

MINUTES FROM PRAGMA

by

JUAN MARTINEZ  
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2000

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## ABSTRACT

*Minutes from Pragma* is a collection of twelve pieces—a memoir, five short stories, and six short-shorts—exploring ways in which estranged characters may find refuge from chaos and entropy.

These stories attempt to deal with bleakness and despair through playfulness and humor. In "Enterprise Carolina: A Capsule Review," time has stopped, but somehow everyday life goes on as usual. In "Errands," children work in razorblade factories. In "Roadblock," the narrator lives with a relative who repeatedly sets his possessions on fire.

The collection concentrates on hardship and alienation, but suggests ways in which characters may confront and endure hard times. Characters' attempts to connect with others sometimes fail, but the characters themselves persevere—they read, hold hands, even treat one other kindly. In these ways, they fashion temporary shelters from the frustrations and horrors of the world.

For Alvaro, Susana, and Maria Paula

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## SOUVENIRS FROM GANYMEDE

*Time is like a river made up of the events which happen, and a violent stream; for as soon as a thing has been seen, it is carried away, and another comes in its place, and this will be carried away too.*

*Marcus Aurelius, The Meditations*

The snakes had nowhere to go, so they ended up in our homes. We extracted four from our A/C unit. They crawled in and wouldn't be found till the unit malfunctioned and stank up the house, and little drama was made of the extraction. We lived with live snakes and were okay with dead ones. The live ones ran through our gardens. A man with an unkempt beard was called upon to deal with those thought poisonous: He doused them in gasoline, lit them on fire, let them burn, and swung them into a ravine with a cartwheel motion. I must have watched that arc a few times. Mostly I remember the snakes found in the A/C unit—already dead, probably not at all that bright to begin with, sad, harmless.

They made their way to our ducts from 1979 to 1983. We lived in Guri, a worker's camp in Venezuela, on a low dimple adjoining what would become, when completed, one of the biggest dams in the world. Caterpillar trucks cleared the land in wide sweeps. The forests of Canaima burned, the smell sweet. We lived in paradise and were expelling the snakes.

The American and Canadian workers living in the camp took us aside. Showed us charts. Warned us about corals.

Children chased coral snakes because they were small, hard to find, colorful, and had no desire to be caught. No one we knew was bit by a coral snake. Corals were shy, as were scorpions, which we sometimes found when we shook our sneakers before putting them on, although we put them on many times without shaking (we often forgot) and nothing happened.

Nothing happened with the *arañas monas* either. They were nothing more than particularly large tarantulas. They looked otherworldly, extraterrestrial, and they scattered out of unexpected places. Closets. Boxes. Pants pockets. Barbecue pits.

One scattered out hissing, on fire, out of the coals. It jumped out of the grill and onto a table and into the ground. It moved fast and passed right by me, a little alien on fire looking for a forest and finding nothing but pre-fabs and shrubbery.

Post-tarantula, Peruvian friends of my parents grilled anticuchos, marinated cow hearts, which I ate again only recently and which are better than you might think, specially if you don't know what they are before you eat them. The dish took me right back to Guri. These friends, Lucho and Lucia, also prepared exquisite fish seviches: chunks of raw fish marinated in lemon juice. Our Argentinean neighbors introduced me to *mate* and ark clams. People had flown from all parts of the world because Venezuela had struck oil and had too much money and didn't know what to do with it.

When they arrived in Guri, my father was twenty-five, a scholarship kid, an industrial engineer who turned down a Fulbright because he had just met the person who follows this dash—my mother was twenty-two, bright, a beauty who received a call from a former suitor on her honeymoon, the boy heartbroken and telling her that if she did not leave my father he would

kill himself. She told him to go to hell. My mother was seventeen when she married, my father twenty.

They are extraordinarily good-looking people—toned, symmetrical, and (during their twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties) eerily ageless, young. They are in their sixties now and could pass for people in their early forties.

Their crowd in Guri was mostly young and unmarried. They spent their weekends on beaches, following long, artfully choreographed car trips.

I was the only child for a long time. When I visit my parents' friends or when they visit me, they tell me so, that I was this little thing chattering away with all the twentysomethings. They break out photo albums (they carry them on trips, and e-mail forgotten prints—what happened for them during their twenties never repeated itself, I don't think, never again that combination of oil-boom, disposable income, youth, free time; in sharing these photographs they are confirming an unlikely moment in the unlikeliest of places; they're looking for confirmation: look, this happened, here's the proof; here's conclusive evidence). On those photos I'm at the forefront, flanked by limbs, dark girls in bright-yellow bikinis, thin laughing men with sideburns and unbuttoned shirts printed with highly questionable patterns. They were into body-surfing, the waves on Playa Colorada peaking at twenty feet. They were all very young and full of a kind of energy whose afterglow I feel even now. There were bonfires. There were stops along the highway for coconut water, raw oysters shucked live and doused in lime and slurped down, and corn arepas topped with farmer's cheese.

There was the food, and there was also the sense of being unique among unique people—anything I said was listened to with more consideration than it deserved. We returned from these

trips tired, sandy, and bronzed, soaked with and overloaded by sun and waves, an intimation that what mattered could be drunk from the world in large draughts. I was four, I was seven, and they all seemed wise, old, beautiful.

The dam dwarfed the camp. The Caterpillar trucks moved chunks of earth on their backs, the diameter of their wheels three times the size of a man. Cranes moved on steel tresses along the concrete skirt of the structure. A detailed, scale-size model had been built by the side—it used a small tributary of the Caroni and replicated the larger structure in every way, including fully-functioning turbines that produced a trickle of electricity.

I did not visit often, but did visit. The dam confirmed what I already knew from watching Japanese cartoons on Venezuelan TV: *Capitán Centella (Gekko Kamen)*, *Gaiking*, *Mazinger Z (Tranzor Z)*, and a few others that blended together. The world buzzed with large and wonderful man-made structures. Some battled crime. Others generated energy.

The camp itself was all pre-fab structures. It had two bowling alleys, two country clubs, three cinemas, a handful of restaurants. There were large stretches of red dirt, dense clusters of trees thick with the fog of rotting mangos, things half-built or torn down or put up. Past a small mountain we found a cluster of houses made entirely of Styrofoam. Concrete would be poured into them eventually. We tore chunks and moved into hiding places and threw rocks at each other. We also threw the Styrofoam, to no avail.

We often threw rocks at each other. We used chunks of clay when we could but weren't very particular. These fights lasted hours. Nobody won, and allegiances didn't last long, and they



were a lot of fun. A rock cracked my head and the wound required a few stitches. We hurt each other all the time. We picked fights, chased dogs, raced bikes down steep ravines. The American and Canadian kids mostly stayed away. I befriended a few, partly because our Guyanan maid spoke English and I was learning and wanted to practice, mostly because they had the best toys. Peter had the Millennium Falcon *and* Slave One. He had an Atari. His grandmother mailed tapes from the U.S. We popped them in the Betamax and watched *The Smurfs*, *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer*, *G.I. Joe*, other shows, plus all those remarkable ads for cereals and action figures.

You got what you wanted in Guri. You asked for it and it was given to you. I was spoiled. We all were.

There was school. I don't remember much. I doodled on books, notebooks, any available surface. One teacher put me and another kid in a drawing class. The other kid drew fantastic, highly detailed cityscapes. They were intricate and full of technique and virtuosity: windows properly spaced, sophisticated instances of perspective, all betraying a reasonable sense of architectural theory for an eight-year-old. He drew UFOs hovering above these landscape. They shot laser beams and set the buildings on fire. The destruction was in every level inferior to the city—the UFOs were crude, as were the lasers, as were the people on fire with their hands up in the air. But I remember the pleasure he got from destroying his creation. He always drew the city first in pencil, the devastation overlaid later with Crayolas.

When we drove at night my mom asked me to keep an eye out for a black cow. You'd only find it at night, a perfectly black cow that was a harbinger of something, I forget what. The

roads in Guri were dark and, past the camp proper, unpaved: long dusty strips amidst vast clearings. Bruised sky, small cones lighting a small patch of land, twin ribbons of pale earth unwinding into the car hood.

When I swam at night I was convinced that the squid from Disney's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* waited in the murky, chlorinated depths. Snakes, tarantulas, and scorpions didn't scare me—they were part of the landscape. But I'd only seen the giant squid in the movie and imagined it below me, as I imagined the shark from *Jaws* lunging from some unknown part of the pool. (Pete played the movie for me; he never let me forget that I ran out of the room about five minutes in, so that I didn't actually see the shark, but conflated the artwork of the movie poster with the music and the lurking camera—that was enough.)

At sea I swam and body-surfed in the smaller waves and poked dead grounded jellyfish with sticks. Crabs I didn't mess with: they too had an extraterrestrial quality. They could have been villains in any one of the Japanese shows.

Victoria was often kidnapped by these villains. I always rescued her. There was not much in the way of physical romance in these fantasies, but they were baroque, elaborate affairs.

Victoria lived three houses from me—she was Argentinean, two years older, spent time with me with bemused contempt and only if I agreed to play whatever she wanted to play, held my hand, informed me that we would be married when we grew up. She was light-skinned, blue-eyed, freckled, and has remained so. After Guri, we didn't hear from each other for five years, then she called: her father had divorced and she was living with him in a houseboat docked in

Caracas. The last time she wrote, she was living in another houseboat—Valladolid, Argentina. She enclosed a photograph, asked if I remembered that we were engaged. She was still lovely. I would still rescue her from any Japanese robot that might come her way. I never wrote back and have not heard from her in years, so that she has remained fixed on a boat somewhere on the coast of South America, the first girl who ever took my hand, a castaway.

Ukio still writes to my mother. He could speak flawless Portuguese and a halting Spanish. He taught me chess and (he insists) Japanese, although I do not remember learning it, and if I did I've forgotten it all. I judged all of my parents' friends by the quality of their gifts. (Again: We were all very spoiled.) Ukio gave me some of my most memorable Matchbox cars, as well as my first LP (*Unmasked*, by Kiss) and a few decent Star Wars action figures. He has written to me a few times, and I try to respond but often don't, and there's a sense—with him and with all of these people, who I love and who make up a vivid part of my life—that in responding I'm mooring myself to that time, to those years that do not seem to have happened at all, and that in fixing any memory to the page, or to the screen, I am failing it, and failing these friends, all twenty, thirty years older than me, and failing to preserve it as it should be preserved. When we meet in person and talk it's fine. We still do, from time to time. Ukio still looks very youthful. He's shy, and has flown to every continent, and has worked with several oil companies. He has never married. We all suspected that he had a crush on my mother, and on some of the other women of that group—he broke out the ubiquitous photo album, and presented me once again with all of us at an impossible time, an impossible place. They're all laughing. They're tanned and healthy, young, toned—they're all extraordinary people.

And there is, in remembering them, still a sense of having failed the actual, the memories. They're livid, effulgent, light-filled visions. Transcribe them and everything falls flat and leaden: They were here, we were all here, and now we are not. Again: failure.

I was three when I first arrived, nine when I left.

No one stayed in Guri. My parents and I left shortly before the Bolivar lost its value. The bottom fell out of the boom. Dad had converted our savings to dollars a few weeks before. We were packed and ready to go. Others did the same thing. Some lost all they had, Victoria's parents among them. We all scattered to distant places.

The first book I ever read for pleasure was read in Guri, and it was about a distant place. It claimed to be a nonfiction account of being taken aboard a UFO and flown to Ganymede. I don't know how old I was, or why I wasn't outside throwing a rock at another kid, but this book broke me in—I took it for truth and followed the author as he was abducted and shown a perfect civilization on a satellite of Jupiter. He warned doubters: It's true, I was there, it happened. I was no doubter. These UFOs could come in at any time, drop you in Ganymede. I finished the book and hid behind the couch, convinced that they were coming for me. I hid for hours.

There would be some comfort in failing to find any evidence of this book's existence. It should, like most of what I remember, betray some degree of doubt as to its existence.

It exists. Its author is Yosip Ibrahim. It's been translated to English: *I Visited Ganymede*.

I wish it'd been a better book, or that I would have seen that it was hoax, or that it wouldn't have affected me as much as it did, but no luck. The book has remained fixed in my mind. The terror of that afternoon is also fixed. Aliens were out to get me. What was written and printed was true. (And the aliens, by the way, were pretty benign folk, higher beings, quite evolved, so my terror is still perplexing. What was I afraid of?) Ibrahim's travelogue was lost in one of our moves, and I've never made an effort to find another copy, or to figure out who the strange man behind the very strange abduction story turned out to be. He is part of Guri. And Guri is gone.

