

*THE DISTRESSED SCHOOL COMMITTEE, INTERIORS OF MODERN PLAY,  
AND OLIVIA'S PASSIONATE SKETCHES*

BY

ELLIOTT STEVENS

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Chairperson \_\_\_\_\_  
Prof. Deb Olin Unferth

Committee members

\_\_\_\_\_  
Prof. Joseph Harrington

\_\_\_\_\_  
Prof David Ohle

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The Thesis Committee for Elliott Stevens certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

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## TETHER TOGETHER

Dad can't get to the second floor of his house. The last time he went up there, years ago, he fell into his daughter's closet. Her hung dresses shrugged off their hangers and fell onto his head. One of her dresses had plastic dinosaurs sewn dangling off its hem. Another smelled strongly of marzipan. Another still was one he remembered that had belonged to his wife. It was an old Sears Roebuck, and she had once worn it into the ocean. He tried to throw that dress of his wife's out of his daughter's closet—he thought it would comet across her room—but it didn't. It fell sadly but a foot away from him.

Dad lives next to the City Burying Ground for Animals, abandoned buildings, vacant lots, and a polluted river when just about everyone else he used to know lives closer to yards, homes, pet cats.

And Dad cannot make it to the second floor of his house because he has gotten too old. Dad has painful clumps of veins in his hams and calves. His ankles have turned spongy. His toes are rotting—what, with his lack of circulation—and his toenails are so thick and sharp they cut through his black socks. He can't go upstairs to get fresh socks, ones he knows are in a dresser drawer in his bedroom. In that same drawer, he remembers he has a bowl full of intricate knots he had tied, matchbooks from trips, cheap folding knives, and his wife's tiny watch. Her watch used to make chimes, but now it doesn't. Dad knows he needs someone to help him because his daughter can't. Most days, he can lurch about the first floor of his house. Pull himself along the walls. He can wash himself by using his kitchen sink.

He can order groceries. He can paint insects he finds since he has painted—and even re-painted—all the lead figurines he has on his first floor. Most days, he can be elective mute and deaf. No one else is ever in his house to notice, so all he has to do is press his lips together and remove his whistling hearing aids. Some days, he can be elective dead. He lights red highball glass candles for himself. He lays cushions from his couch and chair onto the dining room table and then, stiffly, lies down. On his makeshift bier, he imagines his daughter peering into his coffin. But Dad thinks he needs someone to go upstairs for him, someone to check on things, retrieve things. He wonders about the state of his bowl of knots—that is, if they’ve untied. He’d like to see his daughter’s dresses again or get someone to find him some uncut socks or some figurines that haven’t been painted. He wonders if his wife’s watch might now chime. Dad often opens his front door to look out, and sometimes, with a cane, he can jank step a short walk to the polluted river. Outside, he sees large covered trucks rumble past him. He knows they carry piles of dead creatures to the City Burying Ground for Animals. One such truck, strangely, has the words *Cruel es mi Destino* scrawled in spray paint on its side. Another, incongruously, has *Your My Love, My Friday Night*. These trucks drip lines of liquid, liquid that is darker and just as fermented as any wine. Dad found a dead wasp and painted it to resemble one of Napoleon’s grenadiers. White pants. Blue jacket. Red epaulets. He had to steady one hand with the other, and as he worked, it felt as if he clasped companionship into himself. In his mudroom, Dad discovered a live scorpion in one of his daughter’s old

shoes. He blew on the creature's maroon back because he knew that was a trick to get it to freeze. To put it in stasis. With it rendered still, manageable, he took minutes to paint a purple cape and bronze helmet on it. Dad puts a sign up outside that reads, *Sober Aide Wanted / High Pay*. He cannot use his upstairs toilet or tub, so he's a man of washrags and buckets. He does the old tenement bachelor trick, the thing that gets the super infuriated: he pisses in the kitchen sink.

