears and laughed just as I stepped forward barefoot into the sharp, arcing curve of a broken coke bottle bottom. The glass cut up into my hard-calloused heel, all the way up to bone. Feeling lightheaded and sick, I fell back against the curve of pipe, fumbling my flashlight on, then watched the sewer water bloom red behind me, Maddie and Marilyn and Sherilyn all horror-show shrieking in my ears.

“Stop it!” I shouted. Then I turned up the bottom of my foot and peeled back the calloused flap of heel skin and saw white bone, a brimming deep gash that spilled blood into my lap, and I almost puked as I pulled my t-shirt over my head and tight-tied it around my foot.

“Can’t walk,” I said, feeling like I’d pass out, gulping air like a carp on a muddy bank, a taste like silty creek water gone coppery at the back of my throat. I handed the flashlight over to Maddie and said, “Go get Dad. Now!”

She stared at the flashlight a long time, the only one we’d brought with us. “Dumb shit.”

Then she tugged at Allyn’s hand and said, “Let’s go!”

“Go on,” I told Allyn, but she jerked her hand from Maddie’s and held mine instead. Maddie scowled at us both, then tight-turned in the pipe without a word and crawled off in a huff, Sherilyn and Marilyn shouting behind her, “Slow down, will you?” and “Don’t leave us, Maddie!” in the retreating halo of light.

Allyn sat there with me a long time—forty-five minutes, an hour—waiting, nothing but the sound of her breathing and mine in the Carlsbad dark.

“My dad’s going to kill me,” I whispered, “if I don’t bleed to death first,” and Allyn laughed in that strange way she had when her father’d fallen backwards from a headstand and broken his back showing off for her. She reached out in the dark to touch my face, feeling around my cheeks and eyes and chin, then, finding my mouth, kissed me, the corners of her mouth upturned in the dark with that same strange smile she’d had when she’d laughed so strangely, the soft, wet insides of her lips partly parted so that I felt an electric charge like static surging through me, the hairs along my arms and legs tipping up till I was shivering, and then, just then, the faint, far-off boom of thunder echoing all around us, cracks of electric light splitting purple anvils piled up high in the sky outside.

“No,” I whispered, understanding too late, the damp hissing coolness of a hard summer rain slow-rising in the pipes around us.

Shirtless in the damp rush of air, I shivered in a faint—I’d lost a lot of blood—and when the water rose, swift enough to whisk away the t-shirt I’d wrapped around my foot, I pulled at Allyn’s hand and said, “Let’s get out of here.”

The street-warm rainwater rose fast, cold, then colder, up around our ankles and knees and thighs as I crawled forward ahead of her, feeling my way through the pipes. I made a blind turn and then another, trying to remember which way, left or right, then stopped at the T of a wider pipe ahead, shuddering in the dark rush of air, lightheaded from losing so much blood draining from my numbing blue foot, the water in the pipe ahead roaring past us like a subway train.

“Turn around!” I shouted. “Must’ve made a wrong turn.”
Then I felt Allyn’s icy palm on my bare back, as water rose up around our waists, and I lost my balance, tumbling forward into the rushing water ahead, gasping as the cold current pulled me under, till I’d lost my grip on her hand and she was gone.

I rolled over onto my head and then onto my back into the tumbling rush of water, coughing as I came up, my bare hands scruffing fingernails across the rough pipes as I tried to get a handhold, tried to keep my head up, riding the swift current up one side of the pipe, then up the other, like the logjam’s fiberglass chute at Six Flags over Texas.

The moment I spilled out of the pipe into the roiling, muddy creek, my father was standing there, wading up to his chest against the current and grabbing me by the back of my cutoffs, fighting his way back with me to the slick, slate-gray bank.

His white shirt was soaked to his chest, shoulders and back, his short red hair plastered down to his forehead. “Where’s the girl?” he shouted, spitting a spray of rain into my eyes, shaking me hard by the shoulders as hail pellets pierced the skin of my back like ice needles.

I fell into a fit of coughing and glanced up the creek bank to see Maddie standing there in the rain next to my father’s truck, holding an umbrella up over Beck, his wet, gray dog Garçon shivering in his lap, his wheelchair mired to its wheel rims in muck.

“Where the hell is she?” my father shouted at me again, knuckle-knocking the top of my skull—a loud *thock* that echoed down the sewer tunnel like a flute of hollow bone breaking—and I said, “I don’t know,” shivering hard and coughing, my jaw-locked words chatter-trapped between clamped teeth.

My father pulled me hard to him and held me.

“Jesus, son, thought you were lost,” he said all of a sudden, coughing, choking. “Another son lost.” And he held me so hard to his chest I passed out in his arms.

“Allyn?” I said, waking bolt upright to the shrill of sirens from our couch, my father sitting next to me and shaking me awake, six or so Dallas cops and firemen and a city engineer all pacing around our living room and Beck’s muddy wheelchair like expectant fathers. Blue-red lights flashed the window shades of my parents’ green-shuttered rental house, and I whispered, “Is she—?” then stopped myself short when I saw the dead cold blue of my father’s bloodshot eyes.

He pulled me off the couch by the wrists and said, “What the hell were you thinking?” and I came down hard on a throbbing heel, which my mother’d tight-wrapped up to my ankle in white gauze and tape and Ace bandages. “Were you thinking at all?” my father said. “Don’t you have any brains?”

A sharp headache pulsed behind eyes and I put my hands on my knees a moment, lightheaded, my elbows and back and the tips of my fingers raw-scraped and bruised, two of my fingernails peeled back, and when my father shook me again by the shoulder I tried not to flinch or limp. Then Beck from his wheelchair told my father, “Ease up on the kid, will you?” and my father told him, “For chrissakes, man, this boy’s just drowned your girl!” and then my mother shouted at
my father, “Deuce!” and my father pinch-gripped me by the backs of my arms and lifted me straight up off my feet, carrying me like a stiff-armed mannequin into our kitchen.

Just as we passed Maddie sitting in my father’s maroon Naugahyde La-Z-Boy with the cigarette burns on the arms, she grinned up at me, Beck’s grizzled dog Garçon wrapped in an old towel on her lap.

“Dumb shit,” she whispered between her teeth.

In the kitchen, a city engineer rolled out blue-lined drawings, smoothed them out over the breakfast table, leaned over them and pointed. “We’re here. And you found your son where?”

My father pointed to a dark blue sewer line intersecting the creek and the long stretch of freeway construction along L. B. J. “Here.” An architect, his long-dead father a civil engineer, my father told the city engineer he’d been teaching me how to read blueprints since I was ten, grooming me for the profession. He jostled me by the elbow. “Pay attention, Travis, will you?”

But I was still staring off, still remembering what he’d just said about drowning Beck’s girl—remembering a Mexican girl I’d seen on TV weeks before, face down in muddy water, her long black hair floating out around her head like a cuttlefish spouting black ink, her arms and legs and neck broken at strange angles, her bones pulverized, tangled into the twisted roots of a giant cottonwood after a south Texas flashflood along the Rio Grande.

My father traced the blue lines crisscrossing the civil engineering prints and pointed. “The storm sewer splits off here, here and here. Which way’d you go? Travis?”

Beck had just rolled his too-wide wheelchair into the kitchen, into the too-narrow doorframe, and he sat there wheel-stuck between the lintels, mud-rows of tire tracks trailing in from the living room, and every man in the room stood, stunned, as Beck’s lovely wife Lynn pushed, then pulled, the chair handles behind Beck, in and out of the kitchen, wheel-scraping chips of paint screeching from the wood, till my father stopped staring like the rest of them and ground his teeth and pulled the chair unstuck. Then Beck and his wife were both there in the too-crowded kitchen with the rest of us.

Beck glanced at me, his eyes sad, like he’d already forgiven me somehow, even if the worst had happened, but Mrs. Vanderbeck wouldn’t look at me, or couldn’t. The picture of Allyn grown up—or never, another child lost—Lynn Vanderbeck had the same slender nose as Allyn’s, the same heart-shaped cartilage at the tip of her nose, the same green-flecked blue eyes, clear and dry and unblinking as a rainbow trout’s lying on a river rock in the sun, with big glassy pupils like peepholes and the same magazine model face as Allyn’s but slightly askew so that in the mirror she’d look like a distant cousin to herself, maybe, or someone almost ugly, not a woman so stunning you had to force yourself not to stare and ached for days remembering.

“Travis,” my father said.

I pointed at two intersecting blue lines. “Here, Dad,” I said. “Or...here. I...can’t remember.”

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Done with me, my father pushed me away from the table as the police and firemen crowded in, and I backed away as the city engineer discussed rescue options or, worse, ways to retrieve a body tangled in a logjam at a turn of swollen creek or storm-sewer pipe. Just then, as I was turning out of the kitchen, unable to listen anymore, I saw her outside the kitchen window, splash-kicking barefoot through curb gutters, police cars, an ambulance and a fire engine flashing blue and red lights in the afternoon sun, all stalled in the middle of the street.

“Dad?” I said, pointing. “She’s there, right there.” The others didn’t see her, didn’t seem to hear me, and my father paid me no attention at all, unofficial captain of his own mad mission to rescue another lost child.

Allyn turned up our sidewalk, her feet slapping wet footprints onto concrete, already drying as she stepped out of them into the sun.

When I opened our front door, she looked up at me, smiling, and blinked.

“There you are,” she said. “I was looking for you.”
Generating Mind, Editing Mind, Sequencing Mind
in Linear and Modular Design

The very idea of sharing my work before it’s finished has almost always left me, in Madison Smartt Bell’s words, “paralyzed by self-consciousness,” yet here I am sharing part of my novel-in-progress, Nacogdoches, with the readers of Segue, and glad to do it (15). Like Bell and many other writers, I teach in a creative writing program—the only bilingual MFA program of its kind in the world—and, whether the writing is in English or Spanish, I still focus on three main things in my workshops: 1. Writing Process, 2. Craft Consciousness and 3. Narrative Structure. As Bell argues, though, each of these writing abilities can often be in conflict with the other, requiring the training of three very different parts of the creative mind and a sense of balance between the three. For the sake of this discussion, I’ll call these: Generating Mind, Editing Mind and Sequencing Mind.

Over the years, I’ve learned that if I teach any of these three things without some sense of balance—putting too much emphasis on craft consciousness at the expense of writing process, for example—my classes lose their balance, and my students become blocked, stuck. Because of workshops’ “inherent tendencies . . . to enforce conformity, no matter who is leading them” (7), Bell writes, the “whole paradigm” of writing workshops “is a recipe for writer’s block” (9). “Consciousness,” he says, “is the great inhibitor” (21).

The last thing I want to do is to make writing harder for my students than it already is. The trick, I’ve learned, is trying to help students become more conscious of craft and narrative structure without also making them so self-conscious that they get stuck or stop writing altogether. At times, it’s a difficult, almost impossible balance to strike.

A few years ago, novelist and short-story writer Richard Bausch told me a story: In the first writing workshop he ever attended as a young man, he submitted the first two chapters of a novel he’d been working on feverishly for months. In the short span of an hour, the class and workshop director had dismissed his work, for whatever petty reasons, as a “mess,” and Bausch left the workshop and never came back, left the writing program altogether and never worked on the novel again.