The dam has been built. The last stage flooded our neighborhood. Our old pre-fab house lies beneath the waters of the Caroni river. I'd like to tell you that you can see the rooftops on sunny days. I'd be lying. I have no clue, but know that the water would in fact be shallow by where we lived. It is now smooth, crystalline, calm, probably pleasant. I've seen photographs. It looks pleasant enough. It doesn't look like anything I remember. They did not raze the neighborhood before flooding, so the houses are all there, and one could, in theory, revisit them: the wide garden, the built-in bookshelf where Ibrahim's book waited for me, the yard where our dogs and our one turtle played. One could dive. One could find concrete evidence.

The dam has been built, the house has been flooded, and that should be enough, but there is also this: My parents, in tennis whites, walking towards me. We're at one of Guri's two country clubs. My father has put his hand on my mother's shoulder. They're smiling. They're walking towards me.

We fail. Life is essentially a string of failures: We fail to stay in one place. We fail to be the people we'd like to be. We fail others, others fail us. We fail to live up to expectations. We

fail to resurrect the past, or to let it go. In end, we fail to keep on living, which given how much practice we have at it, we should be able to keep at it forever, but don't.

My parents are walking towards me, are looking at me, and I'm convinced that I am loved, will always be loved, and that this love will never waver. This certainty has not been challenged. It has not changed. It should have. This love, like everything in life—which after all is given to swift turns, shapeless shapes, random bursts of grief and grace—should have failed. It hasn't. These are ancillary mysteries. They are peripheral to the business of living but crucial, because they keep us going. They're part of the mystery train, the threads tying us together, the ghosts of fingerprints: they are at the heart of beauty. They are light falling in certain rooms on certain mornings.

## THE WOMEN WHO TALK TO THEMSELVES

You would not think you'd fall for a woman who talks to herself, but there it is: It's done, it has happened. They are everywhere and there are more of them this week than there were last week, and you have fallen for one.

And did you not think they were all squat or odd-looking? You did, and you were for the most part right. They wait on bus benches and point at random places in the ground as if signaling to low-flying birds or roustabout squirrels. They wear odd-fitting dresses. They are overweight most of the time. They are sad and slight sometimes. They carry strange items they have just purchased. They talk in high squeaky voices or low alarming murmurs. If there is another side to the conversation it is a side they are angry at or conspiring with, or it is God—like the short dumpy woman who thanked Jesus.

She said (three weeks ago), "Thank you, Jesus! My Jesus! I know my Jesus is Jesus! Thank you!" She carried a Publix bag with groceries and a cake and birthday items: candles, noisemakers, and party hats. And last week she was back on the bus. And she carried more birthday items and another cake.

And you suspected—and you are probably right—that these items are not really for a sane birthday party. That these were things she was buying for herself. Were you saddened by it? You were, a little—you imagined throwing a little birthday bash for yourself: No one else there, just you with a foil hat and a noisemaker, singing to yourself and making a wish. What makes it unspeakably sad is the effort. What it makes it unspeakably sad is that it isn't sad, not for her, not

really: that this birthday party is a true comfort, an honest source of joy, and that though you wish to sympathize you can only shudder a little—that your capacity for compassion and empathy is nowhere near where you would like it to be. You could not imagine anyone caring for one of these unfortunates.

You would not think it would happen but it did.

After nights of fitful work you take the bus to your apartment—to your cat, your beer, your TV. You drink and grow heavy. You have mown endless grass for hours and hours and your arms itch and your work clothes are stained with the juice of the field, and with burrs, and bugs, and bubblegum. You wake up tired and in deep need of morning shows targeted at women. You watch *The View*. Maybe, you think, you do not understand women. Maybe you are right. You watch Oprah. You are fascinated and perplexed. It has been a long time since you have had a girlfriend. Your shift begins at midnight—you are expected to be done with the grounds by eight in the morning. You are a short man and like all short men you have grown a beard. You own a cat that you talk to more than you should.

What matters is the physical. You learned this in high-school. You learned that you were no prize. You learned that you could be sometimes charming and polite, and that charm and politeness helped a little, but not a lot. (And—you do not think about this too often and are vaguely reluctant to admit it—what matters for you is the physical as well.)

The woman wears a calico dress in the chill of this southern winter. She is tall and leggy and a brunette, and has very green eyes and looks vaguely Irish and she is angular—she walks as though she was stabbing the ground and did not want to; she tilts her head to inspect the ground and whatever she is saying is being said to nobody, or to nobody in particular, or to somebody



who is not there. (You do not know why you are surprised by her beauty. You do not know why you find it odd that someone who has some kind of psychological problem could be beautiful. To your credit, you know that there is something wrong with that line of thinking, something ugly: You think of blind people in movies, and you cannot help but think that their real-life counterparts are not nearly as attractive, and then you remember the deaf girl with the golden locks and the honey skin in high school: how beautiful she was. But your compassion and your empathy—they are negligible.) The woman talks to herself, though you cannot hear what she is saying, she talks so low. And you are too shy and too struck by her beauty to sit closer. You avoid direct inspection. You would not think of approaching her.

She is lovely and you are in love with her, you think.

You think of what it would be like to talk to yourself like she does.

This is what it is like.

Tonight you step into pools of orange from the glow of the lamplights. You can see yourself and the lawnmower on the reflective walls of the low flat buildings of the research park. You need to talk a little louder—I can barely hear you—the lawnmower needs to be looked at once you get done with it. (It probably needs oil.) Have you wondered what they do in there, in those buildings? You have. Beats me.

What matters is the physical. What matters is that you are alone. What matters is that she is beautiful. What matters is that you will not reach her—she is not reachable, is not to be reached, is unreachable.

You think you can talk to yourself if there is no one else there. You do it for a few minutes before realizing that you cannot: It's exhausting and pointless. Your throat is sore. You wouldn't be able to do it all day—you would have nothing left to say in very little time.

If you stop right now this is what you will hear: the grumbling of the lawnmower, the Doppler decay of a lone automobile on the interstate, the hum of the electrical transformer by the building nearest you, your keys rattling in your pocket, the beating of your heart low and steady in your ear.

OK. Yes.

Yes, that is what I want to hear.

## **AFTER THE END OF THE WORLD: A CAPSULE REVIEW**

Enterprise Carolina sits at the edge of the end of the world, and she doesn't know it. These are the first few months of the Event: clocks and timers have slowed down, the Swedish rock band Roxette has made a comeback, and talking cats are making sporadic appearances—also some Seraphim.

Enterprise Carolina carouses with mountain bikers and Hell's Angels. She wears shitkickers. After dinner she gathers her gang of fellow fifteen-year-olds and contemplates vandalism in the half-empty malls of Culver City.

They beat up old men! They shoplift from The Limited! They return shoplifted items to the store and (brazenly! brazenly!) demand a smaller size, a larger size, a different color! They stare down older girls and giggle at their weight behind their backs! They fill up on samples from the food court! They loiter by the fountain!

They wear leather and dog-collars, fishnet stockings cosmetically torn, heavy mascara, and silver and silverette chains with skulls, monkeys, Celtic crosses, and the suggestive tongue logo of The Rolling Stones. Their hair is dramatically gelled. They sulk. They do not like you.

Their performance is not without problems.

Enterprise Carolina is a bit too beautiful. One feels uncomfortable with this hyper-erotized depiction of a teenager, balanced as it might be by Carolina's dramatic revelation to Lozenge Carmichael—sidekick—that she is a virgin and will remain so until married. Carolina is pure and has a heart of gold—is this what we need for the days after the end of the world?

Should we not be stepping away from this queasy mixture of hard-edged grit and cotton-candy idealism?

And what of the design choices? Enough with the Mad Max clones already. So the world ended. Fine. But why do we—all of us—feel the need to wear clothing that is dusty and torn, and patched together willy-nilly?

The Wal-Marts and the Gaps are still running. Why not go there? Have we lost our zest for tasteful outfits in our collective wait for judgment from some Supreme Being? Must we own wolves? And why drive souped-up cars welded from makes both domestic and imported? And why decorate them with spikes, gun turrets, and shark fins?

Time has become unmoored and we are no longer at the whim of mortality. Fine. The old men who have been beat up will get up in the morning and have their coffee, unbruised and sprightly. I'll still be writing this review. Enterprise Carolina will still haunt the streets of Culver City—she will march under the yellow and red backlit signs of Indian, Thai, and Cuban restaurants, and she will walk to Sony Studios and make obscene gestures at the movie ads, at the tourists, at the cats who just can't seem to shut up. I don't think we should be overdramatic, is all.

It is not overdramatic, however, to rhapsodize about Enterprise Carolina's beauty—to say that she will be a stunning woman when and if time begins to move forward again. That she might abandon her life as the leader of a wild outlaw gang. That she might pursue college and get a degree in liberal arts. That her golden hair and crooked smile and street smarts have won the respect of Capsule Reviewers everywhere. That she is dazzling and worthy of admiration, stomping in her shitkickers into the haze of this fiery perpetual sunset, fading from us as we take

our notes and make appreciative comments to fellow Reviewers. That she has enthralled us. That she is remarkable in a time that is anything but.

Five stars. Five golden stars. Five golden stars and my heart.

## **FORSAKEN, THE CREW AWAITED NEWS FROM THE PEOPLE BELOW**

Forsaken, the crew awaited news from the people below. At noon they gathered at the helm. The device was on. They leaned into it, their ears pressed against the auricular, and heard nothing. Stomachs rumbled. Robert mistook the rumbling for the burning of coal, but he was quickly shushed and corrected.

By midnight only five remained. The rest had gone below. The five at the helm waited for news, but heard nothing, not even rumbling stomachs. (Lunch had been served at two: braised goose, Pop Tarts, fettuccini.) Robert expressed anger, and also (at eight) renewed hunger. He was shushed and reprimanded. They waited, ears close to the auricular on the device, and developed theories.

The theories:

(1) The device was working, else at least one person from the crew would have returned and asked if they had not heard him, the person returning, speaking through the device—maybe shouting. Maybe even gesticulating, as many do when on the telephone, for no practical reason. But something was keeping them—what it was, nobody knew. But:

(a) It was so interesting that it kept the crew below thoroughly absorbed. All interest in communicating with those above was replaced by interest in this considerably more interesting thing.

(b) It was so deadly that it obliterated the crew before they could use the device.

And not only deadly and terrible, but also very very quick, for how else could it get to them before they could even scream?

(2) The device was not working, else they would have heard some sign of it at work.

Regardless, as in (1), some force kept them below. So:

(a) As in (1a), though some conceded that maybe even with the interesting thing, the crew would have made some efforts to use the device—perhaps to tell them of the interesting thing. But if it was too fascinating, they agreed, the efforts to communicate via the broken device or to attempt repair were most likely half-hearted.

(b) As in (1b): They had not returned because they had been eaten—or something—by the horrible thing. And they had not heard the screams (and other remonstrations of agony & etc.) because of the malfunctioning device. Unlike (1b), (2b) posited a thing that needed not be devilishly quick. As a variant of which:

(c) The thing itself had disabled the device, and proceeded to (2b). So the thing did not need to be possessed of uncanny swiftness, merely some basic mechanical ability. Or luck: it might have broken the device by accident.

(3) The crew below were playing a practical joke on those above. Ha ha. Though of course it was probably terrifically funny once down there—you were "in the know" the minute you descended. Were there not muffled chuckles heard through the device? Alas, there were not. But the device could have been temporarily disconnected. Ha ha. And the forsaken crew above—only three remained—would be forced to consider theoreticals (1a) - (3a), much to the delectation and hooting of those below. Also maybe:

(a) It had started as a joke, but the presence of a horrible thing could have led to theoreticals (2a)-(c).

Forsaken, the three awaited news. Robert complained, and panicked, and said he was going down there. To which the other two said, Whatever, fine, do what you will. But he was just bluffing, the coward.

They reached shore and contacted the maritime authorities. The authorities boarded the ship. They were never seen again. More authorities boarded, also never to be seen again.

Nobody has since gone into the bowels of the ship.

All passageways leading downwards have been sealed.

Its helm (with the device intact, functioning or not) is open to the public on Tuesdays and Thursdays, from nine to five, two dollars for adults, one dollar for children, free for children under two. Photographs are allowed but not encouraged.

Most, when photographed, lean into the device, ears against the auricular. "Hello?" they say in jest. If the crew and authorities are still down there, and the device is functioning from their end, that's all they hear: Hello, hello, hello. Hello, anybody there? Hello?



## ERRANDS

Rosalie's parents lived in a forest. Rosalie lived in an apartment complex. They lived in Oviedo, a city adjoining Orlando, many years from now.

Rosalie measured time by how many birds hit the window: five in a row meant that it was late afternoon, and that she should be out. The phone rang—she did not pick it up because the called ID showed her parents' number. They were calling from the forest. If she could make it through her little one-day vacation without having to talk to them it would be wonderful. She had very little money for food and did not want to share the little she had with them.