Dad captures a salamander, and as it squirms, paints its yellow spots black. A man answers Dad's sign. Evidently, this man is also a driver for the City Burying Ground for Animals because he comes in one of those large covered trucks. He's the pilot of the one that, in spray paint, has *Cruel es mi Destino* on its side. So this man gets out of his truck, pulls up Dad's sign—puts the sign under his arm—and lets himself into the house. He smells ghastly of dead creatures and has tufts of fuzz on his shoulders. On a typewritten form of responsibilities Dad has this man read, he signs his name as "Ducayet." "May I now lean on your arm?" Dad asks. Ducayet lets him. They shuffle around the first floor of the house, and Dad shows Ducayet some of the figurines he painted. "This is Scipio Africanus," Dad says and points to a tiny lead man in a purple cape. "This is Hannibal"—and he shows his new aide a man who holds a pike while perched atop the back of a miniature elephant. "This is a skating scene"—little people with paint-chipped scarves are mid-stride on a mirror. "These are Hittites." Men with metal beards shooting arrows from frozen chariots. Walking with his daughter by the polluted river—this was when Dad didn't need a cane or a steadying arm—Dad found a body in far along

decomposition. It looked old, was mostly necrotized, but—and this was astounding—one of its hands was somehow cleanly preserved. The hand looked just fine, only, instead of being flesh-colored, it was bright bluegreen and made into a fist.

On another occasion, Dad saw lots of bones in a tree and didn't want to call the police. But that body with the bluegreen hand—in front of his breathless daughter, he opened its fingers. In its palm were a stack of brass coins, their dates too rubbed down and rounded off to see.

Dad and Ducayet stand on the first floor. Dad asks, “Well, are you ready to go up?” He leads Ducayet to the staircase and watches as the man ascends. Dad shouts after him, “I'd like my socks, which are in a drawer at the room on the end!” Dad can hear Ducayet's heavy steps above. First, it sounds like he's in Dad's daughter's room. “Wrong room! Not that one,” Dad says. Ducayet then seems to take the upstairs hall to what had been Dad's study. “My unpainted figurines! Bring them down. They're in the desk!” Dad says. Ducayet moves again, but his steps become distant, quiet. Dad can no longer hear Ducayet, even though he fiddles with the knobs on his hearing aids. His hearing aids are so turned up they start to feedback and whistle urgently. Years ago—but after his daughter had left him—Dad saw skeletons floating down the river. He thought it so odd that skeletons would float and not sink. He thought it strange that those bones would remain skeletons without their attendant musculature and tendons. It was only later, when he found one of those skeletons crumpled on the river's shore, that he learned someone was carving those skeletons out of willow and tying them together with string. He took the one he found home—its knees clacking together,

its jaw hung open—and painted it. Fibulas blue. Femurs pink. Ducayet finally returns to the first floor and to Dad. Dad turns down his hearing aids. Ducayet has no black socks or figurines in his hands. All he holds is a yellow dress with green ferns stitched into it. And his body and his clothes are completely soaked though wet. He smells even worse than when he came in. “But what did you do up there?” Dad asks Ducayet. He tries to take his daughter’s dress from the man—it’s been so long since he’s seen one of her dresses—but Ducayet won’t let go of it. Ducayet tells Dad that he found a television playing in a vast and spreading ballroom. The walls of this room seemed to be farther away every time he looked, and there were people dancing. The men wore Dad’s old suits and the women his daughter’s dresses. “But I never had a TV,” Dad says. Ducayet says that it was the news that was on. The story he saw was about how a zoo attendant had tranquilized dozens of animals—otters, African ravens, silverback gorillas, sloths, Komodo dragons, anteaters, Asian bears, ocelots, tigers, Indian elephants. Then, and who knows how he had moved them all by himself, the zoo attendant ziptied them all together—by their arms and legs, their tails and wings—into one long chain. “And he tied himself to the end of it,” Ducayet says. “They’ll rip themselves apart and him when they wake up.” Ducayet holds the yellow dress tight against his chest and laughs. He says, “A reliable source says the bears are already starting to rouse, and when all the animals are up, they’ll turn that zoo attendant into lotion!” Laughs and says, “And it will be me who takes all those fantastic things to the dump!” Dad, flustered, asks, “But if a TV was on, did you turn it off? And how could my upstairs

have been a ballroom?” Ducayet wraps the yellow dress with green ferns stitched into it around Dad’s neck. He pulls Dad’s face close to his. “And why are you wet?” Dad asks. Ducayet lets go of the dress, puts both of his forefingers into his ears, and comes out with knots Dad had tied. He throws them to the floor and says, “A bathtub surprised me!” He turns and runs back up the stairs to the second floor of Dad’s house.