Of course, Bausch kept on writing anyway and has since become one of the greatest living writers of the contemporary American short story and novel—and, I hear, he’s an excellent workshop director, especially for that difficult-to-teach class known as The Novel Workshop. Even so, ever since Bausch told me this story, I’ve been haunted by a question: How many potentially gifted writers in writing programs have done the same thing as Bausch did, however briefly, giving up on their writing and never returning to it again, never overcoming the sometimes-petty comments of a workshop that focuses only on craft without regard to the mystery, joy and spontaneous playfulness of writing alone, for its own sake alone, in one’s own sacred space?

“The great defect of craft-driven [writing] programs,” Bell writes, “is that they ignore the writer’s inner process,” a process which, he insists, in a seemingly impossible contradiction, “should in fact remain private” (9-10). Why then, despite all the faults of writing workshops, do we still submit our work—moving it from the private, playful, even sacred space of the imagination and dream to the public sphere of critical analysis? The reason is simple, and no less true for beginning writers than for writers who’ve had many publications and successes: To save ourselves time and trouble when we can’t see our work clearly.
Simply put, we need some narrative distance, some other person’s point of view—even if that person isn’t trained as a writer—to help us see the underlying patterns we’ve laid down from writing processes that have often remained hidden from us, deeply unconscious and mysterious. The more a writing workshop or writing program trains our critical sensibilities, the theory goes, the better we can see, explore and develop for ourselves the underlying patterns of our own work with a clearer sense of order and artistic symmetry. More important, perhaps, we all need to save time, and workshops can help us see the unconscious patterns in our work sooner, may even show us patterns that we may never have recognized until many years later, when we’re older and allegedly wiser. The whole workshop process, then, is a trade-off, especially if we can’t or won’t see our own unconscious patterns until we’re ready, and for some of us that may be later rather than sooner than workshops—with their sometimes brute-seeming methods—will allow.

I’ve said a good deal more about the problems of writing workshops in my Poets & Writers essay, “Toward a More Open, Democratic Workshop,” and a good deal more about my own baffling, even maddening, writing process elsewhere in my article, “The ‘Last’ Draft,” (published in shorter form in Novel and Short Story Writers’ Market 2002), but I want to focus here on the two modes of narrative design, Linear and Modular, which Madison Smartt Bell describes in Narrative Design, especially as they relate to Generating Mind, Editing Mind and Sequencing Mind. And I want to invite Segue readers to help me with a practical decision I’m trying to make about the structure of my novel in progress: Should its structure be linear or modular? It’s mostly a rhetorical question, since I’ll end up doing what I want to do in the end anyway, but I’m hoping it will generate some interesting discussion.

When children play in their rooms, they aren’t conscious of the patterns of stories they’re enacting or the unconscious working out of their own unresolved inner conflicts: the dramatic love triangle between Barbie, Skipper and Ken; G. I. Joe and Spiderman’s unending battle with Darth Vader and the Transformers. They only know they’re lost in time and having a good time—like writers when the writing is going well, when they write for hours on end until they stop, realizing it’s three in the morning and the dog has been scratching at the back door for hours to go outside and pee.

When parents open their children’s doors, intruding upon their sacred play-spaces and stories, saying, “How many times do I have to tell you to clean up your room!” these parents see only chaos—things out of place—not recognizing that the tangle of half-naked dolls in suggestive embraces or the dismembered superhero parts scattered all across the bedroom carpet all represent a kind of order, parts of complex narratives their children use to understand the chaos of their own world and the baffling contradictions of adults like their parents. Parents only know that they want order, now, everything in its proper place, and they have their own ideas about what that order should be—like workshop directors and students who think the stories they’re critiquing should
only be in strict chronological order, no flashbacks, no digressions about dogs needing to pee, please.

Children often live in *Generating Mind*, spending most of their waking hours spinning out fantastical stories that surprise, disturb, amaze, frustrate and terrify their parents. Children, being unconscious most of the time, are natural story-tellers in this respect, and that lack of self-consciousness often makes their stories both strange and magical.

Parents, especially controlling and unimaginative parents who’ve lost touch with their own sense of playfulness, often live in *Editing Mind* and *Sequencing Mind*, so distracted by the chaos in their lives, the concerns of making a living and paying bills, that they want order now, dismissing their children’s stories as the products of over-active imaginations, fabrications or outright lies, discouraging the free-flow of their children’s imaginations whether they mean to or not.

A bumper sticker I saw once in Peterborough, New Hampshire, sums up the problem here nicely: “Those who have given up their dreams will discourage you in your own.” Amen to that, brothers and sisters.

The conflict between children and parents reflects in subtle ways the inner conflicts of writers who generate scenes and stories before they craft and sequence them. For some writers, there’s no conflict at all: they simply write linear stories and don’t think about it, period, or they use of modular constructions—like collages—and don’t care if events, scenes (or digressions about dogs needing to pee) follow any particular order except that they seem to fit together unconsciously at the time.

I envy writers who can do either and feel no conflict at all.

Like many writers I know, I don’t write strictly linear narratives. Such traditional narratives, Bell writes are, “timebound and sequential…the time vector run[ning] out of the past toward the future [and] follow[ing] it in a sequence of causes and effects, like a string of dominoes falling” (29-30).

Perhaps because I began my career as a short-story writer, I often write linear scenes and chapters—especially when I’m writing a novel like the one I’m working on now—but I tend to write different chapters out of sequence, in a modular order, “something like a jumble of unsnapped Legos” as Bell puts it (213). In the case of modular design, Bell writes, “the job of the artist” is “to assemble the work out of small component parts” like a “mosaicist, assembling fragments of glass and tile to form what can be understood, at a greater distance, as a coherent, shapely image” (213).

When I taught at the University of Alabama in the nineties, I often heard the story of a recent graduate, Tony Earley, and how he composed his remarkable story, “The Prophet from Jupiter.” Earley had written three different stories all with the same intersecting characters, yet none of the stories worked as independent stories for him or for the other students who critiqued his stories in workshop. Earley wanted them all to be part of one story, he told his workshop director, but he couldn’t figure out how to put them all together to make a coherent whole. One night late, after being stuck for months, the story goes, Earley woke up in an epiphanic Eureka moment and got out some old dull scissors and began cutting up his three stories, sentence by sentence, arranging into paragraphs one sentence from one story with another sentence from another story, on and on in sequence, like a giant jigsaw puzzle, until he’d finished around dawn, a huge mosaic of sentences covering his living room’s hard-wood floor like Fifth Avenue after a tickertape parade. He rewrote this jumble of scraps somehow, and somehow, miraculously, the three stories suddenly became one, greater than the sum of their parts, a brilliant, widely anthologized story.
To some degree all writers move back and forth between linear and modular designs. They have to generate material, then organize, sequence and craft it all into a coherent whole and in doing so have to find a balance between the child who plays in his room and the parent who helps clean up the awful mess. It’s a natural balance but one that takes persistence and patience, allowing the child to play and the parent to clean up the mess only at the right moments, the unconscious and conscious functions clearly accepting their roles and knowing when it’s time to butt out. For the linear designer of stories, the primary tools of coherence are chronological time and cause and effect; for the modular designer, the primary tools are image clusters and repeating patterns of meaningful similarity that aren’t at times consciously recognized until long after the writing is done. Both methods of narrative design can work well, and most writers do both, whether they like to admit it or not.

Along with a good many published stories, two unproduced screenplays and another novel in progress, I’ve been working on Nacogdoches for thirteen years now. The novel you’ll read from is about the Vanderbecks, a family of suicides from Nacogdoches, a small town in east Texas, and their relationships with the Truitts, a family of misfits who live across their alley in Dallas briefly the summer of 1969 and who continue to love them for thirty years, even as they disappear one by one by their own hands.

I wrote the first chapter you’ll read here in a much rougher draft, early in the summer of 1992. My sixteen-year-old escape-artist dog had just died in May, days after I’d split up with a beautiful woman and, like the novel I was trying to write, I was a complete mess. The rest of that summer, I wrote five more chapters at the Blue Mountain Center in the Adirondacks and the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, until one cool summer morning in August—blue sky and birch leaves ticking against my studio eaves, hermit thrushes singing serene, serene in their liquid silver voices just outside my window—when a dark demon descended behind my writing chair and whispered into my ear, “You made a wrong turn back in chapter one.”

At that moment, I realized I’d have to throw out everything I’d written that summer except the first chapter, and that chapter may not be any good either. I’d wasted an entire summer writing a novel that was going nowhere, I realized, and there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it. For two days, I was more depressed than I’ve ever been in my life, and then, on the third day, in a sudden word-fever that overtook me, I sat down and wrote the title story of my collection, Macauley’s Thumb, which would go on to win the Iowa Short Fiction Award the following year.

Nacogdoches is now completed through chapter 13, almost four-hundred well-polished pages, with at least another two-hundred pages to go.

The novel’s chapters are mostly linear, in fairly strict chronological order except for the occasional flashback, while the novel itself—as I’ve written it—is mostly modular in construction, shifting back and forth in time and place, tied together with recurring image clusters—doorways, for example, from which people are always greeting or saying goodbye to each other, running away
or returning, like the novel’s escape-artist dog, Who, who shows up, grinning, at the narrator Travis’s screened door after spending weeks of rolling in road kill.

This modular structure has undergone significant sequencing and reconstruction over the last ten years—at least eight organizational plans—and it’s kept me stuck from chapter to chapter as I’ve tried to figure out how to organize the terrible mess my Sequencing Mind thinks I’ve made. On the next page is the latest version of the map of the novel as I’ve conceived of it until just recently:
As you can see, the first three chapters set up the underlying modular structure: The novel begins in the present tense, the day after Christmas, 1988; then it shifts to the past tense, back to 1978, ten years earlier; then it shifts back again to 1968, another ten years earlier, also written in the past tense. The novel’s pattern then shifts back and forth between three separate and distinct linear timelines: an awful week in Nacogdoches, Texas the winter of 1988 (Story 1: the Present Action); four awful years, 1978-1981 (Story 2: Past Action); and four more awful years, 1968-1973 (Story 3: More Past Action), each of them interspersed with small moments of light, joy and, I hope, a little humor.

As I look at the structure again now, I get the feeling I first had when my nephew handed me a Rubik’s Cube and asked me to line all the same colors up in a perfect square on each side:

I panic.

What was I thinking when I wrote and organized the novel this way? I wonder. Was I out of my mind? And a part of me I don’t like much stands in the doorway yelling, “Clean up your damn room!”

Segue / 25
Three months ago, I sent my unfinished novel to an agent I’ve been wooing. She read it about a third of the way through, then sent me a short email: “The novel should begin with chapter three, don’t you think?” Obvious as it was, the idea had never occurred to me. At first, I dismissed the idea altogether as too easy. Then one day about a month ago, it occurred to me: Why bother with such a complex structure, especially when it’s driving me nuts? Why not rewrite the novel in straight linear order, beginning in 1968 and ending in 1988?

The idea makes a lot of sense. How many times have I suggested to students that the best writing path is usually toward elegant simplicity? How many times have I suggested that a complex structure may confuse a reader more than necessary and may not necessarily translate into a complex and interesting story? Could these questions be true of my own novel?