She needed to pick up some Shake-and-Bake—the forest where her parents lived lay between her apartment and the Publix supermarket.

The birds were small—and dun-colored, ugly, and dumb.

She put on the polo shirt with the Taco Bell logo from her job last summer and stepped out. She turned to her apartment and waved—she said goodbye to the TV (still on), her comfy chair (rescued a few months ago from a Dumpster, though she needed the help of a few people she didn't know too well from the factory), and her modest stack of Golden Books (she colored on the their margins with Crayolas, though the doodles did not stay fixed to the stiff, slick pages). She turned again. She waved to K., the naked woman who stood with the broom in the

apartment opposite hers. K. waved back, though she was blind. How the blind woman interpreted Rosalie's mute gestures she never knew.

K. never closed her door. She was blind, but she was lovely. Rosalie was in love with her blind neighbor.

(She had told her as much last summer. She brought her tacos that she smuggled after she was done cleaning. The blind neighbor thanked her for the tacos, but refused to acknowledge her feelings. "You're a child," K. said. "You don't know what you want. You can't know what you want if you're eight or ten, or however old you are. How old are you anyway?" Rosalie held all five fingers of her left hand, four of her right, and shook her head: she was in love; she knew what she wanted. K. said, "When you're as young as you are you don't know what you want.")

"If you're going out," K. said, "you mind picking me up some Advil?"

"Not at all," Rosalie said.

"You're a dear."

"I love you."

K. smiled and waved her off. She must have a terrible headache, Rosalie thought, and if she brought the Advil back and her headache was gone would the blind woman love her? Would K. love her then? (It bothered her that she knew only a letter of her true love's name—when they first met she had asked her her name, and she had said K., and Rosalie had asked her if it was Kay as in Mary Kay, and she had said No, that K. was just the first letter of her name, and when Rosalie asked her what her full name was, K. had said, "I'm blind. If you're wondering why I'm walking around the house without a stitch on, that's why. Because why not?") You did not fall in

love with your errand girl, did you? She walked down the stairs and knocked on her other neighbor's door.

“Jesus is my Jesus is Jesus,” Umega Upsilon said.

The woman was older than K., and stouter, but beautiful all the same. She was tall and wore a pale-blue gingham dress and she spoke to herself continuously.

“Hello! I'm going to pick up some Advil for K. Also some stuff? Other stuff? So I was wondering if, you know, if you needed anything.”

Umega walked into the folds of her apartment. Rosalie waited outside.

If she married Umega the first thing she would do would be to clean up the place and get an air freshener and maybe throw out the cats or at least let them out once in a while, but if she let the cats out they would jump on the stunned birds and torture the poor things. She had seen them do it. They wouldn't kill the birds. They would paw at them for hours. If cats knew CPR they would revive the birds when they were at death's door and paw at them again until they were at death's door *again*, and then they would re-administer CPR.

Rosalie snapped the necks of the birds. They tasted odd, and she never plucked them right, but they were free-range—they were free. Besides, they were migratory birds migrating to nowhere; they were going from nowhere to nowhere, and they kept hitting windows and cars. They were suicidal and nutritious.

Umega returned with a shopping list scrawled on the back of a utilities envelope.

“Sure. I can get this. Also, I keep telling K. that I love her? And she keeps acting like I'm not serious. So if she's like that—if she's all oh-I-like-you-but-I-don't-like-you-like-you—then I

want you to know that I would *totally* consider you? But we would have to do something about the cats.”

“Jesus is Jesus. My Jesus.”

“So I’ll be back with the stuff.” Rosalie pocketed the money Umega gave her. “And litter? Because you didn’t put it on the list but you need it.”

Rosalie tilted her chin and widened her pupils—she liked trying her Orphan Eyes on Umega because they had no real effect. Umega hardly looked at her at all. Umega hardly looked at the world, just the corners.

Rosalie had worked as an Orphan last Christmas. Grownups walked hand in hand with her from toy store to toy store in the mall and bought her things. She could keep the toys or return them and get a commission. They told her she could return for Easter if she wanted. She did not want to. It was an in-between job: after the Bell and before the razorblade factory. She was happier at the razorblade factory.

Because here was the thing: as an Orphan you had to pretend your parents had died, and they dressed you up in rags, and you had to be teary and snotty all the time, and there were days when no one would show up and you’d just sit there, waiting, doing nothing, talking with the other children, rehearsing your tales of woe and parental loss: random decapitations, plane accidents, lottery-ordained executions, cancer, AIDS, drug addictions, love triangles that resulted in terminal heartbreak, brake failures in ethanol buggies. It was too much work.

At the razorblade factory she packaged four razors into small paper envelopes. They gave her gloves, pink and imprinted with the logos of Sanrio characters: Hello Kitty, Pukka, Ponchi, Belial. Her co-workers, all about the same height and age, hardly spoke—they were so busy.

“I’m seeing my parents tomorrow,” one of them (Martha? Maria?) said yesterday.

“Mine are dead,” Rosalie said, not really looking at Martha or Maria.

They worked for an hour before the girl next to her, Irene or Izzy, said something. “You should hang out with me. I’m going to be watching TV all day.”

“I don’t watch TV,” Rosalie said. The razors hardly ever caused an accident, and fatalities were rare. They had been well trained.

She packaged and thought of the women she wanted to marry, thinking maybe that they would hang out during her break, all the while smiling and humming along to the song piped through the speakers. She knew the name of it because they played it all the time and she had asked her shift manager, and he had found out for her from the people higher up: Schubert’s *Trout Quintet*. She knew all the parts, and thought that maybe she could get it for her apartment—there was a kind of happiness in listening to the song and following it in your head, in lying to her co-workers, in watching the birds hit the window, in thinking about K. and Upsilon, and she could almost say what it was but not quite. She could feel it but not name it. It was a kind of daydreaming but not quite.

Upsilon closed the door and Rosalie found herself mentally adding the litter to the list of items. A bird had shaken itself back to consciousness on the patch of brown grass by her side.

The bird fluttered into the air—it rose in a breathtaking arc interrupted, for a second time, by Rosalie’s second-floor bedroom window.

Dumb birds. Dumb, *dumb* birds.

She reached the store at seven-thirty, the hem of her shirt rimmed with mud. She worked at the Taco Bell a week before they had begun providing uniforms her size, but her store had not lucked out, and she had been specially unlucky: all the manager had left were extra-large men’s shirts. (She remembered talking to a union person who told her that it was wrong for underage children to work. Rosalie had told him that since ’09 it didn’t matter, because if you were over eight you were not underage anymore. Because of the resolution. And the union person had said that resolution or no resolution it didn’t matter: she was underage. And she said no—not according to the law. And the union person huffed and puffed and moved on to the next employee, but the store manager spotted him and brought out the shotgun and the union person had to scam.) The polo shirts fitted her like dresses. She thought of them as dresses. Her Taco Bell dresses.

First she purchased K.’s Advil at the Publix drugstore so she wouldn’t forget. She put K.’s change in her front pocket, then pulled the money Umega had given her from her shorts. She unfolded the utilities envelope and walked the wide aisles and plucked the various items from their nests—the candles to the saints, the Lotto ticket, the Clamato, the thin envelopes of freeze-dried steaks, the cans of tuna fish, the cat food, the litter, and the Shake-and-Bake for the birds. She also bought herself a small square of government chocolate wrapped in the white and green colors of the supermarket.

The bags were heavy but not *heavy* heavy. Not like the bags of frozen beef at the Bell. Not like the sour cream and the guacamole.

On her way out she patted Hairy Seldom the dog. She liked the dog. Whenever she had some time she would sit down next to him and chatter away. She pretended that the dog talked back. Like she would say, “Oh, but it’s such a hot hot day and I’ve got such a long way to go and I’m sure I look a mess.” And the dog would be like, “Oh, no, you look lovely. You are such a lovely girl and you look really lovely in that dress—specially lovely—and any girl who married you would be so-oh lucky.” And she would be like, “Oh, you!” And Hairy would say, “Really, like you’re Saint Di or Saint Bleeth: that lovely.” And Rosalie would giggle. Saint Rosalie. The dog didn’t talk, of course. Dogs don’t talk. It just sat there with its stupid happy Lab face and smiled at Rosalie. Publix had stenciled the dog’s white fur with the supermarket’s sans serif “P”-logo in mint-green on its back and stomach. The dog sat there and smiled. But you could sit right next to him and *pretend*. He smelled like the strawberry shampoo she smelled on the dirt they had rubbed on her rags, when she worked as an Orphan.

“I’m so tired,” she pretended to say to Hairy. “So-oh tired. But it’s cool because today and tomorrow I don’t have anything to do. Nothing at all! I can sit at home and watch TV. I can play Parcheesi with K.!”

“I’m happy for you,” Hairy said. “It’s good to sit around and do nothing at all. It’s my favorite thing! It’s what I love doing all day! And, by the way, don’t you look particularly lovely today in your lovely, lovely dress.”

“Oh, you.”

She patted the dog and left the supermarket via the sliding doors that had stopped sliding six months ago when they cut off the A/C. Dark already. Her favorite show would be on soon. She would be late for it unless she cut through the forest. She did not want to go through it. She did not want to run into her parents.

The forest was not dark or scary: it was well-lit and easy to navigate. The trees were tall but mostly leafless, and had been planted in neat symmetrical grids. She would be home in no time at all if she followed the path and avoided the golf balls that had exhausted their arc and tapped and pocked at the trunks and at passersby, and besides, the light from the branches hanging high overhead was more reliable than the flickering yellow splotches of the street lights—so she dove into the path. She thought that maybe this time she could pretend that she couldn't hear them, but she knew she could not. She walked down past the shed hoping that maybe they wouldn't be there, but they were there, of course they were. They heard her, and she heard them—she heard them call her out (“Our daughter! Our darling daughter! Our Rosalie!”)—and she thought, Maybe I'll just pass by and they won't go after me, and maybe they won't cry, but she heard their slow weak steps behind her, their sad shuffle on the dry dun needles, and she heard them sobbing, so she had no choice but to stop, though she didn't turn around—they wouldn't make her turn around—she heard them sobbing, asking why she didn't stop by more often, why their darling Rosalie didn't even *call* or mail them a postcard, some sign that she was alive and doing well, and by the way how was the Taco Bell job working out, and she told them that it wasn't, that she had quit but she was doing okay at the razorblade factory, and that she



was making a good living, and she would soon be married to a lovely woman with a physical impediment.

They said, “Oh we are so proud, so proud of you, and do you have, do you by any chance have any... Do you have any...?”

Rosalie tossed them her little square of chocolate and some of Umega’s change, which she hoped Umega wouldn’t miss, and she said that she had to get going if she was going to make her show, and they said Okay, fine, but write or call. Stop by.

“I will,” Rosalie said. She waved goodbye and ran out of the woods and into her apartment complex.

After the first commercial break she was seized by panic: she had forgotten the errands. She had left the bags in the forest. And if she were to run back they wouldn’t be there any more. The bags would be gone.

But no: there they were, on the kitchen counter. She picked up the Advil and Umega’s bag and walked through the patio and into K.’s apartment, who was watching the same show. K. thanked the child with a distracted wave. Rosalie ran downstairs and knocked at Umega’s door. She handed Umega her groceries. She gave Umega what remained of her change, and Umega said, “Jesus! Jesus is Jesus,” which might have meant Thanks. Or it might have meant, Where’s the rest of my change?

Rosalie responded to K.’s wave and Umega’s words with the same silent burst from the day before: the happiness for which she had not found a name, but which she had felt on saying

goodbye to her parents. She recognized something else in it. She still did not have a word for it, but she thought it was a lonely sort of happiness, or a happy sort of loneliness.

When Rosalie returned to her apartment the show had just started again. A heavy indistinct object (a safe? a piano?) fell on a person. It was very funny. She sat, happy to find that the show has just began as she had returned—it was such a perfect summer thing, such a wonderful little gift from the universe to herself during this short vacation, this gift of good timing. The phone rang. She picked it up and hung it up without looking. And she was so happy—it was so good be back home.

## MACHULÍN IN L.A.

I'm not married. I've attended thirty-seven weddings this year. I'm on my way to the thirty-eighth, with the bride in tow. Mirabela, the bride, will be marrying my cousin Chapulín. I'm going with her to Los Angeles. We sit in an airport bar, in Orlando, waiting for our flight. Mirabela is twenty-five and an intern like my cousin. They met at UCLA, and in their white coats they palpated the brains of small mammals. From what my cousin has e-mailed I know that they are both considering the field of neurosurgery. Her hair is short, bright-red, and intense. Her eyes are pale blue. Her skin glows against her neon blue top and dark jeans. She's Argentinean but has lived in Los Angeles most of her life.