“But why are you wet?” Dad shouts through his ceiling—what is now Ducayet’s floor. Momently, there is crashing and pounding upstairs—as if walls are falling. As if iron bathtubs are being pushed on their sides. As if dressers are being toppled. As if drawers are being hastily emptied and bashed together. As if beds are breaking. Warm water trickles down Dad’s staircase at first, but then it pours down fast. “Why are you wet?” Dad asks. The wooden skeleton Dad had found and painted so long ago clatters down the stairs. It wears a suit Dad had worn to his wife’s funeral. Dad remembers how he had broken a pocket in the jacket of that suit and how his wife had repaired it with silk from one of her nightgowns. The wooden skeleton’s head is still the periwinkle Dad had painted it. Sopping black socks get tossed down the stairs. A heavy old vacuum with a crinkly hose. A samovar. A taxidermied fox. A doll head. Unpainted figurines fall down the stairs as if stricken. Dad’s daughter left him after she had found her mother’s body on the shore of the polluted river. She found her mother with yesterday’s newspapers plastered to her shoulders and arms. One of her hands was bluegreen and in a fist, but her other one was missing. So Dad’s daughter looked close where her mother’s hand



should have been—she looked into her mother’s wrist—and saw that a string came out of it.

The string ran back into the river, and when Dad’s daughter gave it a tug, she felt it went out into the river far. She told Dad about it, and he told her not to call the police or to follow the string.

In the coming days, Dad calls for Ducayet, but Ducayet never answers. Dad does not call the police. He paints new figurines. He calls for groceries. He eats olives, canned fish, canned bread—thinks a meal will enrich him—before he attempts to go up the staircase himself.

And he does get a few steps up when he tries, but oh so quickly he learns he is too weak. So he sits on his lower staircase with his legs swollen from his clumps of veins. When he removes his socks, he sees his toes are purpled and immovable. His ankles are dark wads.

The steps of his staircase are still wet. Something clatters down to him, and it’s a cheap scout knife from his dresser tied to a long piece of string. “Just grab the string, and I’ll pull you up to me,” Ducayet says. “I’d like to show you what I’ve done.”

Dad looks up to the top of the staircase, but he can’t see his aide. Ducayet must be tucked around the corner and hiding in the upstairs hallway. He’s a voice disembodied. “I’ll pull you up! You can see all I’ve done. We have a dance up here for your honor. Just hold the string.”

Dad knows the string isn’t strong enough to carry his weight, but he holds the end of it—the end tied to the scout knife—anyway.

Dad’s daughter did follow the string she found. That was how she left him. She took a rowboat out into the river and followed the string. She nearly reached the opposite shore of the river when she came up with her mother’s hand. But the hand had no

fingers. The string ran right through—right through the hand’s wrist on one side and where its index should have been on the other—and continued to run out of the water and onto the river’s rocky shore. She continued to follow it, and it took her through a field of large rocks. Then, it took her through knee-high ferns. It brought her through mud and to a town and into a square. Children, in the square, saw her and asked, “What’s with that string?”

Dad holds the string, and Ducayet pulls it until it breaks and snaps back into Dad’s face. “You’re too heavy! You won’t get to see up here. You’ll miss the dance, I guess,” Ducayet says. Dad hears a loud scraping upstairs, so he scoots down the few steps he managed to climb. Gets out of the staircase. It’s now that a dresser minus its drawers tumbles down the stairs. An iron bathtub romps down on its griffon legs. More water comes—this time, it’s cold—and it’s followed by hundreds of yards of string. Dad’s daughter didn’t know how to answer those children, so she ignored them. They became angry, took matchboxes out of their little vests, and started throwing lit matches at her. She ran from them—match tips burned peppercorn holes through the back of her dress—but once she got away, she continued to follow the string. Dad, exhausted, pulls himself around the first floor of his house. He decides he’ll make himself elective mute and deaf. Elective dead. So he removes his whistling hearing aids from his ears. Ducayet yells down at him, but Dad cannot hear. He lays his couch and chair cushions on his dining room table. Lights red highball glass candles for himself. Ducayet yells. Dad strips off his clothes—sees how his body looks like something

out of a river. He lies on his bier. His daughter followed that string, thinking it would lead her to a pointing finger—an end point. While his daughter was gone, Dad found his wife’s body on the shore and saw that she now had no head. He got close to her and saw a string coming out of her neck. This string, though, didn’t run along the shore and back into the river. No. Instead, like a string attached to a helium balloon, it went straight up into the air. Dad saw that it went up hundreds of feet and that its end was attached to something round, blotted-out, and floating.