I don’t know. Honestly, I don’t.

That’s why I’m asking Seque readers to take a look at Nacogdoches, chapters one and three (the last recently published in Glimmer Train Stories), and tell me what they think:

1. Should I begin the novel with chapter one or chapter three? Which is the more compelling beginning?
2. While it’s difficult to make such a judgment based upon only two chapters, should I abandon a complex modular structure for a linear one?

I’m not sure there’s a right or wrong answer to these questions. They are, as I’ve stated, rhetorical, meant more to provoke fruitful discussions about process, craft and form, linear and modular structure than to arrive at any clear-cut answers, but perhaps they might lead to a few breakthroughs for me and any other writer who may be struggling with similar issues. And who knows? The whole exercise might be fun.


Many thanks to Eric Melbye and Seque for inviting me to be the featured author for this issue and to all of you who might join in on the discussion. Anyone who’d like to talk more may contact me at lex@utep.edu or leave posts in my guest book at www.lexwilliford.com. I look forward to any and all questions, comments and suggestions.

—Lex Williford

Works Cited

Once in a field
(an antic)

Once in a field was a landscape of corn in all directions ears, nipples, silk, skin, pale yellows, tans, and greens. The backdrop was a child blue sky, vacant and dry.

In the midst of the landscape loomed the Moby Dick of all scarecrows, tall as a telephone tower, with dime store button eyes and a snow white bridal gown. Its eyes were not uniform. The lavender eye was a heart-shaped little girl’s button, the green eye elliptical with four holes.

The scarecrow’s mouth was red velvet and only half a mouth—one lip with its corners turned down—an aperture constructed by a half-hearted parent. Its hands were pitchforks with wedding confetti dangling from their fingers.

Once upon a scarecrow was a hat of feathers, feathers of sparrows and robins, hawks, blue jays, budgies and cockatiels, feathers pointing in all directions. The hat resembled a weather vane, the weathers reporting:

No rain. No rain yesterday, today or tomorrow. No rain. No wind.
No clouds. No no. No yes. Yesterday, tomorrow and today.

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Once a crow stood erect at the hem of the field. It was less than a foot tall, even with good posture, looked behind itself with its red ballpoint eyes, asked itself questions, darted its head north west south east like a windup toy. It opened its mouth frequently, emitting nothing in the manner that birds exercise their mouths. Infrequently, the crow would declare: caw, caw.

The crow turned its head in the direction of the scarecrow, and asked:

Why no weather worth a tale?

Once upon a crow were polished feathers tidy as the bottom sheet on an army cot. But as it watched a robin alight on the scarecrow’s hat, the crow’s feathers trembled. As the robin pecked at the feathers in the hat, the crow began to pace up and down.

Then it came to pass. The scarecrow emitted an abrupt black ache, like the startling complaint of a thunder god. Grabbing the robin with one of its fork hands, the scarecrow thrust it into its mouth and the bird was gone. The scarecrow burped, spraying flying red flowers all over the field.
The crow hopped up and down, flapping its wings and shrieking. It started to hop into the cornfield. *Hop hop.* Very slowly, the scarecrow began to turn its head in the crow's direction. The crow stopped, spread its wings as though to take flight, but could not move.

The scarecrow screamed at the crow in its thunder god voice and reached down to grab it, as the bird's heart raced like a sick clock in its chest. The fingers of the fork curled around the crow, lifted it up to the scarecrow's lip. *You are my soul-mate,* the scarecrow cooed gruffly but softly, with its two crazy buttons moist with dew, examined the crow.

Then then then . . . the corners of the scarecrow's lip curled upward as it planted a kiss on the pate of the crow.

And then the pate sprouted dandelion-like puffs of black and straw colored broken hearts.

Those hearts hitched a ride with the first swift breeze that chanced, and landed in the cornfield, where they grow taller than telephone towers, reaching for crows with their crooked half-lips. That is what they do happily ever.
Magnolia Zone

But this would be dreaming wouldn't it — arranging these drafts it might take decades working on — and adding light to light — while the twins enjoy the block-ringed fire-pit — requiring what from us — that the cottage now should serve another generation — with time enough and light — to recognize mistakes and find the planet / to bring the doomed plane right / aligned to dreams and light and yet again to landing.

America mourns Ray Charles dead. And traffic creeps — leaving us here to mulch the lilies and new ground-cover / to edge and pull up dandelions — as the traffic creeps — discovering the breakdowns ever only lovers idling / or party loyalists — pounding their party nonsense into ditch-lines — with fireworks ahead / fire-walks and piercings — playlists like prophecies patience sorts this last cool weekend before summer.

Depending as much as I on Your hands at my shoulders / on skills as yet unlearned — wasn't our summertime enough — and album versions of some cuts — when
the sun-warmed pebbles —
orphaned by the star-fields — mapped
the magnolia zone
and dreams were just beginning —
when heat and paths
and thunderheads shared meaning —
wasn't the summertime enough —
when the kids
thumb rides kids spent
their good luck
getting home from —
marked
by their dreams
no less

and hours wearing out their court-shoes —
names they were sure
to leave unspoken before panels — and
no prisons but their own
/ no wind-mounted dead nor shames
for what they've added
to sad pictures / no agents of pain
( we think ) — in
coincidental daylight — accounting
for commitments — for
adventures
ahead — in rain-shared news
and in the details —
bringing the ghosts around —
hung-out no less
than these scarecrows
before
the show
trials!

Segue / 30
Likes

With snow still possible the president retreats to / emerges lost from a long-forbidden garden — pushes a fruit so far / party loyalists so far — lightening belts / butt packs — welcoming tones encryption re-displays as innocence. What would they say for us — for this news the light-house shares with waves below and dolphins — say for Bernard Jones / Bobby Jay / for Jimmy Merchant / Cleveland Still or Richard Blandon's lyrics — restoring worlds yet — voices on porch spans / instruments — on school steps here now! trembling with kisses — urged — bit by bit — beneath night skies — against that fiercest barbecue — beyond the likes of Washington / of Crawford — where a woman might be painting in the outskirts — and a man — to stretch the thought — would be insisting on his versions — until the barbecue's shut down — the smoke's blown off through smokey capitals — well beyond the reach of heads of State and audits. So groomed — so fit to earn his living in dishonor — he smiles wide-away through (stupefying) deficits — lamenting his dream again — as if it were only sleeplessness — this news from Abu Ghraib — only tarot readings in the war-rooms — a cabinet sleep-over — begun in olive light — with saxophones or mountain fiddles — were only cloudburst say — with holidays ahead — and a woman hurrying indoors with canvases — drawing on stuff she needs to dust off just to listen. How could he not stop smiling — revealing what's become of the most spiritual intentions — certain sharia was never so sweet as his commanding — and searching the limbs he squints
to discover birdlight in — this barbered
gent — believing in readers
    everywhere — and large birds —
riding surely on the thermals —
    above the house of fears
/ the house of modesty?
A Horsefly Landed on the Jamb

Of the front door of my office building,
For a moment it is the center of the world.

The horsefly of horseflies, an angel kicked out Heaven’s stables
And cleaning itself on this rotten peeling oaken deep red jamb.

But no devil ever washed itself this way, wiping its filthy legs
Across the block & tackle of its jaws, getting one stuck

Behind its bulging right eye that’s deep & slick as a soup plate.
Its rice paper wings shutter like doors to a whoreshouse:

E quelle svolazzava, sì che tre venti si movean da ello,
Quindi Cocito tutto s’aggelava…
This November

Trees go underground. They carry blossoms
And baskets of light to the dead that tangle like roots in love

Beneath this park where I read Ion Caraion on my lunch break
Pausing only to give a cigarette to a lonely man on a bicycle
Because I can do nothing for the dead.

He sits on a bench & smokes, newspaper spread around him.
The trees will do nothing for him until he redeems himself
By breaking out in blossom.

Pigeons cross the park in a hurry: a flock of young priests.

The trees spend all winter reading scripture
And in the spring offer us only verses we need.
Cycling to Work Past K & C Used Autos, I Think of Basho

1973 Buick Century, moth mullein & bottle grass grasping
At its grille—what becomes of an engineer’s dream

Of a Buick Century, its chassis rusting into soil,
Its paint job bleached from eggshell blue to the gunmetal sky

That threatens rain, so I crank my chain through gears
And wonder why that Century is not good enough to be

A tricked-out, souped-up summer cruiser kids
Race down Erie & Salina? Its full-page, four-color ad

Boasted AccuDrive, Inner Fenders, a Tube-Mounted Choke
And Solenoid-Actuated Throttle Stop. Things fade:

Shadows, paint, rhetoric, the future so goddam relentless
Nobody has time to celebrate what's achieved or calibrate

The dream, its remains the forms it borrowed: the crow
Perched on its fin, leaves stuffed like bills in its wipers.
Ann Neuser Lederer

January Thaw

The show runs reruns in sepia:
rust scrub, a dun colored river bed, mostly mud.

This is your past, it tries to mutter,
raising its arms above its head,
knotted the bedsheets beside it
into a gnarled, tumorous lump.

The sepia show is an orange tinged residue,
or aura from Elijah, with spew from his fiery chariot.

Someone may try to stop this simmer,
crushing a sedative into a paste with honey,
jamming the sticky mess
under its tongue.

The past will try to protest, cry out its innocence.

A simple ceremony ensues.

A mummified monk is rolled by his brothers onto a linen shroud.
A strap of cloth is fixed beneath his jaw, tied at the top of his head.
He is lowered into the hole.
That is all.

How beautiful, said the woman I told this to. I had never really seen it, except on TV. But we both had been to the place, and abhorred but were drawn by the thought of burning our mothers.
We went outside to sniff and hover in the January thaw.
The low sun was barely warm, but enough to tickle our fancy.
We sat on a bench made rickety by woodbee drillings.
The cushion remained in storage.
We sat on the rusted, sagging springs.

Slowly, the bed of ashes rises,
    snakes and snarls
in the foggy mist.
Equal Day

He is stupid She says He will not hear Not
For I am not overburdened with sorrow
he will hear I am overburdened with sorrow

Therefore say She says in her accent laden
with enthusiasm Her wide smile that
surprisingly does not make me feel suspicious
I am filled with joy and so I repeat

I am happy in my absences in my new found
freedoms in my airy ovaries
like birds' bones emptied for easy flight
and my jealousies now silly also flown
I am happy in my absences where my poem
returning has been born

He is stupid the subconscious here she pauses
first and whispers first the word in Russian
then she translates Then she translates
for today is Equinox When I say Spring
she translates Equal Day not Equal Night
Burt Kimmelman

The Waves

When you told me, “I’m dying — it’s all right,” I dreamed I was treading water in the ocean, no land in sight, and a great ship, its sails jutting into the night sky, was making its slow way toward the far horizon. The world of the dead must be like that realm where dreams hold the living, where we come and go, breathing stars. If I could rouse you from that place I would tell you how I swam, swam to shore, exhausted, where I hear your voice in the waves.
Hwabyung Fragments

1.

A scientist, now fallen, once promised to clone me. You heard about it on the evening news. “The tiger is a holy creature,” he said, “and I will save it from extinction.”