Mirabela has drunk four Long Island Iced Teas. She orders her fifth drink. She has raised her bright shining arm and ordered another. I have not had a drink in a year and a half, since the summer of 1998.

I have no desire to attend this wedding. After the thirty-seventh I swore off weddings—the brides, the toasts, and the nuptials all offering further confirmation of my failure—but Mirabela happened to have a conference in Orlando a few days before hers. My cousin asked if I could accompany her—if I would attend the wedding—since relatively few from our side of the family would be able to make it. I said that I did not mind, though of course I did. He offered to front me the plane money. When I said that No, I couldn't take it but would of course not mind helping out, he did not insist. He should have insisted. I would have taken the money. I work at a

goddamn Blockbuster. I hate flying. I hate leaving. Our flight leaves in twenty minutes.

Mirabela, the bride, is a graceful drunk.

We have not said much to each other. We have very little to say.

"Chapulín tells me you made a movie," Mirabela said half an hour ago.

I grunted. I have very little to say about the movie.

The pudgy waitress, in the black shirt with the flower print, exchanges Mirabela's empty glass for a full one. Behind the waitress two men argue over the remote. The winner has switched to the Sci-Fi channel. The back of his shirt reads, *Be Seeing You*. I recognize kin. I don't have to look at the front of the shirt to know that it will show the outline of a penny farthing bicycle. I scratch my beard—I'm five-foot four: like all short men I have grown a beard. I weigh two-hundred and fifty pounds. Like all fat men I wear a cape. Like all fat men who have failed I wear a cape or a cloak.

She has ten minutes to finish her drink.

She's half done. She should look debauched or seedy in her drunken state but does not. She looks radiant. Her skin shares the same coppery intensity of her hair and her neon blue top. She's all about that neon.

"This movie you made," she says, "you must like movies a lot."

I have never been to L.A.

I grunt. I'm halfway through thirty hot wings.

I grunt and nod. In ten minutes I'll be flying to L.A. with a neon angel.

"I've been to thirty-seven weddings this year," I say. "I have this notebook with all the photographs."

I pull out the Mead book from my Jansport bag. She flips the pages with a deliberate delicacy. She's overcompensating for her drunkenness.

Mirabela of the bright and impossible skin gulps down the rest of her alcohol. She flips to the end pages of the composition book, where I have pasted photographs of telephone wires and blue skies.

"These are really pretty," she says, placing her neon hand on my thigh.

She's drunk. She's leaning. She could fall.

"I took those," I say. "We should go."

Her hand rests on my thigh. She could be Jean Seberg, she's so pretty.

I always wanted to direct. I majored in film. In the gray bubble of my failure, I see that what I loved most was imagining how certain key parts of my life would look like when captured in film.

Mirabela leaning on my thigh—that moment belongs on film.

I lived in Bogotá for four years before returning to Orlando to finish my degree. I mention it only because it was there that I was hit by another moment that belonged on film.

I wore Wayfarers and was about to walk past the cathedral by the Centro Granahorrar. The sun was about to set. The light had turned thick and golden. I took off my sunglasses and turned my head to the doors of the cathedral, which opened as I passed. Pallbearers walked out with a coffin. It could have happened in slow motion. It could have happened in a Hong Kong film.

I tried to replicate the moment in our movie. We shot it in slow motion. I told the actor where to look, how to look. It came out wrong. In the movie it looks gimmick and clumsy. In life it had been smooth, glorious, and filmic.

What was supposed to be funny wasn't. What was supposed to be sad wasn't. We had poured a year of effort into it. We had run up credit cards. The movie had been swallowed whole. I want nothing to do with my bastard child.

"We should go," I say again. "We'll be late."

I hate flying. I hate being late. I hate my cousin for marrying the lovely woman leaning on my thigh. She stumbles to her feet from the stool and leans in close. The men by the TV watch *Mystery Science Theater 3000*.

"Wait," she says. "Before I forget. Let's meet at seven. We have to meet at seven. Is there anywhere you're going? Any sights?"

My movie.

"The Museum of Jurassic Technology," I say. "I want to visit the Museum."

"Let's meet at seven over there. I like your cape."

I shake my head. She has pulled the edge of my cape to her nose.

*Mystery Science Theater 3000* is showing my movie. The silhouettes running along the bottom edge of the TV screen are making fun of my movie. I can't blame them. We tried. We tried to make it good and could not. We were not good enough to make it good.

The man in the *Be Seeing You* shirt laughs. The man he scuffled with also laughs.

We're late. Our flight is leaving. I'm a failure.

"Don't tell Chapulín we're meeting," she says. "He can't know we're meeting. So don't tell him. I hate flying. I need another one of these."

I'm Hank Quinlan running down the bottom of the bridge in *Touch of Evil*. Marlene Dietrich asks the camera if it matters what you say about people. The man in question is dead and floating.

I'm sinking. We're flying.

She grabs my hand every time we hit turbulence. I hate flying. I hate turbulence, but I don't hate it so much on this trip.

If the plane shatters and we're spilled into nothing and die, it seems not so bad with her in tow. Her beauty muffles the terror.

She dings the stewardess for a beer. She pulls a pill from a murky orange case and downs it with the beer. She reaches for my hand and sometimes misses and hits my thigh. Then she falls asleep on my shoulder. Mirabela is not nearly half so graceful in her sleep and leaves a discreet spot of drool on the cape. I fall asleep as well. I wake up from a dream where I am covered in fine pale dirt. I brush it off when I wake.

We're landing.

Chapulín waits for us. He waves—a tall muscled bastard. He hugs and kisses his bride-to-be. He hugs me.

I'm happy to see him. I stayed in his apartment and mooched off his family when I lived in Bogotá. He had been doing his pre-med. He smoked then. We drank. We drank like there was no tomorrow. He buried himself in his studies. I slacked off.

He still drinks. At least I've stopped drinking. At least I've stopped smoking.

He drives me in his SUV and drops me off at his sister's. Chapulín's sister hugs me. Other cousins hug me. Chapulín's sister's illegitimate child hugs me. I'm thinking of how I'll be meeting the bride at seven.

Light falls thick on the city. You walk through it like you'd walk through water. You'd think the light would wash away the grit on the signs, the low cloud of fumes. It doesn't. I stumble into Culver City. Behind me the family waves. I say that I am off to see the sights. I could take a nap. I pass by a shirtless black man and his pit bull. The pit bull lets me pet him. The man welcomes me to L.A. I'm expecting anger and beautiful women. I'm expecting gangs. Instead the man tells me what bus to take to get to the Museum. He compliments my cape. I walk away, sweating.

I pass by three Indian restaurants and stop at the fourth. I spoon mint chutney from a jar on the table, chomp on the orange skin of a tandori chicken, and realize that I'm jetlagged. I step into the aggressively ethnic streets of Culver City—Mexican locksmith stores, Colombian and Guatemalan calling card stores, more Indian restaurants.

When I find the bus stop, I photograph the wires overhead. The camera clicks and I hear a faint delayed echo behind me, and assign the sound to another camera. I turn around: no one's there.



My watch says it's five in the afternoon. I can't remember if I adjusted the time. The Museum of Jurassic Technology is smaller than I expected. A pale blue flag hangs over its door. A small metal lip curls over an empty fountain. I knock on the metal door. I'm let in. I see no one.

Tomorrow I'll miss a bus and strand myself for an hour on Sunset. I'll be wearing my Jurassic Technology t-shirt. I'll walk by Mann's Chinese Theatre. I'll turn to find the Max Factor building, boarded and abandoned, then a Freemason temple, also boarded, crumbling, and abandoned. I'll wander into a Jaguar dealership. Three improbably good-looking men in make-up and headsets will be improbably nice to me. They'll offer me coffee and give me directions. I'll spend the afternoon at the Getty center.

L.A. should be seedy, unfriendly, and full of broken dreams. I'm a failure looking for failures. I fail in finding them. I have dived into the city and am looking for William Holden floating above me.

Instead, impossible light, improbable smiles. From the Getty center you can hardly make out the city in the smog. Pollution makes it a paradise about to vanish. It shouldn't be pretty but it is.

My expectations. My head. The knot of desire in my guts. The ghost of the kiss at the Museum.

She's waiting for me in the Museum of Jurassic Technology, at the Sonnabend exhibit, in a blouse tinged with the powdery blue of the L.A. sky. The darkened room holds dusty letters, faded photographs, a wedding dress from another time. Between us sits a record player encased in a glass shelf. The room holds the earthly possessions of an Argentinean opera singer.

"You're early," she says.

"You too," I say. Behind her the photograph of Madelena Delani glows faintly. I can spy Madelena's face in the dark of the room. Mirabela's face glows with the same unsettling intensity I spied in the airport. Madelena has tucked her hair into a bonnet for the photograph. They could have been twins.

I remember *Vertigo*: Jim Stewart looking a Kim Novak looking a painting of herself. The jet lag will not go away. I could be falling.

"They say we had an opera singer in our family," she says. "It could have been her. I've lived here most my life and I've never been here. I'm glad we settled on this place."

My throat has turned to dust. I can neither articulate nor grunt my agreement.

"She could be my great-grandmother," she says, looking at the photograph. "I've lived here most my life. I haven't visited Argentina in forever."

"You look very much alike," I say. "She's very beautiful."

"You were very sweet to have said yes. You could have said no. Chapulín is lucky to have a cousin like you," she says, and presses a red button by the faded wedding dress and the photograph.

The room grows darker. Light blooms from the glass shelf that separates us. An aria descends from concealed speakers. Madelena Delani sings through the static of time. She would

have sung the same song deep in the Amazon in a floating barge out of Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo*. She would have sung the same song to sailors and businessmen who were dark and short and lonely and overweight. We would have sat and stared at her across the chasm of the orchestra pit. We would have listened.

I walk in the darkness to where Mirabela now stands next to a faded dress. My head brushes hers. She turns. The song stops. I kiss her. She slaps me. The lights in the room flicker, struggle, fade again, return. Mirabela's face no longer resembles Madelena's. Mirabela is seriously pissed off.

"Asshole," she says. "You fat asshole. *Cabrón*."

"You said that you wanted to," I say. "You said you wanted to meet me here."

She slaps me again. The room freezes into cold segments of strobe light. We turn from the ignominy of my misunderstanding to find the man from the airport bar, still wearing his *Prisoner* shirt. His camera clicks and whirrs—he's out of film. I stumble towards him. In the small dark chamber the silk-screened print of the bicycle glows blackly against the neutral field of his shirt and the dark of the exhibit. I fall and hit my head against the sharp edge of a diorama. I've fallen face first and have dislodged a sign. *Obliscence: Theories of Forgetting and the Problem of Matter*.

Mirabela hustles me back to consciousness with worried little slaps. Her blue eyes shine in the unnaturally bright confines of the room. They've turned on the lights. The mystery man has vanished.

"I tore down a sign," I say. "I'm sorry."

"You shit," Mirabela says.

"I'm sorry," I say.

"*Cabrón*," Mirabela says again. Her eyes will not stop shining. They are unnaturally pure, bright, and blue. "You shit." Her eyes will not stop shining. "Chapulín doesn't have any friends here. I was going to ask you to do a little bachelor thing for him. Take him to a strip club. Asshole."

"I'm sorry," I say. "I didn't know. I'm sorry."

Those eyes.

Mirabela leans in. She tries to pull my fat body upright. She can't. Her eyes—she leans close to me. Her eyes look down from a place of infinite beauty. She has never been so close to this slumped and heavy-breathing incarnation of failure. Her eyes look down from a place of infinite coldness and purity. She tips my chin with her neon hand. Her face leans closer.

We kiss.

My Seberg. My Jeanne Moreau.

We kiss. She kisses me. I kiss her back. We kiss.

I stand up. She brushes a tear from her face. She smiles and hands me a hundred-dollar bill. "Somewhere fancy," she says. "Nothing too seedy. My brother will go with you. He'll drive you guys. He'll know where."

"Okay," I say. "I'm sorry."

I take a nap. I dream again that I'm covered in fine white ash.

Ricardo, Mirabela's brother, awakes me. He is tall, lean, and fit, and long-limbed like his sister. He looks like his sister. We pick up Chapulín and take him to a strip club, where girls in their unearthly twenties move with no affect, their smiles frozen, their breasts for the most part unenhanced. The hard-on is real but the experience itself is not.

I drink poorly-brewed coffee. They drink beer. The girls gyrate. We leave with our hard-ons and with none of the money that Mirabela gave me.

We drop Chapulín off. Ricardo drops me off. Ricardo should not have been driving, but I don't drive.

"Nice to meet you," he says.

"Nice to meet you," I say. "It was fun." It wasn't. It was. It didn't feel real.

"It's funny, your name, Machulín. You're Machulín and he's Chapulín."