Way up and buffeted by wind. Dad feels some fingers on his neck, so he comes to. A man he’s never seen before stands over him. “Why do you have our truck?” the man asks. “Why have you had our truck for so many days?” Dad can’t hear the man, but he smells that the man is like Ducayet—that he stinks of dead creatures. The man yells, “Why do you have our truck out front of your house?”

Outside Dad’s house is another large covered truck parked next to the one Ducayet drove. *Your My Love, My Friday Night* is now next to *Cruel es mi Destino*.

Dad can’t hear the man. Dad tries to get up, and he remembers he’s naked.

He can’t much move his legs.

His whistling hearing aids.

The man continues to stare at him, so Dad says all that he thinks:

“Ducayet! Ducayet! Ducayet!”

But the man shakes his head. He says, “That’s the guy who died at the zoo. I’ve got *some* of the animals he tied himself to in my truck. But I need to send whoever has the other truck to go back for the rest.”

## THE CEILING

I squirted a light machine oil—it's sewing machine oil—onto a pile of my brother's work coveralls. Then I gathered up the pile and put it on the stovetop of the electric range. I turned the dials all to nines, and soon the top of the stove was big flames. I rang a brass ship's bell we had in the kitchen.

My brother ran into the kitchen since he had heard me ringing the ship's bell. He wore only the shiny robe of a woman he knew. He saw the big flames—the big flames were making a spot on the ceiling that looked like a horse in mid-gallop.

He took a tube of fog we kept under the sink. He got as close as he could to the big flames and tried to shake fog onto them.

My brother must have known he couldn't go to his work bare. He couldn't go just in a robe. And his neck, a triangle of shoulder, the tent of his hip.

He tried to shake on fog—he shook that tube of fog hard—but now the big flames were on the floor and trying to get beneath the sink.

The black mark on the ceiling really was a running horse. It fell down, landed, and snuffled next to me.

## TO EAT ASH AFTER AN ERUPTION

“I’d like my cocoa rococo,” someone’s great uncle says beneath the sink. How did he fold himself into there, into the cabinet beneath the sink? Around the pipes? Doesn’t he have plastic hospital parts in him?

The notion of a great uncle is not easy to grasp. He is not your brother or your grandfather. He is not your father or your uncle. No, he is old. Eighty-plus. An octogenarian. He has amateur musical interests. He makes shadow boxes for things. Why is this great uncle’s sex so big in his pants when he sits?

With this great uncle, without doubt, the proof is in the pudding—that is, whether or not he eats it. And so, what if, as condiments, he spoons Vaseline and mayonnaise in? That’s his proof, really, his insistence, and isn’t he eating it? Before this great uncle got under the sink and asked for his cocoa, didn’t he eat all his pudding? The evidence is the bowl in the sink.

“I’d like my cocoa now,” this great uncle says. “I’d like it *replete*.”

This great uncle, though he becomes increasingly difficult to understand, was once a sponsor to alcoholics. He knew, when he did such sponsorship, that he is nothing if he doesn’t cut himself on a broken coffee cup every again and once. A sponsor is not much if he doesn’t bring a small boy with him to meetings. A sponsor must have the sand from an ashtray in the cuffs of his pants.

But his cocoa.

That cocoa.

The great uncle is not like a brother, and it makes little sense that he should have children of his own. It's difficult to imagine that one of his sons had caught a fox and had kept it chained in the backyard. The sound it made was *chuck chuck chuck chuck*. It's not easy to understand that his daughter had wrapped her hands in tinfoil and had placed them in a campfire. Is this daughter a kind of cousin to you? Would you take the bandages off her palms and put on more ointment?

And the great uncle has a mass of genitalia in his slacks—a seat of mystery, a pound of oysters, a bullfrog, or a lot of dough. He is shy because of his caramel-colored teeth and happy with his dry-looking nose. No gin blossoms on him. He makes shadow boxes for beautifully splayed moths, not butterflies. Every year, assiduously, he eats volcanic ash to cleanse himself, to scour out his insides.