That night I sprang to life from a picture book, the one your father brought from Korea when you were four. My eyes were crossed, my fangs exposed, my fur a puzzle of circles and streaks. My body filled most of the sky. Floating atop Paektusan, the white-headed mountain where your ancestors were born, I cast a shadow two hundred and fifty kilometers long. “D-M-Z,” I sang in your mother’s voice. “Famine. Bomb. Ceasefire. Ecological paradise.” The song was a message, its words in a language you forgot as a child. I danced like a flag, my shadow twisting and turning across a peninsula where once I roamed freely…

…Then you disappeared into the world of consciousness and America and time. And I was turned back into what I had been before you dreamt of me: a giant bell asleep at the bottom of the East Sea.

2.

…original … not two, as they …
…but one in number … long ago …
… whose unity … a sphere, as if …
… the sun itself … and thus reform …

… bisection, they … to heal their wounds…
… memorial … each other’s arms …
… entwined within … from dying of …
… such yearning, that … grow into one…

Segue / 39
3.

In waters just south of the demilitarized zone, South Korean fishermen discovered a submarine tangled in their nets.

The vessel was towed and docked to the southern naval port of Donghae. When navy frogmen pounded on the hull with hammers, there was no response from inside the craft. They also used sonar scans, but these too revealed no signs of life.

A team of soldiers cut the hatch open, expecting to find the corpses of North Korean crewmembers. “Suicide pact,” they thought. “Most likely the men shot themselves…” But instead they found a chamber piled with dead magnolia flowers. The flowers were brittle and smelled of dust. Their petals crumbled in the soldiers’ hands. Buried underneath the desiccated leaves, blossoms, and broken stems lay a wilderness of animal bones.

The bones were sent to a laboratory in Seoul. Over the following weeks, scientists reconstructed the skeletons of a white-naped crane, a yellow bittern, a whooper swan, a ruddy-breasted drake, a roe deer, a gray-faced green woodpecker, a black bear, a black-capped kingfisher, a golden eagle, a musk deer, and a scaly-sided merganser. There was exactly one of each species. Analyses of the bones revealed that the animals had died of unbearable sadness.

4.

During the winter of 1950, my father and his parents were forced to leave their hometown. For weeks they walked. They were part of a crowd of refugees who had nowhere to go but south.

One day, by pure chance, they ran into my father’s elder brother. He had strayed from his National Guard unit. He begged his father to let him join the rest of the family. My grandfather longed to protect his eldest son. But he could not break the law. Reluctantly he urged his son to find his unit. So my father’s brother returned to the battlefront.

The family spent several months in the southernmost end of South Korea. In the spring, they were able to return to their hometown. There they waited for my father’s brother.

Finally he arrived. He was gravely ill. Army generals had stolen much of the rice that was meant for the soldiers. Nothing could save him.

Afterwards my grandfather was not the same. He did not sleep. He stopped leaving the house. He wrote an elegy that did not end. Eventually the elegy killed him.
5.
If twins coalesce in the womb at a very early stage of development, what results is a single organism whose body parts contain dissimilar sets of chromosomes. The skin, for example, may be dappled. Or the color of each eye may be unique. Or some strands of hair may be blond while other strands of hair may be red. Or the heart may consist of cells genetically distinct from the cells that constitute the brain. It is said that such an organism will feel as though something is missing from itself. It is said that such an organism will spend the rest of its life aching to reunite with what used to be its other half.

6.

Despite
the symmetry
our bodies share
—birthmark, thumbprint,
chromosomes—
the two of us are not alike.
I am here. You are there.

Diaphanous, your flesh—what flesh remains—betray a foreign world:
the grass that you are forced to eat;
deserted cage of ribs; a mesh
of hunger-stricken nerves and veins;
a uterus that never bleeds.

...Why can’t I dig a passage
through the earth from where I live
to where you’re only just surviving.

Why can’t I feed you.
Why can’t my fasting bring you sustenance.
Why won’t the famine die.
7.

Eat me alive
Eat me entire
Eat me until we are one
Enough's Enough: And Other Questions of Life

Then what exactly does he do? Are you one of those columnists who’s always writing about how funny it was the time the basement got flooded during Christmas dinner? What does your husband usually write about? Aren’t you ashamed of making a living that way? Then I take it, sir, that you’d like to redeem your exclusive, limited-time offer to take advantage of this special award? Do you collect anything yourself? Yes? Hello? Hello? Remember when Australia was a synonym for boredom? But how about someone old enough to remember that for decades Australia was spoken of in a kindly way only by elderly American tourists who treasured it as the farthest away clean place where people spoke English? How about someone who managed to go for thirty years without mentioning Australia at all unless he happened to fall into a conversation about relative per capita beer consumption among postindustrial nations? But how about the person of respectable age who spent twenty years under the impression that the capital of China—the very same Chinese city with the very same Chinese name—was called Peking? Why? From where? Whatsamatter, pops, elevator service not going all the way to the top floor these days? Don’t you see? Did you know you’re not the only Circulation Fulfillment person in Boulder, Colorado? Doesn’t it seem to you that the chintz on that armchair is getting a bit tatty? How long have we had that couch? What do you think of that couch? Couch? See? Couch? Which couch are we talking about? You don’t see how threadbare it’s getting on the arms? Arms? Threadbare? The car? What’s wrong with the car? But how can you claim to be hounded by one guy who’s not even fully awake? But why should he care? What other product, for instance, could get away with giving itself a name as silly as RX-7-SE? How about Tab? Well then, how about Diet Coke? What do you think of Nigel? I don’t suppose you’d be in favor of Duane, would you? So why are you just talking about boys’ names? You don’t think so? Then how do you explain the fact that you’ve never heard any television weathermen talk about a hot front moving up from Mexico? See how easy everything is? You don’t think so? Then tell me this: where does the weather start? You think that the weatherman there doesn’t get up in front of his map on the ten o’clock news and talk about the high pressure system coming from somewhere else? Why not? If there’s no such thing as a cold front, how come my socks are frozen to my feet? If there wasn’t any such thing as acid rain, after all, what was it that Michael Deaver was taking a lot of money from the Canadian government to lobby for controls on? So you’re thinking that by shoveling money in Deaver’s direction the Canadians finally got as hip as they’re always telling us Toronto is—right? And what was the name of the crowd lobbying against control of acid rain? You didn’t guess that? What’s so dumb about that? Let me see, was it thirty-five cents, or maybe half a buck? By the way, did you fellows know that a hummingbird weighs as much as a quarter? Do you think a hummingbird also weighs the same as two dimes and a nickel? But then she asked a question of her own: How do they weigh a hummingbird? And what do I find