"Nicknames," I say. "My name's actually Josué. His is Jorge."

"I knew that," he says. "I knew his. Jorge."

"A lot of jays in our family. Tons of us birds. There's five Juans and one Joan and a couple of Josés and some Jorges."

"Damn."

I shrug. All Colombians shrug the same way: when we shrug we're asking, What can you do?

We're inside a mission-style chapel. Mirabela looks lovely. Chapulín looks happy. He should have crumbled into a pile of pale ash, and that pile should have been scattered by the wind. I would have taken his place. Two priests run through the ceremony. They switch off tag-

team style. One speaks in English. The other one also speaks in English but switches to Spanish at different parts of the homily. The one that speaks only in English looks Latin. The one that speaks in perfect English and in perfect Spanish looks like he's Irish-American.

I'm touched by the easy and graceful bilingualism of the ceremony. This chapel strikes another *Vertigo* chord. It too adjoins a cemetery. Could they have filmed it here?

No. They set the movie in San Francisco. So no, maybe a set in Culver City or on location, the actual city, but they would not have used an L.A. chapel. We pass a statue of a man named Sepulveda. We pass children wearing paper skulls on their way to the cemetery.

That's it. They're married. Bastards.

We're shuttled to the reception. I'm seated next to a very old man whose blazer pocket bristles with ballpoint pens. The other jays flock the table—the Juans, the Josés, the Josúes. Most I know or knew before. I'm glad to see them. I'm introduced to another Colombian living in Orlando, a distant relative who shuffles and coughs and doesn't look at me in the eye: I dislike him immediately. Another jay.

Mirabela and Chapulín step to the center of the hall. The bride waltzes with her father. We're asked to form a line to dance with the bride. I do not join the line. They waltz. The men dance with Mirabela, the women with Chapulín. Each is given a safety pin. They pull bills from their wallets. Before they dance they pin a bill to Mirabela's wedding dress. I think of Madelena Delani singing to no one deep in the Amazon. Herzog sang to no one, too, as did Welles. No one expected much from *Touch of Evil*. *Fitzcarraldo* cost more than it was worth. Herzog turned to documentaries for German television. Welles voiced over a massive planet in *Transformers: The*

*Movie*. We know we've failed when we have no money. But Herzog's movie was passable, and Welles' brilliant, and mine was neither; mine failed, and the only money that trickles in comes from *Mystery Science Theatre 3000's* residuals. My aunts pin bills to Chapulín's tuxedo. I'm happy for them. I'm happy for all of us. The old man sits with me at the empty table. He introduces himself. I forget his name immediately.

"I'm a Mason," the old man says. "Your cousin's a member. I'm representing the organization."

The old man had nothing better to do. He must wander from one wedding to another.

"I didn't know that," I say. "I didn't know Masons had representatives at weddings."

The old man nods.

"I didn't know my cousin was a Mason."

The old man looks away. How many weddings has he attended? Isn't it a secret? You're not supposed to tell people you're a Mason.

The man in the *Be Seeing You* shirt stands at the other end of the hall. I walk towards him. I stumble onto the waltz line and dance with the bride. Mirabela smiles. She's so happy. She's so fucking happy. I smile. I can't help it.

Someone photographs us. The room buzzes with flash strobes, and with the clicks and whirrs of cameras—they're documenting everything. I step off. Someone else dances with the bride. At my table the old man sits alone. The man from the museum reaches for my hand. I shake it. I want to punch him. He offers me a beer. I tell him I don't drink. He finds me a Coke.

"This one's the last," he says. "The thirty-eighth. The thirty-eighth's the last. We're done. It's a wrap."

"Why have you been following me?" I say. "Why have you been following me to weddings?"

"I'm a fan," he says. "I liked your movie. I'm in film school? I thought you had some nice moments in there. Some pretty cool things in the movie. I mean, it's rough? But still." He's younger than me. Thin, but growing heavy. "Anyway," he says. "I'm sorry. It's a project. Like a documentary?"

"All stills?"

"Yeah, but we string it along, you know. Dissolve dissolve dissolve. Do a *Jetté* thing on it. It's all sort of Luc-Godardian. Film on filmmakers. Or film on people who love films. Look." He pulls out a sheaf of photographs. They're me. I'm looking at a fat man wearing a cape. I recognize the backdrops. The man wearing the cape is a mystery. He's a failure. I don't know him. He's not me. He is. I do know him. He photographs wires, leans into the sky for a better angle, grows old while making a record, something that stays put, something that moves, singing to no one, singing alone, singing to one film student.

I return the photographs and walk away, fly home, the edge of my cape pinned to the hills of L.A. and unfurling from one edge of the continent to the other, a thin black ribbon drifting to earth and settling soundlessly over Orlando.

Would the film student document it? Would he shoot the thin line bisecting the country? His project is done. We're done. I land to find a child no fatter than my thigh clicking away with a Barbie digital camera. She's documenting the gift shop, its magazines, t-shirts, and paperbacks.



She's documenting the Disney store, the Warner Bros. store, the terminals, the empty bar with its stools upturned and resting on top of the tables, the bags, the people leaving and those returning. She zooms in on the fat man and clicks away at his bags, his shuffle, his heavy return. The fat man in his cape. I smile at the little girl with the camera. We say we are doing this for no one, that we're doing it for our own sake, but that's not quite true. She keeps clicking as the fat man floats through the airport window. Departure dissolves into arrival. I think we should dolly far from here, or cut or fade out, or wait for the next scene.

## THE PERSON WE WANT

Easy, you know, does it, son. We move from being to nonbeing with a shrug, and wait at this vestibule, this airport lounge, until granted admittance. You'll find no newspapers, no books, no TVs tuned to 24-hour news, no ghostly voice intoning the name of a stranger. You'll find no smoking section, although smoking is allowed. You are to sit at this chair and forget what needs forgetting: whatever you learned from print will be erased. Every memorized passage will turn to a blur. Every character you loved will vanish, although we are close enough to heaven for exceptions to be made, so some of these made-up people might insinuate themselves into your recollections. You might have gone to camp with a Dolores Haze, or remember that, while staying at a hotel, you ran across Ada and Van Veen and Marina, or Luzhin or Quilty or Hugh Parson, or you puzzled through a thickly-accented lecture by a professor Kinbote, who invited you to ping pong (you refused), or a professor Pnin, who always called you by the wrong name. You once had tea with Vivian Darkbloom. Or not. You'll likely forget them. I forget. The rules vary.

What matters has little to do with these remarkable phantoms. What remains, at any rate, inflexible is that you cannot move forward until every fingerprint has resurfaced on your skin. These impressions will be peacock-green and iridescent: we'll begin with the palms of the doctor who delivered you. Other prints will follow. The mortician who squeezed your hands for reasons unknown even to him. Your sister's foot upon your chest. Your brother's thumbprint on your

cheek. Your mother's shoulder against yours. The paws of every pet. And those of every stranger. And those of every friend.

Every whorl and every pattern will be disclosed. This much is certain: You cannot go on, you cannot leave the lounge or even move from this chair, until you are bright green. You cannot move until you are bright green and glowing. So think. Recollect. Easy does it. Good luck.

## STRANGERS ON VACATION: SNAPSHOTS

They stand three and a half blocks from the Eiffel Tower and look as though they hold the monument in their hands.

They are at the beach, holding hands.

They are at the beach, not holding hands.

They are at the beach, and one is missing.

They are at the beach, their backs to us. They are staring at the sea. The missing one has returned with a boogie board.

They are at Disney World. A man or woman in costume is with them. The costume is not immediately recognizable as belonging to the pantheon of Disney characters. It is a weevil.

They are at Six Flags. The same man or woman in the weevil costume is with them.

They are at the beach, buried to their necks in sand.

They are at the beach, a treasure chest in front of them. One holds a metal detector, the others shovels.

They are at Disney World, wearing Mickey or Minnie Mouse hats according to their gender.

They are at the beach, wearing the same Mickey/Minnie hats.

They are at the Hard Rock Cafe, rocking hard.

They are at Planet Hollywood. The weevil is with them.

They are at Coney Island, riding a roller coaster, eating hot dogs, winning prizes, getting tattoos.

They are at Mount Rushmore—out of focus, but behind them, atop the head of Washington, one can see a gripping struggle: A man wearing tails, a monocle, and a cape is pushing down a man in a gray suit. They are fighting to the death! The man in the gray suit hangs by the nose. Is all hope lost? Clearly not—that man in the gray suit has steely determination. He will prevail. Atop Roosevelt: the man in the weevil costume.

They are at the beach again, badly sunburned.

They are in a living room. Is it their living room? It must be. They're home. The man or woman in the weevil outfit is in the kitchen, fixing the family pancakes.

## CUSTOMER SERVICE AT THE KARAOKE DON QUIXOTE

Customer service at the Karaoke Don Quixote is main thing we worry about. Because if customer doesn't go here, will go elsewhere, and soon no customers go here period. We treat them special. We feign bad foreign accent to make feel better. We not decide on particular region—because if customer is from said particular region, or customer's family is, is no good, no? No. Is no good. Is little Italian, little Polish, little bit here and there. Is good.

Because it gets customer singing. Customer service is number one priority for us. We say, You sing, you sing! Is person drinking? Yes! Is good, for beer and spirits make person sing, and people singing is good: They buy more beer and spirits. And intoxication is good because is no cover charge. Is good, because people like singing great works of literature, and is good because they drink more, so more profits.

First we start with Don Quixote. But soon we branch to postmodernist stuff, because customers want, and customers is always accurate: They say, Barth! Barthelme! Pynchon! Coover! We say, OK. We say, is good. Also postmodernists drink. Minimalists, they don't drink so much. Is poetry good? No, is no good. Poetry karaoke, is like haiku, sonatinas—no good, no one sings. Classic is good: Melville and Tolstoy and some other peoples—big hits, big big hits.

Is reason for accent? Is annoying you? Logic? Logic is, these are shy peoples—literature peoples is shy. Is sitting around reading, no much dancing, maybe some drinking and then dancing, but stiff, you know? Is people reading travel, you know? The *New York Times* travel section? Also travelogues and such. Is dreaming of going elsewhere, maybe finding charming

out-of-way spots with kindly innkeepers, lovely foreign women, also big motherly types that feed them exotic soups and ales and such. And maybe, in this fantasy of going places, they're thinking they might let go a little because no one knows them, right? So we feed that fantasy a little. Is good, is people happy. Is good business. People sing: They sing Quixote:

*«En un lugar de la Mancha, de cuyo nombre no quiero acordarme, no ha mucho tiempo que vivía un hidalgo de los de lanza en astillero, adarga antigua, rocín flaco y galgo corredor.»*

Or sing dubbed international public domain version:

"In a village of La Mancha, the name of which I have no desire to call to mind, there lived not long since one of those gentlemen that keep a lance in the lance-rack, an old buckler, a lean hack, and a greyhound for coursing."

Is good! Business is good. We have many franchises. As for matter of customer service—customers happy, is always happy here—service-wise we are number one. Soon we open in La Mancha—is ironic, no? Waiters feign heavy American accent. Talk loud. Slow. Is good. People feel OK singing. Is happy.

Soon: IPO. T-shirts. Web site. CDs. Is good!

**CORRESPONDENCES BETWEEN THE LOWER WORLD AND OLD MEN IN  
PINSTRIPE SUITS**

Gustavo called as I was about to ring Renee's door; the phone chirped the first few bars of Leonard Cohen's "Suzanne." I would just as soon have a regular ring, but I set the phone to random depressing songs after a bad breakup and lost the software to set it back. I thought about the breakup more than I care to admit. It was gray and raining but patchy, with brief random sun bursts. Across the street, an orchestra of children played to an audience of grandparents—violins, a song belonging to the repertoire of my cell: Willie Nelson's "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain."

I rang the doorbell, thumbed the green button on the phone, and talked to Gustavo while the slightly off-key violins clotted the background. He wanted to borrow one of our blue boxes, which we used to recover data from legacy systems. I said, Sure, no problem, and asked him why he needed it, but before he could answer Renee answered the door.

"I'll call you back," I said, and hung up.

The children stopped singing. One perfect plane of light hit her corn-colored hair, then her dark forehead, then one of her eyes, then vanished. She tapped at the fold of skin near the eye, under the tear duct, as though brushing away a tear. She had been crying but was not doing so now. The brushing-motion remained, refused to let go.

"I'm sorry about your loss," I said.

"Come in," she said. She shook my hand and turned. We made our way to a dormant computer. I knew, from the call ticket, that Renee's father had passed away, and that, in an effort



to remove evidence of an affair, he had deleted program and document files from his system.

Renee wanted to recover the lost documents. "I don't know," she said, "but I think he would have said something in there. He was writing to her all the time."