He's under the sink, and you make him his cocoa. There are the cacao beans, the brownly liquid, the cream, the marshmallows. It's all in the moustache cup with the gold leaf, and instead of slipping it to him down there—or instead of tossing it onto his starched short-sleeve shirt—you pour it down the sink, in the hole next to his pudding bowl. The dark kecks the cocoa makes are not his, they are the pipe's, and he's still under the sink, listening to his cocoa drain to some place he's never been.

SHE, CROWNED. HE, SUITED.

To take x-rays of my teeth, the technician in Dentist Gouveia's office first wipes jelly cut with some kind of gray particulate onto my cheeks. Then, she asks me what size of lead doll I'd like to hold.

"We have ones that are small—like dolls. But we have also ones that are more your size. Like human," she says.

I take a lead doll that is a little smaller than I am and ask the technician whatever happened to the lead suit—the lead pants, vest, and jacket—I used to have to wear whenever I got x-rays at Dentist Gouveia's.

"If you miss them so much, you can have them if you get your teeth cleaned," she says and smirks, and I tell her that doesn't she know I'm here to get my teeth cleaned?

"Not to mention I'm here to see Dentist Gouveia and have him make me another mouthpiece," I say.

She smears a little more grainy jelly onto my face.

"Hold your doll while I press the button," she says. I hold the doll, and it's just like when Peralta would lay with me.

I sit in an exam room, and the technician removes a partial denture from her mouth.

"Let this be a lesson to you," she says.



She's about to clean my teeth, so she fastens a paper bib around my neck. She combs my hair back, and as she does this, she tells me how two of her babies had had to have Dentist Gouveia plate their front teeth with steel.

“Ooh, Dentist Gouveia was so disappointed he had to crown their teeth! He told me, ‘Make your babies avoid carmel. Don’t let them get taffy.’ Like I was giving them those treats! He told me to not give them old maids.”

“What’s ‘old maids?’” I ask her.

“Popcorn that didn’t pop.”

The technician has a dental pen she starts squiggling over my teeth. It shoots water, gas, blue light, and powder. It emits a smell of cinnamon. The technician tells me that she, at times, imagines that those steel teeth of her babies are double doors that can open.

“Like in prize shows,” she says.

When her babies’ steel teeth open, she sometimes sees sparkling dinette sets. Or she sees a speedboat and a couple of jet-skis. Or it’s someone unexpected—like a father holding an over-sized support check. One of those giant checks that only the winners of prize shows or golf tournaments get.

And the technician says how before Dentist Gouveia had crowned her babies’ teeth with steel, he had noticed how sticky their teeth had felt to his instruments. How their teeth were brown spotted with white. Little flat hanging eggs with no birds inside.

Done with her dental pen, she rubs hot paste into my lips. “This will seal your teeth,” she says, “but you have to wait two hours for it to make an effect.” She pulls a cord

and raises blinds to reveal a window that opens onto a muddy field with patches of gray snow on it.

“For your benefit, Dentist Gouveia and I have arranged for some local actors to entertain you,” the technician says. She gestures out the window, but I don’t see much except for an older woman shoving a younger woman into the mud. The younger woman looks like Peralta.

No, it is Peralta.

It must be Peralta because—even though she’s getting thrust into mud—I see her posture is as straight as it always is. What’s more, her head is shaved bald because, since I’ve known her, that’s how she’s worn it. Only now her pleasantly shaped head is splotted with mud.

“When you’re ready, you’ll see Dentist Gouveia,” the technician says. She toasts her partial denture to me, snaps it back into her mouth. She leaves.

I remember Peralta once said she wanted to help a family she knew see a dentist. The family was from some other place—some country that looked like an open mouth or a motorcycle or a cannon, depending on how you viewed it on a map.

“It would have to be a dentist that would see them gratis,” she told me. She spoke of how the mother, back home, had had to bury her sister under a pile of corncocks and wooden spoons since all the dirt in the area had turned too hard to dig. The father had seen his friends killed by child soldiers. Their daughter played a game called “Make the Pig,” which entailed her smashing her face against a square of glass

she had found. When she'd play this game, her nose would sure turn porcine—but her lips would also flare out, revealing teeth rancid with damage.

“Maybe Dentist Gouveia?” Peralta said.

But when I asked, Dentist Gouveia said he'd never see anyone gratis—especially an entire family.