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when I get back? Will there ever be a time when I’m able to leave this country with some peace of mind? Do you really want to go through that business about Gary Hart’s real name and Gary Hart’s real age again? Do you? Which reminds me: What’s this business about candidates having to prove how sensitive they are by whining about the tough life their granny led on the prairie when there was no such thing as fabric softener? What’s this about confessing that they used to take all the chocolate Neccos before offering the package to their little brother? What did I tell you before I left? Will anything ever get done right around here when I’m gone? What did I tell you before I left? Why don’t you people ever listen? Moderate? Did someone say something about a moderate? What? Why does everybody think it’s Peoria? See what I mean? How can you not even know about a city that’s bigger than the biggest city in four other states, not to speak of South Dakota? Is it bigger than Sioux City? Does everybody where you’re from talk funny? The Bartender slid by and said in a tone of studied casualness, ‘I don’t suppose it could be Kankakee?’ Where the hell is Rockford? What about the reports that your own economic adviser got his degree in advanced molecular voodoo, Mr. President? Do you? Simple, isn’t it? And what will the political pundits do on the morning after the Iowa caucuses? I mean, what else does he have to wonder about, except for whether the dominance of purple in the garbage bag he’s about to take out is going to make it clash with the red and orange bag that the sanitation men still haven’t picked up from yesterday? Simple isn’t it? But what about foreign affairs? You’re going to write a column about that? How are you today? Also, if our diplomatic strategy is constrained by the limitations of the President’s ability to pronounce foreign names, wouldn’t our interests in the South Pacific suffer severely if the King of Tonga, on an official White House visit, suddenly said to Reagan, ‘Just call me Taufa’ahua Tupou IV?’ just call me Taufa’ahua Tupou IV? What if the king is known to his friends as Buzzy? How did Reagan know that Prime Minister Nakasone should be called Yasu rather than Yasuhiro, which is what a Shearson Lehman salesman who phoned him at dinnertime in Tokyo to discuss IRA opportunities would have called him? Listen, Peter, I was wondering if you fellows drill in that first name approach in your Executive Pest Training Program, or is that the sort of thing they teach at Harvard Business School? Is the fact that Yasuhiro Nakasone is known as Yasu the sort of thing that the CIA finds out? If our side knows that Mikhail Gorbachev’s closest friends call him by and old law school nickname—Motormouth—is that what President Reagan should call him? How are you today? Did President Reagan keep his hand on his wallet? Daddy, do you think that while you talk you could pour the cereal that you’re holding in your hand? Could you just pour the cereal? Who is this Aunt Sukey you keep talking about, anyway? Sister? What do you mean? An example? What, specifically, justified four years of spying on people who were breaking no laws? What, specifically, is so much fun about insulting someone’s children? Got it? You and who else? Isn’t science grand? Well, what seems to be the trouble, guy? Does this mean that some of these scientists are so busy talking to themselves that they don’t talk to each other? What if his mother always burned the chocolate chip cookies? Are you talking about my mother? Whose mother do you think I’m talking about? Were those cookies burnt? What do you think all the black stuff was? What are you some kind of nutcase, or what? How do you know I sniffed two dozen? Why am I doing this? Why am I bouncing a balloon for the evening news? What’s with Liz? Is she keeping her weight down? Who’s she married to these days? What ever happened to Eddie Fisher? During the flap about Larry Speakes’s memories of the Reagan White House, did it occur to you that one of your kids may someday publish a kiss-and-tell book about your administration? Never gave it a thought? You’ve got nothing to hide? Nobody would be interested in the story of an ordinary family? You’re
confident that your kids are too loyal to think of embarrassing you by revealing those insignificant little arguments about money or the scene over the boyfriend with three earrings and a modified Mohawk or the incident involving the Thanksgiving turkey and the cat? You’re certain that you’re a lot closer to your children than the Reagans are to theirs? Am I worried about this happening in my own house? You say that sounds very much like the White House, with the guys in the National Security Council basement as the teenagers and Howard Baker as the mom? You don’t think that could ever happen? And what do you do, Mr. Rooney? In proximity? What if someone wants to mail a letter? Like, what? Did you come here and say, ‘The heck with it, I don’t need this darn thing’? How about another splash of coffee, kiddo? Is that right? Did you look in the basement? Why would anybody want to read about our old armchair? Why do I need you to teach me? Wasn’t this the summer you were going to learn Spanish? Now that I think of it, weren’t you going to have a project this summer of looking up, once and for all, the answers to all those summer questions your kids are always stumping you with? O.K., the water in the ocean swooshes like the water in a bathtub, but what makes it swoosh? Is there a big huge person moving back and forth on the bottom? So what is the answer to that one about the tides? But what does make the water swoosh? How’d that Kissinger book go, anyway? Did he talk about what effect bombing Cambodia had on his lecture fees at all, or was it mostly that policy stuff? So tell me—how was your summer? Where’d you prep? What does it mean in English when it’s said someone ‘doesn’t have a whole lot upstairs’? Do you think I’ve overdone my ax murderer’s mask? Do you think I’ve overdone it? Did you think that old bathrobe was a good addition last year? What are you going as? You don’t think I might have spawned a lot of imitators, do you? What are you, some kind of liberal? How do you think it makes the poor boy’s children feel when you keep describing their father as not having ‘a whole lot upstairs’? Since when do you go around ridiculing people’s names? Why can’t you find something good to say about him? Are you sure you don’t need some extra help? How could my spell-check expect me to get through eight years of the Reagan Administration without the word ‘wacko’? Doze or daze? Who are you? What are you doing here? Where’d you prep? Coach Watson? And what happens if they roll snake eyes? What if we gave you just a few million so you could buy yourself some Burger King franchises? Would that make you feel better? How do you think the stockholders feel about me? How are the stockholders going to feel if I ever mess up so badly I have to be shown the door? You’re the one who maligns fruitcake, right? Who in Denver? You mean you think that fruitcake would be dangerous to eat? Would a fruitcake that isn’t an antique be dangerous? You mean a reproduction? How about people who buy fruitcakes for themselves? Are you saying that everybody secretly hates fruitcake? ’Son,’ Dad says, ‘have you tested the alarm on that car of yours lately?’ Who says nobody is doing anything to raise the median level of education in this country? Have you gone soft in the head? Why are you talking this way? That’s O.K., except now where’s the Devil supposed to live? You say it’s silly of me to worry about housing for the Devil because the Devil doesn’t actually exist? If the Devil doesn’t actually exist, why are the Reagan’s changing their address? Why are those people sleeping on a piece of cardboard over a grate, Mommy? They like sleeping on a piece of cardboard? But isn’t sleeping on the street cold and nasty and scary, Mommy? What’s this guy talking about, anyway? Why didn’t you say so? You know me—right? Excuse me, sir, but if we find it necessary to repeat rumors and gossip concerning your personal life, would you prefer to be called a womanizer, a skirt-caser, a lech, or a dirty old man? I wonder how much he paid for that suit? Would you prefer to be called a boozier, a hard drinker, an alcohol abuser, or a lush? Would you just as soon skip the whole thing?
—and what have we learned in the last ten years if we haven’t learned that the point is how much money you make? Your supporters? Which supporters are those? And Mrs. Steinberg’s reward? You do for people and you do for people, and where does it get you? Was it a five-dollar job before Steinbeck’s Nobel Prize was factored in? Was Shogun considered labor-intensive? Is it possible that someone in the kitchen responsible for checking in supplies simply weighs the novels with the lamb chops? Have you no mercy, Revson? To where are we be taking thou, sir? Understand my directions? Ou se trouve la plage? Where does it find itself the beach? What’d you do on your vacation to Paris? Are you trying to make a fashion statement? Do I want to risk being taken for someone who is striving for the ragamuffin look? But would anybody from my high school consider blue jeans that had a sign on them ‘real blue jeans’? But I finally decided, so what? And how much space did the dispute between Tomontra Mangrum and Marlon Shadd get? First off, what kind of cad is this Marlon Shadd? Did he really expect anybody to fall for that business about being both incapacitated and out of town? Is Palm Beach Lakes High School the sort of place where a student can say ‘The dog ate my homework’ and get away with it? Were Tomontra and Marlon, as the gossip columnists used to say, an item? Or was this to be their first date? Was this one of those rickety arrangements cooked up by the class movers and shakers to make sure that everyone had a date for the prom? Should the class movers and shakers be sued? Pain and suffering? Whiplash? Was this the kind of marriage I bargained for—a marriage with a birdcage on my lap? Can you still hear me? What disk error is really not all that much fun? Are you telling me that you’re not cutting down on the dry cleaning, but you’re cutting down on paying for it? What are you talking about? Not even one letter? Can you top this? What good was that going to do Jane? Who would have thought that all we needed to clear this up was a prince who lives in Beverly Hills? What are we talking about here, Ma? What is it this time? What is it with him? Did the kid’s tuition bill just come in? Wife redecorate the rumpus room? Would you mind just shouting back there and asking him how much he owes for what? An hour on the first appointment? Is it my imagination or does that bicuspid look a little shaky? What do you see there, Sweeney? A new transmission for your BMW? A long weekend with the missus in the Adirondacks? What’s your secret? And what happens when we’re safely lulled? If these guys in Russia are so smart, I’ve been saying to Harvey for years, how come everyone has to stand in line for soap over there? You mean they want everyone to be dirty? Did you notice all those people were chanting the same thing and holding the same flags? And Poland? Where they had to give up power? Is that part of their plan? And was I also above making cracks about the possessions of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos after their sleazy palace was exposed to the world? Wasn’t I the joker who said it was difficult to believe that Mrs. Marcos was able to break in all those shoes without the use of political prisoners? What do I claim to be different about this situation? Who would know that the way to impress them was to send the American Army to conquer Grenada, population eighty-seven thousand? Are you arguing that the next time you show up in an emergency room and find out that you’re going to be treated by a doctor who was trained in Grenada you’re going to give special thanks to Ronald Reagan? What if I got a toothache in a strange town? Well, then, how about Vaclav Havel? But what was so reassuring about the possibility that Vanity Fair sees Gorbachev as a hot advertising prospect? What could he be intended to advertise? How about Home & Garden? Town and Country? Alison Eastwood? Is that a Bulgarian name? Are you O.K.? But how about the rest of us—particularly the rest of us who happen to be fond of tamales? Are we going to be left in permanent suspense as to what a tamale binding ritual is and how it differs from a tuna-fish sandwich binding ritual? Are we going to provoke suspicion
every time we make an absolutely innocent remark like ‘Boy, would half a dozen tamales and a cold beer hit the spot’? What makes you so sure? What else do you think it could be, captain? Tamale flour? Are you sure we can’t get the Exxon Valdez skipper himself? Did Wayne have another interest in this? How are her teeth? On the other hand, I think of some advice my mother often gave: Why start something? I have a sort of form postcard to deal with those letters: ‘Who are you going to believe, the Reader’s Digest or me?’ Getting much mail on the future of the Atlantic alliance? Getting much mail on the fruitcake question? Getting much mail that says he’s probably not all that dumb? Do I get ideas from readers? Does it occur to you, when February rolls around and we start hearing about Black History Month, that they gave the black people the shortest month? If Lincoln freed the slaves and preserved the Union, how come ‘Lincolnesque’ just means tall? When did historians begin referring to the second term of the Reagan Administration as Voodoo II? What harm does that do? Someone else wanders over and says to Norbert, ‘You mean you don’t recognize the name?’
Space-Boomerang Trap

What good am I if I can’t put my feet on the ground?
Strapped to the giant boomerang I’ve made of my life,
I’m winging moonward & it’s goodbye to the sweet blue
marble I’ve called home. Only opinions challenged
turn to convictions; only the clothes make the man.

Double my size & paint me golden & maybe my voice
would boom big enough to say what I mean
& what I say would be worth its weight. Instead

I run around & tie myself up. Against a backdrop
of white capped mountains, I kneel in front of myself

& beg forgiveness, for understanding,
for a few more minutes of sleep. If there was someone to call,
I’d call, chasing hope over the phone wires with no net

despite the cosmic spitballs seeking to imbalance me.
A spark chases me. I go one way & then another.

Any patch of land with a giant grenade buried in it knows exactly
how I feel, like I’m about to be all up in the air. I wish my problems
had names, colorful costumes or dastardly plans but mostly what I fear

is myself. I am of two worlds, two minds, two contradictory
wardrobes, business & casual. In the beginning, dinosaurs & sludge;

years from now, rockets to deliver me into the stiff arms of love.
So how to reconcile the various & sundry? I throw my fear out
into the void & it always comes back. This time, I’ll go instead.
Poof

So fast my fleet feet barely touch
the ground; I’m running straight out
into the nothingness of one minute I’m here,
& stern, but blink & there’s just a swirl
of color where me used to be.
All that’s left is momentum, the whispering
certainty that I at one time was.
Yesterday I tripped coming home from the grocery
& five people circled around to gloat.
The big spotlight fell on me & left no doubt
about the source of my shame—I was center stage
& flubbing my lines, jerking my head &
arms in spastic apoplexy. I’ve got the strangest feeling
I’m being turned into a puppet
was something I said out loud but instantly
had to wonder if it was my own voice
or someone else’s, their hand pushed through
the hole in my back. I could feel my limbs
becoming wood, a hinge growing at my jaw.
Torn, conflicted, split down the middle, wearied out
with contrarieties, questions filled my aching head:
what weatherman could have predicted this
duplicitous climate? Hoping for a thaw,
I might get sunburned. There was only one thing to do:
let everyone in on all the secrets I keep,
& do it in a big way: preempt the nightly news,
interrupt dinner, say that I sleep on my left side
exclusively & that in my dreams I go shoeless
& dream, in my dreams, of putting my feet up.
I first told my wife as we were driving home from the movies. Birdie Tuttle called and said ‘Aberdine On Sunday’ was everything and a slice of mint. I had my doubts, but then my wife liked Birdie, and here we needed to get out and do something together and could think of nothing else.

We were in an awkward place. These things happened. I tried not to worry. Money troubles had us in a pinch. My wife was an editor for the University Press. I was an adjunct in the school of journalism, a freelancer for the Renton Bugle. For three years I published my own journal—the Altole Review—which covered literature and politics, was paid for on our credit cards, drained our savings down to scratch. My career was a masking tape effort, bits and pieces stuck together, the cumulative somehow less than whole. I had a manuscript I worked on from time to time, several hundred pages of a neo-historical novel set in Gdansk, marked up and rewritten and otherwise kept in a drawer.

Ignoring for now our current fix, my wife and I were an average couple. We rarely swung from chandeliers, abstained from blow-ups with the neighbors, did not chase our children with truncheons or make scenes at the local mall. Sometimes at night we quarrelled deliberately and out of boredom, gravitated to and from one another like two tides in a single pool. We fucked like rabbits when the mood hit, desperately and searching, and at other times avoided one another’s touch as if afraid of catching the plague. We went on trips together, sat in different rooms within our own house, took care of our kids, ate dinners collectively and on the run, came and went, hung out and hung back, loved one another and sometimes now did not.

‘Aberdine On Sunday,’ was playing across town at the Beltway. After Birdie called, my wife read a review, learned ‘Aberdine’ was the final film by Svert Hudjar, a young Finnish director who recently hung himself in a fit of artistic extravagance. Last winter Svert invited guests to watch him stand atop a ten foot rubber ball, a wire noose around his neck, an orchestra playing Ives’ ‘Fourth Symphony,’ as he recited a list of his life’s transgressions. The event was recorded though footage had not yet reached the internet as representatives from Svert’s old management team were still hashing out the sale.