"That must have been awkward," I said. "They worked together, right?"

"They taught high school," she said. "They really didn't see much of each other at work. I don't think they did. I don't know. I really don't know much. She doesn't want to talk about it."

"It must have been awkward."

"He wasn't a bad man," she said. "Nothing like a bad man. He was really mellow. He taught physics for fuck's sake."

"Oh. No. I didn't mean to say he was bad," I said, "but the situation—any situation like that—it's not like he's bad. But it's awkward." I patted my orange jumpsuit, checking pockets for the sheaf of CD-ROMS, serial cables, USB connections. Most of it was unnecessary but carrying it comforted me. If I were to ever need it, it was there.

The phone chirped again. Gustavo. Neil Young's "Unknown Legend." I turned it off before it reached the chorus, inserted a boot disk into Renee's father's computer, and turned it on.

Renee inspected the jumpsuit. The computer whirred to life. I had come across the same sort of look a few times before. Not often. I was getting better at recognizing it—it didn't necessarily mean much: things would get rolling or they'd go nowhere, but I did not intend to press the matter one way or the other. I was here to do a job.

"You're from Colombia," I said. Her skin was fair but coffee-colored, and I was struck again by her hair: wiry and half corn colored, half rust. Her voice, too. But I suspect I'd have suspected regardless. Had I seen her from across the way, there would have been something:

some sign, a subdermal hint. We find each other even when we don't want to—don't want to find, don't want to be found.

"You too," she said. "I mean, no. My parents are. Were. I'm from here."

"I'm not," I said.

Nor was my boss, a transplanted Chiquinreño entrepreneur, who insisted I wear the orange jumpsuit, and who is also responsible for the Humvee with the paintjob. I match my company car. On the hood of the car on the back of my jumpsuit is a line drawing of an anime figure digging, with a karate chop, into the insides of a computer. This needlessly dramatic logo was drawn by the younger brother of my boss. The whole enterprise might have something to do with money laundering. We certainly don't have enough customers to keep the business afloat. And the boss flies back to Chiquinquirá more often than seems strictly necessary to keep up with the family.

I don't know nor (given my financial state) care if this is 100% on the up and up.

Gustavo called again. Cole Porter. "Just One of Those Things."

I answered, talked, and hung up.

"He's at the school," I said, "but he's having a hard time retrieving the stuff from over there."

"Do you want coffee? Anything?" she said, looking at the black screen, the blinking cursor. The computer, its memory erased, reverted to primitivism, infancy, latency.

"Coffee's good," I said. She placed her hand on my shoulder on her way to the kitchen.

I had unearthed the contents of the hard drive by the time she came back.

"All there," I said. "Nothing's really lost. Not even the OS stuff."

"Oh," she said. She brushed her fingers near her eye again, crying without doing so.

"So it's." I stopped. I didn't know what to say. "It's all there."

"No," she said, handing me my coffee. "Sugar? I also have Splenda."

I shook my head. "Black's fine."

She stirred her coffee and inspected the spoon. She would not look at the computer or at me. Her knee pressed against mine.

I noticed her father's house for the first time: clean, tidy, spare, with a shelf of science books, the expected posters of Einstein and Hawking, family photos, nothing out of place, nothing out of order. It wasn't the house of a man who broke his daughter's heart—had he done so? I didn't know. I knew he was a widower. I didn't know much, I realized. What had transpired?

"Could you delete it?" she said. "I mean, could you delete it delete it?"

"No," I said. "I mean, I can. There's stuff I can do. But there's always a way to get it back." I didn't get it. She wanted it back and there it was, and now she wanted it gone. "You could take the hard drive out. Take a hammer to it. Even then there's ways."

She placed her hand on top of mine. "I don't want to know. I want to but I don't."

Neither one of us said anything for a long time. We drank her coffee. The computer whirred.

"Read it," she said.

"No," I said.

She squeezed my hand. "Please. A favor. From one Colombian to another."

I turned to Renee's dead father's computer. I suspected he had taken the breakup with grace. I had every indication that he had, but I feared looking in—I didn't want to run into child pornography or jpegs of atrocities or the scatological dreck collected by people who had lived, people who had existed and who had behaved as ordinary human beings. I approached every machine with the same tremor, the same dread, always afraid I'd see something I wished I had never seen, material I had a hard time believing a fellow human being would be interested in or turned on by.

What we found was a little stranger. I read for hours.

There was nothing objectionable in the drive or in the trash, and seemingly no anger in the several hundred e-mails retrieved from their temporary black hole. I was grateful for that, though disturbed by the sheer amount of material addressed to Renee's father's lover who, as the correspondence made clear, was also Renee's dearest friend.

But there was, at least, it seemed, the absence of any real malice.

Here is a fable of the reconstruction.

Renee's father, a high school physics teacher, died seven days after the culmination of a stormy affair with Renee's dearest friend, another physics teacher at the same school. Renee's father was a widower, but Renee's dearest friend's spouse (a physical education teacher at the same school) was very much alive, and understandably pissed off. Renee's father died in his sleep of old age. Renee's dearest friend would no longer speak with Renee.

So she wanted to know most of all if her father was a ranter, an accuser, a paranoid. She knew that her best friend had ended the affair. She did not know why, and wanted to, or didn't, or sometimes did and sometimes didn't. She also wanted to retrieve these links, or to lose them—how they had hooked up, why they had parted ways. (The links are not necessarily always there. People communicated by e-mail to any great extent if they had stopped communicating sans clothes. Or not. They sometimes did and sometimes did not. Regardless, whatever the men decided to accuse the women of, in these e-mails, had often only a passing connection to reality.) Her father was not a violent man, and had by all accounts behaved, after she called things off, like a gentleman. He did not stalk. He did not call. He went to bed every night for six days and on the seventh he did not wake up.

The father spent all six days writing. He wrote nonstop.

I understood the impulse. I wanted to do the same thing. I wanted to write to the girl who broke things off with me five months ago.

Here's the thing: I had been alone for two and a half years, then briefly swooped upon by this girl—short, half-Portuguese, half-Scottish, with a sloped nose and green eyes. She swooped and, two and a half weeks later, dismissed me. I had been alone since then. I could not get the songs out of my phone, but that was all that remained of that radiant breach of my solitude. That and the ghost of handdog gratefulness.

And anger. And humiliation. And the impossibility of anger—the knowledge that it seems inconceivable to be angry at someone I've seen naked, or who has seen me naked.

This rule is not universal. Half my job involves dealing with the data of people who do not go by this rule.

I read on. There were no indications of how the affair had started. None of how, exactly, it ended. But Renee had a good indication of the dates; the content of the e-mails changed drastically once the affair trailed off. The letters increased in length and became loose, disjointed, and hardly dealt with the world of the high school. They hardly seemed to deal with the actual at all.

Instead, Renee's father developed a gangly narrative about old men who wore pinstripe suits and controlled the world. They were like the Illuminati or the Masons. The e-mails explained that the organization, called Pragma, had developed ways to lengthen one's life without holding on to the bullshit of youth (Renee's father's word: bullshit), and that while this trick allowed them a kind of serenity otherwise unavailable, it also meant that many of the more senior members were senile. Hence the state of the world. The old men in charge had gone bonkers. They were chaste. They had no use for Viagra. (The father did. We found a few order confirmations from several online pharmacies.) They could levitate. They could make small objects float. They could make household pets talk for brief periods of time—days, sometimes weeks. They used to call themselves the Pragmatists and later shortened it.

They were all men and they were all old and they were working very hard to turn the reins over to women as soon as it became feasible. This turnover, the father explained, was crucial. The world would not last too long in the hands of men. Men had fucked it over. Had fucked it over until repair was next to impossible.

I tried to shape the information into a story, for Renee, the daughter. But it wove back and forth, and the e-mails lost focus, lost coherency.

But his main point was that women could fix it. They could buy pinstripe suits, have them fitted, tailored, and learn the requisite incantations, and levitate whatever needed to be levitated. (Several of the e-mails delved on the ceremonies at unnecessary length. There were animals involved. The animals sang songs, and the father included transcriptions, many written in minor keys.) The old men would yield their extraordinary power to women in their early twenties.

I could sense in the narrative a submerged intent. The father—while unraveling, while unthreading the fabric of his sane, tidy, orderly world—seemed to be trying to praise the woman he had been sleeping with. I think. I don't know. It seemed garbled and halfway coherent and desperate and possibly innocent and likely not and it made me queasy.

The world had been undone by the desire of men, he wrote. By what men did and said to spend time with women. The old men lost their chastity—or the chastity had never been there at all, it was all a front, or the intention was there but not the will. They were dirty old men. They pursued any pretty girl who passed their way. They used their powers—powers, the dead father specified, inextricably linked to the pinstripe suits—to make themselves attractive, irresistible, to these women. They grew distracted. They—

Renee's hand rested on my thigh. Her bare foot slipped on top of my sneaker.

Pavement's "Summer Babe." I switched it off. Pavement again: "We Dance." Gustavo both times.

They had decided to look for women of exceptional grace, intelligence and beauty. I cringed. I could see it coming. On the next message, I found it. Renee's best friend would, of course, be one of them. She'd wear the pinstripe suit. For a while I had tricked myself into thinking that what was going on was nothing more than a Henry Darger-esque narrative—a naive allegory, revealing more about the author than the author cared to reveal—an attempt to expurgate the remnants of the affair. He had not let go. Could not.

The old man wanted her back. Had he given any thought to his daughter (whose hand, as we moved to the next e-mail, had not moved from my thigh)? Had he thought of the husband?

Renee's best friend would be in the higher echelon of the Pragma community. The old men would greet her with open arms. The old men would not be there at all. The old men would be dead. But the friend would be there, in her splendidly tailored suit, part of the welcome committee.

I ran my left arm under her blouse and high up her back. Her right arm vanished into the unzipped V of my jumpsuit. I sat, she stood, and we faced not each other but the computer screen, our legs somewhat intertwined. This accidental pose reminded me of an illustration from the Kama Sutra—we were fully clothed, but what made me recall the handbook had more to do with how we resembled a pair set up for a specter opposite of us, some specter looking back from the bowels of the screen. We were reading.

She was crying. She did not brush the real tears from her real face.

The phone would not stop ringing. Modest Mouse. The one about the heart being a cliff and the brain the bitter buffalo. I answered. Gustavo talked. I listened, and hung up. "Gustavo got



the stuff from the school computer," I said. "He found all sorts of other e-mails—most of them he didn't send. He just saved the drafts."

"More like this?" she said. We had untangled.

I thought of lying. "Worse. Threats, lots of—sorry. Just creep-type stuff. Lots of bad words, lots of threats."

She said nothing. I didn't know what to say.

"He didn't send most of it," I said.

"Oh," she said. She sat by the computer and said "Oh" again.

"I can delete this," I said.

"No. I want to read it. He was a good man."

"Okay," I said. "I should go." I did not have the heart to disagree, but she was wrong. Good is letting go. I had no clue as to how one let go—I myself had not done so—though I had not done what Renee's father had done. Suppose I wasn't good. Suppose goodness, in this department, was all a matter of degrees: that one slid up and down this scale, with the chaste old men in pinstripe suits on one end, and with the dirty old men, in equally natty pinstripe suits, on the other. But that one at least let people be if one did not let go. Cut off contact. Move on. Wish them well while all the same wishing them the worst but doing nothing—nothing at all. Let go. Let everyone go. Let's all go.

Renee walked me to the door. We shook hands. I never saw her again, although she called. I quit the job, but kept the jumpsuit.

## ROADBLOCK

Lately my spinster aunt has been setting my personal possessions on fire. I found a cup of ballpoint pens smoldering, a blob of ink and plastic by the TV. She has taken a lighter to my shelf of vintage GI Joes—their hands, feet, and arms are badly scarred. They look like casualties from an actual war. We have been living together and the strain is beginning to show.

I am thirty-five. Molly, my aunt, is fifty-three. The rest of our family died in four separate airplane accidents that took place—improbably, impossibly—within months of each other. We moved together for consolation. There were no other Macallisters left in Oviedo, Florida. We have been living together for ten years.

She hates me. She has told me so in so many words. Before the pyro bits she wrote household advice with magic markers. She wrote on the walls, by the side of whatever related to the advice. She'd write *Please clean up!!!* by the dirty plate I'd leave by the sofa. She'd write *For God's sake pick up your laundry!!!* next to the pile of underwear in the kitchen. The messages got a little more personal after I accidentally deleted the drafts of the self-help books she was writing. She was working on two, and had most of it in hard-copy, but I was downloading some songs off the computer and somehow messed it up, so that they're gone, and all she has, she claims, are the worst possible drafts. The books were called *You are Not Loathsome!* and *It's Good to be Sad and Say Nothing!*

After I deleted the files, she left a stick-figure drawing of a man with a beer belly in my bedroom. The man had a knife stuck to his head. An arrow pointed to the man, and next to the arrow she'd written *You!!!* Those messages began about six months ago. They have not stopped.