And I remember, when I was a boy, Dentist Gouveia packed my mouth with beige putty and took impressions of my teeth. He was making me a mouthpiece to help me stop clenching my jaws and granching my molars in my sleep. While I waited for the putty to set, Dentist Gouveia asked me if I'd mind if he said whatever came to his mouth.

“Go on,” I said, and it could be he said this:

“I love the feel of a worn paper sack. It's so much like fabric.

“I saw a pink robe hanging and thought it was an apostle.

“I've had more of a lapse of luxury than a lap.

“I grew up in a desolate place—brown rocks on the floor.”

Though the technician told me to wait two hours for the hot paste to sink in, and though she told me to wait two hours to see Dentist Gouveia, I, anyway, leave the exam room in which she cleaned my teeth. I can't help but to feel that those people in the muddy snowfield aren't local actors so much as Peralta and someone violent.

Before leaving for the outside, though, I return to where the technician x-rayed me and find the lead jacket, vest, and pants I had worn on so many of my previous visits to Dentist Gouveia. I remove my clothes and put these things on because, after all, hadn't the technician said I could have them? This lead suit is a bit tight on me—the bones of my wrists show; the pants ride—but it's as heavy as I remember it. With it on, my shoulders get slumped and my hips get shot. My breath thickens. I know that when I eventually take this suit off, I'll be able to wave my arms so quickly and run so fast. It's like athletes who train at high altitudes—past timberlines—only to come back down to their sea-level villages and jump over horses, forearm through all challengers, and hold their breaths for twelve minutes.

I walk heavy down a hallway and toward Dentist Gouveia's waiting room and receptionist's desk. The teeth this receptionist has in his mouth are crowded and layered one over the other. When he smiles, he's the busted keyboard of a piano.

"You're me," this receptionist says when he sees me. He's been saying this since I was a boy, so I ignore him as I usually do. I stand in the waiting room. The lead suit is so heavy on my body, it's as if it's telling me to sit.

"And I'm you," the receptionist says. "You've made the same mistakes in romance I have." He starts filling out a "Save This Date" card for me.

In the waiting room, I see a man who's asleep and holding a sleeping child. The man has an oversized check propped against his chair. The child looks but two-years old, and, as I watch her, she starts clenching her teeth. She does it the way I had done when I was young—before my mouthpiece Dentist Gouveia had made me.

The sounds she makes are green sticks breaking. The sounds she makes are ice squeaking under water. I try to rouse the man who holds her by touching his arm.

“You should have listened to her. *I* should have listened to her,” the receptionist says. He smiles with his long, discordant teeth and says, “You should have given her a crown. A ring. I should have given it to her when I was seventeen. Our mistakes in romance.”

He waves me over. He wants to know if my date for another visit is correct.

“The *seventeenth*?” he asks me. Busted-Piano-Key smile.

I try to wake the little girl. I lift her tiny thermal shirt to touch her stomach, but she still sleeps and clenches her teeth. I can see, with great pressure, she’s milling her bottom molars into her top ones. The more I touch her stomach, the harder she grates.

“But, even though she’s gone, you’re still smiling bright,” the receptionist says and smiles even wider. He steps out from behind his desk. He asks, “The eighth? The thirty-fifth?”

I try to wake the sleeping man one last time before I pull the child from his arms. He doesn’t rouse, but, still sleeping, he does send out a hand to make sure the giant check against his chair remains nearby. I press the child to my lead vest. I pass through Dentist Gouveia’s front door and am out of his offices.

Dentist Gouveia, when I was a boy, would tell me how, in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, dentists used chloroform:

--To remove teeth. Chloroform, invented in 1831, made it so much easier for dentists to remove teeth. They could remove cairns of them without the patient feeling a thing.

--To kill or injure their patients—though they'd do this accidentally. Some patients would rouse partway through gum-flaying, root-sumping procedures. Others, chloroformed, couldn't be made to wake.

--To give haircuts and toenail clips to those irrationally afraid. To squeeze dark noodles of grease out of the noses of their patients.

--To huff. Yes, many dentists had this addiction. They'd dab it on the cuffs of their white coats or onto their bowties.