In watching ‘Aberdine,’ my guess was Svert killed himself knowing full well the film was not the masterpiece some critics were hoping for, his suicide a mea culpa for having tried to pull the wool over. Now and then the movie came close to delivering the goods, only to fall away like some dangle of spit from an old man’s chin. As a whole she was frustrating to sit through. Occasionally moving, her cleverness was crude and no more provocative than seeing that she-man’s cock in ‘The Crying Game,’ or Divine eating dog crap in ‘Pink Flamingos.’ My wife disagreed. She felt anything that startled her was good enough. (By her definition, old Arun Howel was provocative for suggesting certain party games at his annual barbecue and volunteering his wife, Ruth, to demonstrate the nuances of specific dares and challenges.) I wasn’t interested in arguing the point and ruining our evening out. My wife’s attitude toward me was already strained, the rhythms between us off. I was distracted by what I had to tell her and didn’t want to make matters worse.
We drove toward Mills Road, halfway between the theater and our house. Before the kids, my wife and I liked to go to the late show and then for drinks. Everything then was an aphrodisiac, the entire evening foreplay. Nights out now were more of an unwinding. We caught the early show, slipped from the house while the kids ate pizza with the sitter. “How can you say?” My wife referred again to the movie. “I couldn’t believe,” she described the scene where Aberdine set her lover’s hair on fire. “That didn’t shock you?”

“It caught me by surprise. It was a good dramatic hook, but that doesn’t make it provocative.”

“Sure it does,” she reached and tapped my leg as I drove. My wife had large hands. Everything else about her—her hips, wrists, shoulders and breasts—were small by comparison, but her hands were man-sized and easily the equal of mine. I’d always found my wife attractive, from the first time we met and still today, but had never quite gotten used to holding her hand, felt somehow when I did that I was being devoured. I shifted my leg away, accelerated through the light, said “Let me ask you this,” and returning to that part in the movie when Aberdine took the candle and lit the hairs on the back of her lover’s head while he slept, “What was that about?”

“He dared her,” my wife reminded me of what went on immediately before. “Marcus said Aberdine could never surprise him because there was nothing he didn’t know about her.”

“So?”

“So, he was trying to say he loved her absolutely, but Svert wrote the scene to show Marcus like every man, thinking they have to possess a woman in order to love them. That’s what the movie’s about, how men are terrified of a woman having her own identity.”

“Alright,” I pulled into the parking lot of Siders, weighing what my wife had said. “I can see that. I mean, I see what Svert was after and you’re right, having Aberdine set Marcus’ hair on fire was a nice touch. She showed him for sure, but provocative? Svert wasn’t channelling anything new about the way men and women get on.”

“So? There’s nothing new under the sun,” my wife yawned and got out of the car. I sensed her mood slipping further away again and began to suspect she knew what I had to tell her. Last month I’d written an article for the Renton Bugle. The piece was of no interest to me, a retread involving public land use and how far the city could go in developing the green belt. Such articles did nothing more than create a false platform for conservationists, everyone knowing the city would expand regardless. I interviewed people from the mayor’s office, and later Lew Wile from C.L.E.A.N.—the Community League Environmentalists Advancing Nature. When we finished, Lew took me for drinks. “Suppose I was to tell you a story that could make you a few dollars, would you write it?”

Siders served sandwiches, burgers and drinks. After eight the crowd was a mix of college kids and locals. The hostess was new. I watched her walk in front of me. She had nice curves, was probably a student. My wife and I were seated in the middle of the restaurant, at a square table facing a window looking out toward the parking lot. “What if I flirted with that hostess and wound up having an affair?” I asked my wife. “Would that be provocative or pathetic?”

The question caused her to look at me strangely, her head tipping back, her mouth coming open with surprise. After a moment she frowned. “What do you think?”

“Right,” I settled deeper in my chair. “It would be pathetic because old guys like me bedding young girls like that happens all the time. That’s what I’m saying about the movie. How can something provocative be old hat?”

“Aberdine’ is not old hat,’” my wife asked the waitress for water. “Provocative doesn’t mean new. What’s provocative is how the story’s told. Look at how the scene played out, the way Aberdine
didn’t panic after setting Marcus’ hair on fire, didn’t leave but stood there and waited for him to wake up. That’s what made everything work, how she wanted him to know what she did was intentional and why.”

“The scene, yes,” I ordered a whiskey and burger, my wife tuna steak and gin. “But the movie as a whole stumbles to make any significant point.”

“That’s not true,” my wife leaned forward as if to tell me a secret. “The movie follows a perfect arc. It just doesn’t tie things up neatly and that’s what frustrates you.” She began staring at me again, more suspiciously now. “Why are we talking about this?”

When our food came, I ate my burger and drank my whiskey. My wife cut her tuna steak with a butter knife. The smoke from the bar made me want a cigarette and I thought about having the waitress snag one for me. My wife changed the subject, started talking about our kids. I was distracted, only half listening. I ordered a second drink. My wife’s face was shaded silver in the smokey light. I was glad we were out together, nervous still about what I had to tell her, yet happy for the moment. Work had kept my wife busy of late, publishing schedules being what they are, she went back to the Press after the kids were fed, leaving me on my own a few nights a week. I wanted to make her laugh and told her a joke. “What’s the difference between comedy and sex?”

“I don’t know. What?”

“I get comedy,” I winked, a second before realizing. My wife tipped her head to the side this time, clearly wondering what was wrong with me. “It’s just a joke,” I tapped my baby finger against the top of the table and then foolishly said, “Pretty provocative, no?”

“Don’t start,” my wife bit off the end of a french fry.

“I’m just saying, it’s funny. The disconnect and all, you know? It’s endemic. Maybe if women explained better what they wanted, men wouldn’t seem so confused.”

“Maybe if men listened better,” my wife in dissent.

I drank my second whiskey. My wife reached for the last of my fries, her eyes moving up and down, bee-like, skittish, unsure where to land. “What are we talking about?” she asked again. I came this close to answering, then veered off course, brought us back around the other side. “Here’s the thing. I don’t know all there is about you, and still here I am.”

My wife had dark hazel eyes. In the half-light of the restaurant, as she stared at me, the green became deeper. She took a moment then said, “I don’t think you’re that naive.”

“To believe I should know everything?”

“To think anyone could ever know everything about someone,” she looked down at her hands.

“Not about everyone, no,” I pressed the point. “But those we love. Isn’t it necessary?” I wanted her to tell me yes, of course, so I could stand and say, “Alright then,” and blame her afterward for demanding my secrets if she went crazy with what I told her. Instead, my wife hesitated again before rejoining, “We tend to know enough. Too much of anything is toxic.”

“And that’s ok?”

“It isn’t one thing or another, it just is,” she pushed her tuna steak to the side, the remains cut down to the rough edge of skin. Back in the car she surprised me by suddenly reaching over and squeezing my hand. I felt her fingers soft and eager to crush mine. I became uncomfortable and pulled back. Near the end of ‘Aberdine,’ the setting shifted from the large estate where most of the movie took place to a brothel downtown. Aberdine had left Marcus, walking out of a dinner party, winding up on the streets searching for a place to sleep. Within a week, she’d thrown herself into the profession, was miserable and excited, diverted and aroused. Word reached Marcus who came at once.
to find her, his head still bandaged, a large patch of white gauze taped to the burn on the back of his head. He paid the Lady of the House and went up to Aberdine’s room. “I understand now,” he dropped to his knees, pressed his face against Aberdine’s thighs, swore he forgave her and knew at last what she wanted.

The actress playing Aberdine was a young Norwegian with high porcelain cheeks and brown hair thick as fishing rope. As Svert’s muse, she’d mastered his direction, was able to convey her thoughts wordlessly. To Marcus, she moved her shoulders, pinched her lips just slightly and slipped from his hold. “What Marcus should have done,” I told my wife, “is come upstairs and get what he paid for. Not violently or tenderly, not desperately or with any emotion other than what a normal john took. That’s the only way he could have won her back, by showing he really did understand and wasn’t looking to control or define her.”

My wife considered this, then said, “No man could do that. It would have been a different movie.”

“A better one, I think.” I reminded her how the film had ended, how Svert created his own fiction, with Aberdine stepping away from Marcus and to the window, jumping without screaming, smiling toward the street as if to say only in death could a woman take control of her life and be free. “It’s all nonsense. It’s a lie. Blaming men for everything. What sort of pathetic indictment is that?

“It isn’t pathetic,” my wife argued. “It’s a commentary.”

“It’s over the top.”

“It’s a movie,” she rolled down her window as the light turned red. “Svert was trying to be provocative,” she used the word knowing it bothered me. “The fact we’re discussing ‘Aberdine’ shows Svert made the right choice. To have ended the film any other way would not have had the same effect. I think what Svert was saying is that sometimes telling the truth is too hard. Sometimes communication is impossible. Sometimes honesty can be its own kind of death.”

I waited for the light to change. My wife wasn’t looking at me anymore. I wondered if I shouldn’t just let her statement go, leave things as they were for the night and worry about them in the morning. That would have been convenient, but then I couldn’t resist. “The thing of it is,” I said, “if the movie’s about all truth, why’s Svert presenting such bullshit? If he was looking to make a point, wouldn’t it be better to suggest something not so jaded?”

We were almost home. I slowed down. My wife rolled up her window as the breeze became too much and turned on the air in the car. She shifted enough on the seat to watch me driving, touched my elbow softly, her large fingers finding the bone beneath my short sleeve. “The thing of it is?” she repeated.

Over drinks Lew Wile offered me $3,400 to write an article accusing the mayor of taking kickbacks from developers and depositing money in secret accounts. The bribe was comical. $3,400. Where the amount came from I’d no idea. The overture was a story in itself. “All you have to do is reference unnamed sources,” Lew said. “We’re only looking for a way to buy time, until the next election. You’re a good guy, Joe. A regular one of us.” He ordered up another whiskey. I explained without further confirmation, no bank records, quotable witnesses or money trail, my editors would never approve the story. “I’m sure you can think of something,” Lew gave a wink, pushed the envelope toward me, made like Jerry McGuire and showed me the cash.

I decided to tell me wife what happened next, how I took the money and why. I pocketed the envelope knowing I would never write the piece, feeling bad about this but what could I do now? Lew was calling me at work, leaving messages. I’d spent the money, a hundred here and there, dinners and
clothes and gas, normal expenses, things for the kids and the wife bought on the sly and so it went. I fucked up. In a hundred different ways I’d fallen into deep shit. What was the point of lying about it? The debt was more than I alone could handle and why get myself in further trouble?

I started to say all this, wanting my wife to know, feeling as I began that I was on to something, making repairs, apologizing and reconnecting, doing good work. The process was restorative, unburdening, a leap of faith. I saw our house at the end of the block, said my wife’s name and reached for her hand. Only then did I realize she was also talking, saying something about something about something, I didn’t know. “What is it?” I felt the heat at the back of my neck. “What?” I repeated. “Who? What are you telling me?” I couldn’t at first understand.
Horrible! retorted Johannes Kepler to the self-imposed question of how his mentor, Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe—whose nose, lost in a duel, was replaced by a silver & gold monstrosity—smelled. Goblets raised, the old guard roared at Kepler fanning his wry face for emphasis, feeling his audience, intelligence thinned by papal Inquisition, might need the visual aid to get it. After all, save for a few snickers, his elliptical orbit bit, he recalled, flew over their waxed & wigged heads. Enter Galileo Galilei onto the stage with vaudevillian aplomb & sly sight gag revolving around his truly inspired take on the spyglass, to wit, his telescope—wink, nudge—a risibly phallic, ultra outre gizmo that made the universe, in its mysterious splendor, little more than a peep show for the uptight, meat pie & mutton crowd, lusting after a forbidden glimpse of the celestial fan dance of Jupiter & her moons, in details far above & beyond those accorded the naked eye. Who or what could follow an act that bared the cosmos, that allowed all who dared to gape at the infinite heavenly bodies in motion?