Today she drew a little comic strip on the front of the oven. A stick figure man is led to a guillotine and decapitated—the head rolls off and spurts bright Crayola blood. Next to the head she has written, *This is your head!!!* She has done a good job with the eyes (set close together), the weak hair, the double chin. I wonder if she realizes how closely she resembles the caricature. We look very much alike. We could both stand to lose a few pounds. At work, we are often mistaken for brother and sister.

We work together at a SuperTarget. We monitor inventory in a room walled with black-and-white screens. The room is the size of a closet. This continual proximity might have something to do with my aunt's feelings of anger and frustration.

The neighbors have had to call the cops only once. We keep screaming to a minimum, and for the most part try to be done with our arguments before 10 p.m.

She has covered every surface with writing. Since the markers are water-soluble, she sometimes cleans up and starts anew. Most of the new ones are either scenes of how she'd kill me (e.g., the decapitation) or, if inspiration fails, the words *I hate you* followed by however many exclamation marks she feels like adding.

I am not particularly fond of her right now, but I have nowhere else to go, and neither does she, and neither one can afford a place on our own, and besides we're the only family we've got so we're stuck with other. I do not wish her dead. I do wish she'd stop wishing me dead. I also wish she'd stop setting my things on fire.

The fires wouldn't worry me so much if we weren't taking care of our neighbor's kid. He looks about nine or ten, has fair brown hair and very light brown eyes and is constantly talking, although we can't understand him. He's from Colombia. We think. The family has a map of Colombia in their living room. They moved in a week ago. No one in their household speaks English. We speak no Spanish.

We met the family as they were moving in. The kid wore a very clean but worn polo shirt and blue jeans. We saw him wear the same outfit the next day, and the day after that—Molly brought home another polo shirt that had been returned to the store and since forgotten and gave it to the father, who nodded and smiled and said something that sounded like Thank you.

Our neighborhood lies in a withered pocket of Oviedo. Barren forest to our left. Half-abandoned strip mall to our right. Boarded windows. Ghostly dogs. Every house has a dry garden with a chain link fence. Too many people loiter on their yards drinking from oversized bottles from late in the morning to early in the afternoon. No one under seventy owns. Everyone rents.

What I'm saying is that we liked this family—young, poor, neat—though we couldn't understand a word they said to us. And they had only witnessed two outbursts, very minor altercations between my aunt and myself, so they seemed to like us too. Plus, it seemed as though they had no one else.

The father had asked me the day before. He used an awful lot of hand language, but he got his point across. He brought the kid over on Saturday. Today.

Molly soaked my razor blade in rubbing alcohol and set it on fire. (She has taken to setting things on fire that could not, I would not think, be set on fire.) The handle melted. She

made sure to set the razor on a plate and to close the door behind her so the kid wouldn't accidentally burn himself.

The kid won't stop running around the living room. He won't stop smiling either. Nine or eight is a great age, the best age. He's looking at the boxes of junk sitting everywhere. Molly's crap. My crap. We're both big *Star Trek: The Next Generation* fans and have collected just about everything the Franklin Mint has put out: the Captain Picard Christmas ornament, the Borg plate, the chess set. Molly has spent quite a few of her paychecks on Thomas Kinkade prints. I've developed an affinity for Boyds Bears.

The kid loves the stuff. He picks it up. Says something in Spanish. Smiles. Runs. Picks something else up.

It is eight in the morning. We've opened all the blinds to the sun. The kid points at the drawings on the walls and smiles. He comes up to me as I'm cooking us pancakes.

He talks. Doesn't stop talking.

I have no idea what he's saying. Molly likes strawberry jam on her pancakes, I like maple syrup. I don't know what the kid will like. Has he even had pancakes before?

They keep their house very neat. Their walls are bare and clean. The four times we've stopped by we've seen the mother or the father cleaning. One or the other, while the other cooks dinner. The kid likes to color on the margins of the free weeklies his father brings from the bus stop. He pencils in happy faces and clouds and dragons by the side of ads for substance abuse centers and sex lines. Molly gave him some magic markers. Now he colors right over the print, draws pirates over the personals.

Molly was briefly engaged six years ago. She has not been out on a date for five years. I have a hard time meeting women and tend to stutter when I do. So what I'm saying is that the odds of Molly or me ending up with a kid of our own are not good—the odds getting worse by the day. So we like this kid for a lot of reasons, not the least of which is that this is the kind we'd like for ourselves. Bright. Athletic. Beautiful.

On Saturdays I always fix pancakes for Molly and me. I usually use about half a box of the mix, but given the company I figure what the hell and empty out a whole one. The stack of pancakes is high.

We eat. I note, with some distress, that Molly has put on her control top and her black pants with the chalk marks drawn in. I go to the fridge to get the OJ and when I return my coffee is on fire. Molly is smiling. The kid looks confused but then claps his hands and laughs.

I laugh too. Molly laughs along. We haven't reached a truce, but we are in agreement as to liking the Colombian kid.

The kid keeps talking.

Molly nods and smiles, pretends to agree, to understand what he's saying, then says that we should get going. That I should hurry the hell up and dress and get ready. I thought she'd want to skip it this Saturday. I ask her about the kid and she says we'll take him along, then lights my spoon on fire.

On Saturdays Molly likes to drive to the Orlando airport to distribute her literature. She makes the pamphlets herself. She has a very creative side, which she has combined with

unfortunate results with her religious side. It all began to get messed up shortly after the violent and unlikely destruction of our entire family.

She believes that you have to accept Jesus as your lord and savior. She also believes that Jesus has set up a committee to run things on earth, which is kind of like the Illuminati or the Masons—she says that the committee is called Pragma (short for Pragmatists). It is made up of very old men who wear pinstripe suits. They are capable of magic, know incantations, can make household pets speak for days or weeks at a time, and are all chaste. No Viagra for them. They are old and pure and the problem is that some of them are senile. They've been living for centuries. They used to keep things running smoothly but are having a harder time of it now. Hence why the world is in the state that it's in, and why all these people are running around behaving like they do, why countries are at war, why the past is in all regards preferable to the present, and it also explains how thirty-four Macallisters died in four months, thirty-three aboard planes, one in the airport parking lot. In her pamphlets she goes into the workings of Pragma at more length. She also asks for contributions and suggests that while we really should not question God's design, we should see about replacing some of the more senile members of the committee, so that maybe the world will right itself.

She cannot afford a pinstripe suit but has fashioned a caricature of one with black clothes and paint she picked up at an arts and crafts store. She has made one for me, too, and I have to wear it and distribute the literature and talk to any potential convertees. I have to do it else I don't get any driving privileges. She sometimes lets me drive her '85 Corolla, but only during the weeks I've agreed to go with her to the airport.

So we drive, Molly at the wheel, the kid in the back, me riding shotgun. The kid keeps talking. I can't understand a word he's saying but don't care. It's like listening to sunshine.

We pass the security roadblock, show our permit, the kid smiling and looking like waiting in parking lot was the most exciting thing in the world. Everything's new for him. This whole town strikes him as a miracle. I caught him staring very intently at the bright green of the highway signs as we drove in, the billboards, the fast food signs on their impossibly high stilts. I'm trying to remember if I ever felt that way. As if everything was new.

Of course I did. I must have. Didn't everyone? I didn't, or don't remember.

But as we're driving into the airport I'm thinking that this is how everyone should deal with everything, every day. I'm filled with a hazy sense of peace, joy, tranquility. The light in the parking lot is dark and gray and cool. The feeling fades as I put on my jacket with lines drawn in crude and shaky. Molly hands me my stack of pamphlets. We will be here for about five hours.

We lose the kid after the first. He had been running in circles for half an hour before getting tired. We thought he was still sitting by our side when we found that he was missing. Gone without a trace.

We run up and down the terminals. We start at Virgin and work our way up. We look for hours, Molly in tears, her pamphlets scattered on the floor somewhere around British Airways. We run up and down the airport. I suggest that we talk to someone, run a message over the intercom, but Molly will not allow it. She believes airport officials are in league with the old men in the pinstripe suits. I'm trying to think of what to tell the father, that we lost his incredible



child, and I dread the conversation mostly because I'd have to bring in someone to translate, someone from work, anyone, and I cannot imagine the grief or the pain—cannot imagine the feelings themselves, but what I really do not want to, cannot really conceive is how you'd translate grief, or pain, how the words would hop. Of course we'll have talked to the police first. And Molly or not we have to talk to someone at the airport. Soon. I have been running with my hands on both sides of my face. I have been pulling at my ears. I just realized this. I put my hands down. I keep running. I run and run and look for the kid and notice that I'm rubbing my hands together and crying. Molly's by my side. I put my hands down. We're holding hands. We stop. We hug. I tell her that it'll be OK, that we'll find the kid, that he couldn't have wandered off all that far. I pat her back.

Molly has set my jacket on fire. I let out a very high squeal, push her out of the way and take off the jacket. Stamp it out on the rug. Keep running. Molly seems to have twisted her ankle. She has not gotten up and is pounding at rug and screaming my name.

They'll find pieces of him. Arms. One leg. One foot in one sock in one foot, neatly severed. Or whole but dead, a few drops of blood dotting one nostril. Or alive but horribly violated. Or not horribly violated but burned, hurt, scraped, bleeding, broken. Apparently my hands have made their way back to my ears. I pull them, thinking, Stop, you'll tear them off. Or they won't find him. They won't find anything. Or they'll find the polo shirt. Or nothing. Nothing. And me and Molly'll go to jail. We'll be the prime suspects. We'll deserve whatever they give us. We lost him. We're as bad as whoever finds him and does terrible, terrible things to this incredible kid. We'll find him. We won't. I keep running. My hands have apparently decided to cover my mouth. My mouth was making a kind of keening sound. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. We'll find

his torso and nothing else. He's lost. Gone. Dead. Because that's what happens when you're small and lost and you've got the wrong people taking care of you. We're wrong. We're so wrong in so many ways and now he's dead.

I had not believed myself when I told her that he couldn't have wandered off too far but it was, after all, true—there weren't many places he could have gone to. I find him in the As. The Avianca terminal.

He's talking to a very young woman with skin the color of teak, eyes gray and somehow metallic. Around the two there are others like them, old and young, carrying nothing or oversized cardboard boxes sealed with duct tape or backpacks. They hug. They stand in circles. They talk on cellphones. They talk to each other in the same bright musical inscrutable tongue of the kid. He points to me. I wave and walk closer.

"So you're the babysitter," she says.

I nod. I try to talk but stutter.

"He was asking me how to buy a ticket back," she says. "Says he likes it here but felt like going back for the weekend. Bright kid. He was telling me about the roadblock."

"I know. It was pretty fast this time. Guess they're relaxing it a little bit." I get it all out really quickly and don't stutter too much.

She looks at me for a long time.

"I mean, they looked at the trunk and asked for IDs but that was it," I say.

"No. The one in Colombia? The *retén*?"

"I don't speak Spanish," I say.

"His whole family got killed. All his cousins, his uncles. At a roadblock. They were on their way to a picnic. The guerillas stopped them along with about a hundred other cars. They stood by the side of the road. Stood for hours. You didn't know this?"

I shake my head. She continues.

"He says it would have been all right if they military had not intervened. There was gunfire. Most of the people by the side of road got mowed down."

The kid holds the woman's hand. He hasn't stopped smiling.

"That's why they moved?" I say.

She turned to the kid and asks. The kid answers.

"No. That's another story."

"So how come he didn't. You know. How." I'm having a hard time of it. "Why is he still alive? How did he make it out of the roadblock?"

She turns again and asks.

"He was short," she says, "and lucky."

The kid lets go of the woman and takes my hand. We shake. The last time I shook a woman's hand was—I can't remember. I can't remember the last time I was this close to anyone that pretty. I let go because you cannot keep shaking a stranger's hand no matter how much you want to.

We wave goodbye and find Molly, still on the floor, right by the embers of the jacket. I pull her up. She cheers up when she sees the kid. I want to tell her about the conversation I'd just had—about what the kid had gone through. But what could it add? What could it do for Molly? What would it tell her that she didn't already know? It'd just confirm her insanity. The old men in

charge had messed up not just here but in South America. Of course. Didn't I know, from reading the literature, that it was world-wide, this conspiracy? And besides, it didn't matter, this information, not with the kid by our side—something horrible could have happened and it didn't. He had been missing and now he was not, and Molly and I are for the moment not acting terrible to each other. She's happy. So am I. So is the kid.

We make our way out of the airport and into the light of the outside world, into the fortress of the parking lot, the three of us walking very close together. We hobble to the car and drive home.