--To thief. Some dentists, after a wretched day of pulling teeth, would steal behind people, press a chloroform-soaked handkerchief to their faces, and, while these victims were out, take whatever they could—things like watches, necklaces, underwear, autographed photographs. That, or dentists would make petting zoo pigs breathe in newspapers doused with chloroform. Once these pigs fell over, the dentists would wrap them in sheets and take them home to their rotisseries.

Peralta said such awful things about Dentist Gouveia when I reported what he had said about treating that family gratis.

And to her surprise, I supported Dentist Gouveia's judgment. I told her the things he had told me—things about pink robes and anesthetized pigs. As Peralta shoved me away, I tried to show her how, thanks to Dentist Gouveia's consultation, I had no

fillings. And I showed her where he had repaired my chipped teeth. And I told her how he had made me a mouthpiece to help me sleep. I showed her my mouthpiece. She took it, broke it in pieces as if it were a bone, and said, “So lose some sleep.”

The cold outside air does not wake the child I’m carrying. As I walk toward the woman thrusting Peralta into the mud, I put my hand on the sleeping child’s lower jaw. It’s a seized fist. I part the child’s lips and try to get one of my thumbs into her mouth but can’t. When I was a boy—after a night of clenching—I’d wake to my teeth chipped. Fragments of my molars and cuspids in my cheeks. I once put a tape recorder in my pillow to hear, in the morning, what I did to myself through the night. I heard that, for hours, I ground my teeth to an intermittent rhythm. To the version of me on the recorder, I said, “Get up! Get up!”

I see the child’s front two teeth have steel crowns on them. They open for me, and, just like the technician said, there’s a dinette set. There’s a dentist’s chair, and its cushions are velvet.

“This is the hardest design I ever attempted,” the older woman in the mud says. I see that she’s not really packing a younger woman in the mud. She’s not really abusing Peralta. No, she’s jostling around a dressform that looks like a human. Anyone would mistake it. It wears a dark blue dress with white yo-yos stitched into it.

“But I think it looks fine,” I say.

“You’d say that,” she says, “and the dress doesn’t have lead in it. You wouldn’t wear it to an x-ray.”

My lead suit. I forgot how heavy it is. I look at the window I peeped out of when I had my teeth cleaned. I see the technician is back in that room and that, maybe, she’s looking for me. She turns the light off and on.

I lay the teeth-clenching child in the mud and start slapping mud over her shoes. I think to myself that, to start, I will give her boots of mud. The woman with the dressform scrutinizes what I’m doing before she says, “That’s a difficult design, too.”

The child stops grinding her teeth a little, so I put mud on her legs and waist. I give her mud pants over her corduroys. I look back to the room with the technician and see a man throwing her against a wall. Is it Dentist Gouveia? I see the same man press a wad of white cloth to her face and push her toward the floor. Or maybe it wasn’t really her but the human-sized doll I clutched when I got x-rays? Or maybe it wasn’t Dentist Gouveia?

I take handfuls of mud and pack them onto the child’s arm and chest. She has stopped clenching altogether. Her mouth is opened, relaxed. I could easily get my thumb into it. I put some cold mud on her neck—and it’s now that a man comes running out of Dentist Gouveia’s office and toward me. It is the man with the jumbo check. He has it under his arm, and the wind takes it. The wind sends it to the mother that needs it.



The man runs towards me and yells, “Daughter!” The Busted-Piano-Key smile receptionist trails him with a fan of “Save That Date” cards in his hand. The man yells, “My daughter!”

So I take off my suit—my suit of lead. I take off my pants and vest. I run, and it truly is as if—after such a long time training at high altitude—I’ve made it down again to my sea-level village.

## HORSE SLUMP

A slumped person on a horse is a common occurrence. It has happened so often that there exists a needlepoint design for it. Someone buys all the appropriate colors of yarn to make this needlepoint. The colors: orange, blue, brown, white.

A horse steps into a town with a slumped rider on its back.

A horse is in a river, and it swims itself against the current topped by, yes, a slumped person.

With its nose, a horse parts a movie theatre's curtain, letting in the most lead white light. The theater's audience groans—as if all the lenses imaginable were out of focus, as if all their collective screens were horribly ripped. On its back, the horse has a slumped man with a handkerchief around his neck.