On this night, the pure white light
shone upon a relatively unknown
Dominican friar, Giordano
Bruno, whose regrettable
shtik of what if
a plurality of worlds existed
echoed in dumbness
underscored by fitful howls
of heresy. *Tough room,*
quipped Bruno, tugging
uneasily at his earthy robe’s
collar, tight as a noose.
If it were something I said I didn’t do—Ludlow began, sotto voce, breeze dying in the bedroom window, burgundy drapes drawn aside, overlooking their garden. Clara, feigning interest in her most improving book, never allowed her bright round eyes to lift. Doesn’t signify, she sniffed, adopting a tone usually reserved for her Yorkshire pup. She understood too well the ordeal he’d suffered--& at his age! Sighing, Clara absently turned the page into the distant ball of her past, her apricot mull with lace overskirt & vandyke hem bespeaking her provincial tastes as she indulged in pleasant flirtations, an angel dancing on a pinhead. Ludlow’s cravat tied rashly in the mathematical—as usual, in want of review—appeared for all the world a Gordian knot whenever he tried to speak the stuff & nonsense of his heart, but as he belonged to the gentry, she—one & twenty when the banns were read—belonged to him. Sweeping over the discontent of years in which he’d, at length, made clear her wifely duties, past leaves torn from a ledger, meant to mask the wretched pounds he’d trifled away at his club on faro, port & tawdry bits of skirt, Clara paused, reflecting upon the wet cobblestone of a fortnight ago, when, with wool coat’s claw hammered tails violently flapping, a princely figure wove his velocipede willy-nilly through the promenade, dinging a tinny bell & caroming off an orphan’s flower cart into a waiting phaeton, a flurry of mixed bouquets spilling by Ludlow’s crumpled frame.

He stared blankly up, calling, now as then, his dear, sweet Clara. Her short stalk of patience having long since snapped, she loathly returned her attention to his prolonged convalescence as he ejaculated a feeble ugh. She set her four-edged book aside & smiling less than charitably, smoothed his clump of linens. The afternoon felt somewhat aphrodisiacal—Clara held in willful disregard Ludlow’s goose feather pillow over his muffled cries—what, with grosbeaks pecking ripe sunflowers & bees buzzing the bee balm & all.
On This Day

Events evolved from a hairline fraction, compounded. Then the screw-brained physicists and some writers posited that there is no beginning and there is no end because they couldn’t imagine it. They wrote it.

Esterhaus and Olmedo have no real or imagined experience that contradicts that assertion, so they therefore create this day in infinity. It could be of only a moment or less. It can be anywhere it wants to be—and is. It exists because you are about to read these words. Thus they—all of them—speak as two in one. The words are complementary, the formalities of creation. Olmedo and Esterhaus alternate positions as to following, that is, in whatever order it comes. They can be switched out.

O

[Olmedo] All right. Let there be lite: but use a filtered gel. Slide it onto the instrument then hang it from a tetherball pole—something. Fade it up to about 80%—no, dim that down to 60—soft-focus, warm, er … more intimate. Where the lite hits the water, paint it read to reflect blood. Try to match it as closely as possible. Then rest for a while and replenish your juices. Spit out what you can’t use.

[Esterhaus] Ready? Next: find three right words. Correct them. Put them into a natural fiber basket and spray them throughout the well, un/known universe, as if seeding its guts. Allow them, however long it takes, to gestate. Then collect them. Grind them down to a fine mill and mix them into something else. Serve them up at a formal dinner, as if seating their guts. Be sure to offer a prayer of thanksgiving before feeding your gut. Rest for a while and let the torpor take over. Recollect the feeling for as far as you can throw it away. Recede as necessary.

[Olmedo] Wake up. Try this: recolor your eyes so that they see differently. Remember, blue isn’t always blue, and so forth. Commission a work of self-awareness but make certain it has at least one recognizable attribute. Render it bilingual for variety and sleep it in during breaks in communication or borders in time or blends in race. When it has ground to essential, gather the remains, put them in a dust bowl and release them into a tornado about to happen. Wait to see what happens, especially if the molecules regenerate. Recede as necessary.

[Esterhaus] You need details. Open these: gold magnolias and humid, overrated charm. In a large yard of lurid imagination, chase chickens for their feathers, then break their necks. Feed the masses
and pray you never have to feel … your hands freeze from plucking entrails. The stench is a killing. Machines would do better but they’re not as flexible as the human condition on its worst day.

[Olmedo] Move, action counts. Noticing motion capture: an ant survives by swimming. It’s a prodigious swimmer and has been around for both documentary film and imputed ages. It feels and smells everything it touches even as it can’t see very well but is directed. Its discipline isn’t work—it’s all it knows about life, despite the many eyes of its poor vision and the substitutions of perception. See if you can see it from its points of view, then transfer that as feeling to others in general. If they can’t see it’s because you didn’t touch them or … seed … a path in the pristine water. Swim further on, using all six crawl points. Ants also have six, and an abdomen, like you.

[Esterhaus] Means have weight and carry it. If there could be no sin: it would be classless. Need is as voracious as it comes when it comes to and blindness can do nothing to prevent murder. Green, although sometimes catholically mistaken for hope, is collected in the second round for gold … vestments that only partially cover two or three of the seven death squad sins. Three dollars every seventh day is a cycle. Hunger … is mortgaged by gamblers who mean to mean well but are desperately ill. The means-less are not mean and their meaning is relative to who or what has come to count … as imported good or immigration. At the end of the day, ants don’t crawl; they march single file, lured by the distinct object of their next meal. On average, they work forty-five days and die by sixty. Computers can’t count as far as they’ve been.

[Olmedo] Find your breaking point. When to give up: what is most important to you. You’ve been asleep. You had dreams. A few nightmares crept in and woke you. You were your own worst main attraction and you had company. You tear up the lawn and soil beneath it to kill the goddamned weeds then lay in long, narrow sods of fresh, tender grass. It can’t be bothered but must be watered for at least four weeks or it will die. You build a fence and stand by with a sturdy garden hose. At midnight you turn on the water and hope no one drives by you on the way home.

[Esterhaus] Pretend none of it’s here. Link to others as: if a butterfly in the desert missed a beat and no one saw or heard a thing. Size up the options. Separate out the plump ones that are yours and put them away in a safe place as soon as you find it. Auction off what’s leftover from the overpass on a freeway. Pick one you know and drive regularly. As the bidders cross under, throw them a tidbit to let them know you’re sincere. Then turn off your bullhorn. Have a happy birthday.
Birth Record

I came from wisp, from smoke
in the village of Bessines-sur-Gartempe
me, Marie-Clementine born of the widow Madeleine
who stitched a fine line, in desperation
worked as a laundress
rub and pound
with raw chapped hands heavy-
carted laundry to a nearby stream
sad-iron pressed smooth

Madeleine’s husband Léger Coulard, a blacksmith
turned to minting coins of the realm
sentenced to hard labor died in prison
widow reverts to maiden name, Valadon

Not so, my mother an actress, left me
on the steps of Limoges Cathedral
a foundling

Born the twenty-third day of September, 1865
father unknown the townsfolk gossiped
the miller in old age Madeleine admits seduction on a January-cold day
the miller in an accident crushed to death
his own stone grinding justice

Not so, my father an aristocrat
my father a banker, a convict
not true? but what is true?
I unbutton and shrug off Marie-C.

write a new life drawn from desire and need
The purpose of my life: equilibrium

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3 Italics are quotes from Suzanne Valadon (1865-1938), model, artist, mother of Maurice Utrillo.
April 1, 1948

Dear Suzanne,

Ten years after your death at eleven a.m. in Montmartre, I am born close to ten p.m., a time and day that will shadow me in pranks and an early start in school. Golden fish swim around my peripheral vision. For you Suzanne this day was Le Poisson d’Avril when the calendar leapfrogged Julian to Gregorian courtesy of Charles IX in 1582. Mock gifts were sent to friends, jokes on them. Jokes on me named for crazed grandmother Eva Green. Cursed, grandfather Mendel waits for signs of madness. Like my aunt, Eva’s lost child, we scream — won’t be crazy — won’t be — won’t. My middle name, Maureen, I discard later as I cut my father’s and husband’s name out of my life, becoming me alone. Suzanne, we change our names to change the road we travel from birth. We find our way brick by cobblestone, pavement and hidden trails. Light and dark. Earth rolls under the sun. Day and night. Shadow and wall. I open all the shades and push back curtains bathing in sun winter afternoons. It comes to this, pleasure in small doses. Your ghost circles me as Renoir painted you — pink cloth rustles in the park. I spin around this small life, a ghost to myself. What you will be, I say to this enfant, wait, wait, wait, childhood a time of patience. Someday it will be easier to breathe.

Suzanne, I will talk to you at the end of the museum corridor, the room with Manet’s portrait of his wife and Degas’ bronze dancer with the faded ribbon in her hair. I speak for me, Suzanne, not for your dead ears or a spirit watching, all the same.

In birth and death we travel.

Eve
Hunger

bits of chalk crumble in my fingers
down to nubs to scraped knuckles
frenzied I draw in swooping and hard lines
those who pass on the street below
seen from one grim window
until I run out of wall

mother comes home heavy
hauling baskets of laundry
angry as though I did harm
these dingy walls scored and stained
what grace do I cover?
she rubs out rubs out

down on the pavement
I draw those that dawdle
gawking at the girl playing artist
as though it is a game

I grab scurrying scraps of paper
bills of lading old receipts
once a letter crumpled
and smoothed

my hands hunger for line
there is never enough
pencil and chalk
pieces of coal make do

famished with lonely
I hold walkers with my lines
drawn faces stare back
I draw to know
Dear Suzanne,

My father reads to me from Aesop’s fables every night, The Lion and the Mouse. *Little friends can be great friends.* I am the mouse, tiny in my bed with the carved picture. A fire burns in a hearth, a cat stares into the flames. Over the mantle are carved plates, I rub my fingers in their bellies. My hair catches in the nails as I sleep.

In French your voice murmurs de la Fontaine, memorized in convent school:

> Chacun se dit ami; mais fol qui s’y repose:
> Rien n’est plus commun que ce nom,
> Rien n’est plus rare que la chose.

Suzanne, I long for someone to call friend in the creaky days of my young life.

My father trapped inside memories, his only escape pastel rubbed in blurring layers. He bade me see muscle and form, withheld color from my crying hands yearning for his, the toothed paper in blues and grays, he bought for ten cents a sheet. Half a loaf of bread.