## MY SISTER'S KNEES

The Palonegro airport lies on a flattened hill dwarfed by the scrabbles and vertebrae of the cordillera—a death-trap, a speck of gray in a riddle of roads and greenery: the Bucaramanga airport. My home town.

I don't travel well.

I don't travel well, nobody does. Some are better at it than others, but if you ask your friends, the people you've known long enough, they'll tell you about their hell-ride, the bad flight, the turbulence, lost luggage, fights, dyspeptic flight attendants, or unexplainable heebie-jeebies, the last being the worst because no clear reason can be given, just the texture of terror without the text. Everyone, even seemingly fearless travelers, has a bad-flight story.

Here's mine: landing in Bucaramanga, my home town, the plane shot up after the initial descent, and the pilot told us over the intercom that he had not seen the runway. Not seeing the runway was a big deal, but what did it was the pilot informing the passengers, informing me, of this foible... Fear of flying, I've read, is mostly fear of not being control. So? Two planes crashed in Colombia that year, one belonging to an American airline, one crash a month after the other.

That wasn't why I didn't go back this summer.

I've been terrified of planes for four years. That hasn't stopped me. It wouldn't. I keep coming back. Colombian airlines are very liberal with their in-flight drinks.

My homesickness, however, is now tempered by relief at not having to fly, but of course that relief is soured by guilt about feeling the least bit happy about not going home, which inextricably makes me wish I *were* back home, and then I remember I don't have to fly, so I'm relieved. We could go on.

It has been a season of funerals and breakdowns, this summer, a heavy wave of unhappiness washing over the people I know in Orlando, maybe over the city in general. Brushfires have sprung up. Animals in a new theme park are dying, a reverse Noah's ark. Convenience store hold-ups now require more hostages than ever. It hasn't rained. Tele-evangelists crawl out of their radio stations and UHF crannies, into campuses and street-corners, and their gospel is shriller, more bitter, more urgent. One of these fellows hired a hit man to do away with another, his lover's husband. Summer makes for impatient people in lines. Complaint departments are overwrought.

My friend Carol has been complaining about very minor things for the past two years, the whole time I've known her. She was diagnosed as bipolar a year ago. What I assumed to be charming quirks of an essentially solid personality have turned out to be signs of mild madness.

Part of the problem with life is that its most dramatic moments occur off-stage. We are not privy to the best and the worst in others, and if we are it is only as witnesses or unreflecting participants, off to the side, extras in a production for which we've only been provided a fragment of the screenplay. With Carol's breakdown, I only have the before and after, not the *during*.

The after's cruelest effect has been on Carol's bottom, grown to absurd proportions from the cocktail of psychotropic drugs. The blonde waif who modeled for hair shows is now grossly out of proportion. When I first met her, I didn't find her all that attractive: a thin shrill girl with bobbed dry hair, wearing baggy jeans and a puffed black parka, to be transformed, during one of our first outings, into a rare and photogenic beauty, still perhaps more alluring in the abstract than in the flesh, of which there didn't seem to be much then. Now there's more than enough.

As for the before, I have some explaining to do.

She drank too much. Drank until she scrambled to the bathroom and puked and passed out. Drank and scrambled to the bathroom and, having passed out, made me kneel; beside her by the toilet, holding the airy strands of her hair and feeling through that insubstantial stuff the fine and fragile contours of her skull. Drank and scrambled and forced me to carry her to the bedroom where, drunk myself, I once fumbled a parody of foreplay, which she gracefully (teeth brushed, puked-on clothes changed to red satin underwear) brushed off, done so beautifully and with so little awkwardness that I realized that this girl, three years my junior, had been brushing off, must have been brushing off the same sort of fumbles for most of her pubescence, and waking up the next day I was rewarded with a hungover angel resting lightly on my shoulder. She woke up. I rubbed the tingling from my shoulder. She liked champagne.

One night her friend Christine drove down from West Palm Beach. Carol and Christine looked so much alike that Carol, below but now way below twenty-one, used Christine's driver's license to buy alcohol—she had reported it lost and received a duplicate. Well into the night, a Dr. Demento CD endlessly playing "Champagne," Carol tongue-kissed Christine ("Would you

like to see us kiss?" she asked, though she did not wait for an answer), and she had Christine strip to her undies to show me the tattoo on the small of her back, a grinning mushroom, after which they headed to the bathroom to powder Christine's ass, the dark and the drink and the makeup smoothing stretch marks from her three-year-old pregnancy. When I told her that she looked gorgeous, baby or not, she said that she didn't understand how women could grow into fat cows just because they gave birth, that all that was an excuse for laziness, that she did aerobics, and still did, and had burned most of the fat in the first two months—she was twenty-two. She slid one kiwi-sized breast from her bra and pinched her nipple, undid the bra and rubbed both, inches from where I sat, and ran off to the bathroom afterwards and came back with her clothes on. And Carol ran to the bathroom and threw up, and then threw up some more. In the morning we drove to the International House of Pancakes. I bummed a cigarette from Christine; we crossed arms and lit each other's.

The next time I saw her, months later, she had a mermaid tattooed on her flank, and her hair was longer, teased and frazzled and ashen.

Christine's little girl I met in between the mother's two visits. They lived with Christine's mom, and one night they found the grandmother in the tub bleeding from the wrists. Christine sent her daughter to Carol, and Carol brought the kid to class, a doll-sized munchkin, with her mother's large brown eyes and fair and messy hair. We walked the length of the campus, Carol and I holding the kid aloft, making a tiny V out of her arms—we bought her ice-cream, listened to her chatter, an insanely beautiful child born out of a beautiful mother, an insane grandmother. I thought that this kid could might as well be mine and Carol's, that if we ever got together this would be the sort of child we would have, fair but not overly so, a little rugged, blond and



darkish. It was an artificial family but it worked for that day. It felt good to be walking around with a pretty girl and a munchkin.

The kid left. Christine came and went. Carol had her breakdown.

During the tag end of the semester, she began to miss class more than usual. And after a while we stopped returning messages, stopped talking on the phone. Months later, talking to a friend of a friend of Carol's, I heard about the breakdown. I called her. She said that yeah, she'd gone nuts. I asked her what she had done. She said that she had tried to kill herself. She said that yeah, she guessed she was pretty nuts. I asked her if there was anything I could do. She asked me if I could drive her to the Fashion Square Mall. I said sure.

Her living room smelled of cat shit. Clothes and magazines were scattered about. The air had the stale and unhealthy density of a sealed chamber. The room's centerpiece, a grotesque pink sofa filched from her high school's theatre production of *Alice in Wonderland*, was streaked with strange organic stains, and Carol dangled from it and waved and apologized for the mess, which she said wasn't due to the fact that she was nuts, even though she was, but because she'd been lazy these past few days. Which I understood. Neither she nor I had taken a shower in days, but her hair was far greasier than mine. She walked to the bathroom and showed me how she dried hers using baby powder, lightly tapping, brushing, fluffing, tapping again—would I like some? I would not.

We drove to the mall. Along the way we caught up. She complimented me on my car and on my driving, both of which I was apprehensive about. I drove an '88 Hyundai Excel, bought by my parents the last time they visited. They were here for a month and figured it'd be cheaper to buy one than to rent one, and that I'd have some sort of use for it afterwards, notable because,

like most economy cars, it crumples into a ball in wrecks, and compacts its passengers, turns them into dead bits and pieces of their former selves.

Cars and planes scare me, though they fascinated me as a kid. When I manage to fall asleep while traveling, I dream the same dreams I dreamed in planes and buses when I was eight, dreams where I walk deserted streets and enter hollow skyscrapers. The word bears endless repeats: dreams, dreams, dreams.

Driving along, we caught up. She hinted at a relationship she was having with a Dominican drummer I know, and she said that ever since she was on the drugs she was getting fat, and the previous drug they had her on cut off her need for cigarettes, but that the need was back; she lit a Camel Light (my brand) and rolled down her window. I told her I'd quit. She puffed and puffed as we rode to the mall.

That summer I did fly back, and the flight was predictably hellish.

Our house in Bucaramanga stood a block away from our country club, where my sister swam and my father played tennis. My father dreamed of a revolution. People in ragged clothes broke windows, fire guns, storm houses—and in the dream he saw himself and the family and our friends holed up in the club, an enclave of sanity. I told him how the dream reminded me of the movie where a small crew finds shelter in a mall and fends off zombies, George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*. He said he remembered himself telling me about the movie when he first saw it, when I was four and we lived in Caracas. I think I remember that, too. Not too many years ago, a friend and I rented *Dawn*, which had the washed-out, lurid colors of any film from the seventies. It was also terribly and terrifically graphic and, more so, tapped directly to a common

nightmare, the sort of phenomenon you were deeply familiar with, without recalling where, exactly, you had been exposed to it, the alligators-in-the-sewer meme, the same vague terror shared by frequent flyers.

My sister has flown all over Colombia, has covered most of the North-American southwest. She has even been to Cuba. She is a serious heavy-duty athlete, a swimmer. When we first hugged, she cried and told me how much she missed me, and a couple of hours later she was crying for real. She is sixteen.

She had a knee operation five months ago and is still recovering. Her times are sluggish, well below the marks she was making before her knee popped out on a tennis court—she is now terrified of stairs and of running on hard surfaces. She is also irritable, quick to snap, a bad mix of hormones and frayed nerves. The dedication required of any serious athlete borders on the neurotic, the obsessive, and wears thin and badly on teenagers. She's doing okay. Better. She's doing better. We took a cab to the hospital to meet her doctor. He examined her knee and told her that they might have to do another operation by Christmas. She cried some more. She said that if she had another operation she would never be able to get her times back. There is something wrong with her ligaments—too flexible, too prone to give way; she would gross us out by stretching her pinkie, arching it till it met her arm. She told me that, right before she went under the last time, the light in the operating room took on a life of its own.

I had gone back to smoking shortly after last seeing Carol. I thought I'd quit again before visiting the family, but I could not.

I had to step outside of the house to smoke, but it wasn't something I kept at all secret—I was through with secrets, or with most. My father walked out and met me by the sidewalk the second day. He watched me smoke. We talked. It is impossible for me to enjoy cigarettes when I'm with the family. When I'm away it seems necessary, but when I'm home it strikes me as a stupid habit, not just the motions per se but how awful it tastes, really, after you and your lungs have had enough and it's just the reflex and the craving. So we talked. He asked me how things were going at school, and I said okay, better, better at any rate than before. Before is something we don't talk about.

What happened was that I'd dropped out of school in the US and returned to Colombia, and in Colombia I did about two semesters and gave up, and taught at shabby English *institutos* in Bogotá, and after three years I was fed up with that, so, without telling my parents, without telling anyone, I took off to the States on a tourist visa and disappeared, vanished for five months. Of course I called them when I was finally broke. Of course they helped out.

This is what we don't talk about—what we really and truly cannot talk about. I try not to think about what parents must have thought.

The prodigal son.

We talked. I told him about Carol while we sat by the curb, the concrete lamp-lit, all surfaces mottled, the leaves fluorescent, a procession of ants pallbearing a moth along a crack of the sidewalk. I also told him what I'm now saying about this particular summer—how a sad heavy wave had broken over Orlando. He asked me how I was feeling. I told him, not bad. I said that I felt pretty good and was half surprised when I realized that I meant it.

When I think of Colombia I see broken bottles glued to bright walls. Hardly ever do I think of what the country is actually supposed to be about, and when I do it's not unlike my father's dream: shreds of an overexposed film.

Home is where the heart is. The eye is somewhere else.

It has not rained in ages and what that means is heatstroke and private invocations. Rain-dances. What that means is.

The short-cut from home to campus is a lot behind a strip mall. The short-cut from home to fast food and a used-CD store is scaling a chain-link fence. The short-cuts from home to the houses of friends involve things I have not done since I was eight.

The short-cut from home to here is a short flight.

Fear of flying is fear of letting go. It is an acute case of backseat driving. My sister doesn't trust the ground anymore. I don't see why she should. I don't see why any one of us does.

Carol showed up yesterday in overalls and a white top. She's closer to her real size. I asked her if her apartment was still a mess, and said that yeah, it was, but that she was cleaning a sector of it each day, a couple of square inches, and that she had fought with her parents, and that she didn't want to go back to school, and she asked me how I was doing. I said okay, better.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon, the sky a patchwork of gray, makeshift clouds promising a rain that failed to fall. She told me that she hated this heat. I said that I did not mind it much.

I was thinking of what happens when you see your knee give way—what goes on in your head when you realize that your body might have some design flaws.

I had asked my sister if the operation had hurt. She had said no, not at all. She said that it was as though it was happening to someone else. When I asked Carol about the suicide attempt, she had told me the same thing.