At school, crayons in a blue box, one side flat, fat and awkward. I shove away. One night, I take a twig of charcoal, draw my father shoveling coal. Heat rises and cools traveling up three flights. I draw the pipes Medusa-rising from the furnace, my father back bent over heavy shovel. The charcoal black as the pieces of coal you stole to draw on the sidewalks. I watch the flames gust when the furnace door opens; the flames eat the coal and shake shadowgoblins on the walls.

I am five years old with father in the cold cellar. Mother waits for heat. This scrap of paper all I have. I draw in dirt and dark. Father tells me of artists that painted light. I want the sun to pour through my hands.

I don’t know the moral to this story,

Eve
The Day I Had Wings

I could have flown over the streets of Montmartre
soared about the white dome of Sacré-Coeur
the day Degas, The Degas, the master
showered me with praise.

Zando and Lautrec brought me to Paul Bartholomé
an intimate of the great man.
I took my box of drawings
held so tight I was afraid it would crack.
I admit taking great pleasure when Bartholomé’s
eyes opened wide, for who am I?
unlearned, a woman without means.
He wrote a letter of introduction.

At the door of No. 37 Rue Victor Masse
I trembled before the housekeeper Zöé Closier.
I had heard the stories about Degas’ dislike of women
how he fiercely guarded his privacy
but the sight of his friend’s hand
brought him down from his lofty studio.

Without a word he took my portfolio
slowly held and studied each sketch
wary he was of the self-taught.

The whole of the afternoon, we talked.
He asked how I could afford artists’ materials
so dear, so dear, how many hours had I modeled.

He bought a drawing, red chalk, a girl
getting out of the bath, La Toilette.
My first sale to Degas, my first sale!
hung in his dining room his entire life.
One of us, he said
One of us.
April 1964

Dear Suzanne,

I had been making props for the high school musical, this year Brigadoon. I made the bridge with the help of the shop teacher who nailed a huge sheet of plywood over a set of stairs. I painted it stone, what a bridge would be, using deep blues for the shadows to carry the vision of solidity to the back of the auditorium, make the bridge look real. I worked all afternoon, my arm getting tired from the hours of painting. The deeper black/blue of the inside edge to give depth. I viewed from the rear of the hall and felt proud of my bridge.

Later that evening returning to paint during rehearsal, I entered the darkened auditorium to see my bridge, MY bridge transformed. Ugly it was, brown with black streaks over my rocks, My real rocks. My stomach wraps around my spine. I ask Miss Fish, the director, what happened to my bridge. “Too good”, she said, “showed up the rented backdrop.” I just stare at her and turn to hide tears. Too good she said, too good, painted over—my life, my life—did she know what she did, this slashing, this cutting me apart.

Eve
Our Tintern

I

Frost on dandelions greening the back
yard,

the swing set hand-me-
down
five-siblings old,
untouched by
rust we
kids mustered on the lawn…

Church-day April 1968

Down Mountain Street
the big world –
Toronto – squints through
sun clouds convocating across the lake
shimmers greyly

while our parents
preen in the toothpaste
speckled bathroom
mirror

We could beat them if our legs were…
if our legs weren’t…

II

Our Tintern was a goodly hour and
a half away – six miles –

if my legs weren’t four years old
and prone to wander then
we thought we might make it
if we started before mother was ready
started maybe half an hour before the Volkswagen
we thought we might get there first

If my shoes weren’t beautiful and slow…
(Mother made my cotton suit / 
Father bought my shoes)
they were posh and pinched
and were no good
for running

I held hands with an older sister, older brother
or meandered into fields in pursuit
of the nudging wind that kept demanding the burnished
road was superflux: a rough sensual rolling middleness of cow
smells, crows, and silos even in the sun
the grain rockets, I knew, hid dragon clouds
that pushed shivers
up my arm like there were
cold winds up my sleeve

Half way was the brick
building cornering Fly
and Mud Road – an abandoned
school if
we made it that far we made it tunelessly,
our songs expended on the road behind,
the only sound mechanical – the green car
pulling up
the hill
If we made it that far…
we never made it further.

III
Church was a hellfire of mysterious words, an adult code or the
sound of my mother’s pulse as I christened her arm with my wet
breath, or the accent of her clipper voicing through my nails.
Later we played a matching game of the numbers on the board and
the numbers on the page, but my singing had no equivalence in the
high treble of the blue-haired matriarchs buzzing like trapped
moths.
Instead, I watched the
soft curved symbols dance inside
the lines that tracked across
my mother’s book and I heard myself
dance with them.

Remember the sounds, my father said every time and
I did, and I knew, too, from the dancing,
from the low bellied men
from the high breasted women
who bristled and bowed on the sheet
when to sing like dad, when to sing like mom.

IV
Lunch
on the lawn was human kindliness. Damnation,
was for the pews

The tall girl in the house
beside the church was always
laughing. I thought she was the minister’s
daughter. She watched me eating
church sandwiches in the rain and
called me Ulysses – I thought
because my mother cut my hair

V
But we rarely sat through
the sermon. Once I grew old
enough to understand the words,
I was dismissed until I grew old
enough not to be terrified.

While the others broke
crackers we slipped
back on the road
my youngest sister and me.

Put together,
we were nine years old,
holding hands, passing
fields of splendour and worshiped
labour. Run, she said
but we couldn’t get much further

We never made it either way
but, Christ, I wished I believed in anything
as deeply as I believed
in that road.
A Nocturne

The little house lets
its man out in the yard, trusts him
without a fence. His mass

moves down the sloping walk, his drawn-out chuckle pouncing into the woods
after a path to another home.

He has all the imagination it takes to bark
and turn back before daybreak.
The voles dig a tomb for moonlight

and crown themselves with bramble
when it rains. I haven’t been
able to unstitch my voice

from his shadow, which lengthens with the dawn.
Back at the little house,
he passes the hearth without looking.

Too late, the cold stone mutters,
I have learned too late
where the thought of fire will not occur.
A Quiet Will

There are things saved for you
when you get older. A book called *Elegy*

that carries the sawbones of our horse
that won’t outlive me.

The live bat that spun in your bedroom.
We cleared you out for school.
When the gloved woman came with the cage,

she stuck the creature’s wings to the tree out back
where it slept. You can find it there with winters

of scurf in its eyes. Hoarfrost on the lawn
in October, a mouse I saved from the happy paws
of a cat, the dented car I owned.

If you read later and find you understand,
know that I never understood the giant screens
of the drive-in near southwest Detroit

where children slept atop old cars and vans

after the early feature ended. The smell of marijuana
and the gravel lot, the prayer for the horse to outlast

me. He’d never fling your tiny body
from his back. One elegy
holds his bridle in its hand. Read it

and know that the nuclear reactors on Lake Erie are always

bird baths for bald eagles, towers
to cool the condensation from our bones.

Read it and know the gang that ran this neighborhood
has tucked its tail between its legs.
Its terrible heroes have extinguished

all the stoplights, taken every car they could
ever want. The toddlers running here in blasts
of mist from an unscrewed hydrant cap are only a cliché
if you haven’t seen them. I lived here with you and your mother
because the neighborhood asked no questions. Our answers
were footfalls between seasons, the wind
you said you saw between our horse’s ears
one Saturday at Rushlow’s farm, where his stertor
hummed one final year for you. I am certain
it was for you.
We Who Once Lived in this House of Stars

Whoever and whatever you are, we too, once lived in this house of stars, and we thought of you.
—Timothy Ferris

1.

Distance not
withstanding, or is it
time? Our place here
requiring so much
apology. How one makes
a home in the
world. How language
must work hard to keep
that meagre foothold; how
the nest is inevitably
fouled by that same
language. None of this
is new—the name for it is
history. How we lived here
the brief time between water and
dust. How the story becomes
in any retelling, a substrate
for belief.

2.

But did not
recognize. Horizon.
Material witness.
What is wanted—
a concrete explanation—what you pour over your cornflakes in the morning. Instead, a man chained to the ceiling. Dreamers and Indians dot the distant landscape; there is no way to steer clear of them. We are running out of the rubber bullets; the next rounds will burn real holes.
Pray for us, father, we know too well what we do. Our orders are to aim true. It does not matter if we tremble; the machine is large enough to damp out small individual perturbations.

3.

Arrives without memory of the journey. A mind empty as pockets. What is history? What is meaning? What is a word? Blood, bone and sinew, surely, but is that
enough? Surely
there are rules, formulas specifying required
content. Surely
a reckoning exists somewhere. What is
motion? What is
forward? It is, of course impossible to know both
velocity and
location. There is no
truth that is not
statistical; no home
that is not
expendable.
Spring in the Emerald City

Air almost too
warm this morning and
something else, not quite
palpable, as if some unseen machine
were whirring away to make
this day—simulation almost
too real. As if each leaf were unfolding
specifically to realize the expression
of its own math; as if the very edges
of the world comprised, above all,
an answer. Is this what Adam
saw that first morning, waking
to the wonder of a made world?
Oh, but here we know that the apple
has already been eaten; our libraries
are filled with the accounting of broken
commandments. We are still looking
for the loophole. This morning perhaps only
a reprieve, engineered from carefully compiled
historical data. May six—it looks
like this.
Exactly.
Contribution Notes

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Dan Lewis earns his living as a technical writer in Worcester, MA, and lives his earning reading and writing poetry. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in Diner, Beloit Poetry Journal, Southern New Hampshire University Journal, Café Review, Paper Street, The Worcester Review, and others.

elena minor is the founding editor of Palabra A Magazine of Chicano & Latino Literary Art. Her poetry and fiction have been published in Poetry Midwest, 26, Vox, Prism Review, BorderSenses, The Big Ugly Review, Quercus Review, edifice WRECKED, Banyan Review and Facets and has work forthcoming in Diner. She is a past first prize recipient of the Chicano/Latino Literary Prize for drama.

Matt Morris has appeared in various magazines and anthologies, including Blue Mesa, DMQ, 88, Hunger Mountain, Manthology, Runes, and Swink,. His first book, Nearing Narcoma, won the 2003 Main Street Rag Poetry Award (selected by Joy Harjo). When not scouring the cliffs of Azshara for arcane crystals, he can often be found in Ironforge looking for a group to run Scholomance or UBRS. Needs tank and healer. No noobs.

André Narbonne currently teaches English at The University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada. He is a former chair of the BS Poetry Society (Halifax), and his poetry and prose have won several awards and appeared in Pottersfield Portfolio, Sage of Consciousness and The Antigonish Review among other literary journals.

New Yorker Carol Novack is the author of a chapbook of poems published in Australia, where she received a writer's grant equivalent to an NEA. Her writings can and will be found in many publications, including The Penguin Book of Australian Women Poets, American Letters & Commentary, Anemone Sidecar, Diagram, Big Bridge, BlazeVOX, Del Sol Review, First Intensity, 5_Trope, La Petite Zine, LIT, Milk, Notre Dame Review, Orphan Leaf Review, and Word Riot. Carol publishes and edits the offbeat multimedia e-journal Mad Hatters' Review. Her prose poem "Destination" was a “best of web del sol fiction” selection (Series 20). She is co-editing an anthology of innovative short fictions and teaches inventive fiction writing at an arts organization.

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