An usher runs down an aisle. This usher puts one hand on the horse's withers to settle it. With his other hand, he tugs at the handkerchief around the slumped man's neck. He moves the handkerchief aside, and in the center of the slumped man's throat, he sees a hole so large a snake stuffed with lumps of mice could inch through it. Next, what seems like a whole sack of little hard white beans pours out of the hole. They skitter on the floor of the theater. The theatre's audience lifts its feet. The slumped man. The horse. So similar to the needlepoint.

People aren't always slumped on horses. They can be like this off them. A horse pulls a two-wheeled buggy along the shore of a beach. In the buggy, still grasping a

whip, a slumped man. The horse, its hooves slopping in wet sand, walks into the ocean and stops. Does it see small black fish?

Or horses pull a four-wheeled coach. Someone slumped still holds the reins. Or a horse pulls a sledge. Or a horse has a rope trailing behind it, and attached to the end of this rope is a slumped woman. But can a person be slumped if she doesn't sit? The rocks and dirt and brush have pulled her dress over her head.

The classic image of a slumped person on a horse. In needlepoint. On coins. On signage. The classic image stamped in belt buckles and tooled in leather. Coined.

So a circus boat cracked itself on an unseen reef and off a hazy shore. The trick bison on the boat died right off. The trick dogs hopped on the deck and danced in their way before they jumped into the ocean and swam. The lions tried to swim, but they couldn't much do it. A fast channel found them and carried them out and away from the trick dogs and trick apes. One ape squirted some saltwater through a gap in its cracked front teeth. And the trick horses? Still wearing their sequined and feathered hats, still strapped into their bedizened leatherage, they pawed themselves to shore.

On the shore, a boy waited for the horses. He had seen the boat wreck. He had even seen what had happened to the lions.

Some mysteries begin with the discovery of a slumped body on a horse. Others end with the same thing.

The boy waited for the horses to swim ashore. The dogs came in first, then an ape or two. He let those creatures shake themselves off and run into a forest behind him.

When the horses finally came in, he grabbed the one that looked finest.

He pulled himself onto this horse and felt its wet, sequined saddle through his pants. He enjoyed being atop the thing. It responded so obediently to his slightest heel tap or to the inner flexings of his thighs. He nudged it along—not into the forest but toward town. He thought he should impress everyone with how grand he looked.

How proud.

He felt so upright.

## FIVE SIMPLE SENTENCE FORMS

SUBJECT – INTRANSITIVE VERB

SUBJECT – TRANSITIVE VERB – DIRECT OBJECT

SUBJECT – LINKING VERB – SUBJECT COMPLEMENT

SUBJECT – DITRANSITIVE VERB – INDIRECT OBJECT – DIRECT OBJECT

SUBJECT – TRANSITIVE VERB – DIRECT OBJECT – OBJECT COMPLEMENT

I clotted. I ate a knot I had found when I went with my father to meet his fiance.

She, the fiance, looked modest. She gave me a ripe pear, a pear from the north of

Spain—Galicia. I deemed the pear too ripe for my tastes.

I stank. Every horse I ever rode tried to rub me off its back. These horses smelled

oniony. These horses shot me looks of certain depression. These horses judged me

incompetent—such that they didn't want me on their backs.

I lost. I woodshedded my boat design for three weeks before I decided it was time to

try it on a man-made lake. The lake was murky and designed by a man named

Murphy. Murphy once cooked my father a meal—one that consisted of manioc and

rooster heads. My father considered the coxcombs toothsome.

I wandered. The auctioneer said, "Gentlemen, the tigers in this cage will be sold by

order of the Collector of Customs. The terms are cash. What do I hear for these

tigers?" The tigers appeared sick, so the chiselers from Barnum & Bailey bid next to nothing. I wanted to give the tigers horsemeat I had chopped from those horses that had tried to rub me off their backs. I kept that horsemeat fresh by dangling it through a frozen lake's icehole and into frigid brown water.

I pined. I caught fish—perch, mostly—out of an icehole. The fish were frozen. I prepared my father's fiance fish since she had never eaten one before. She declared it not edible but wholesome, difficult to eat but pretty.

I expired. Scientists no longer manufacture coral snake anti-venin in the U.S. Coral snakes are red and yellow, and you can remember this by saying "Red and Yellow—Kill a Fellow." I tried to show my father a coral snake I had found in his basement, but then that coral snake bit me. My father's fiance kept me alive for a time.

## A COMPLIMENT

It was when her father took baths that he started with his compliments. Through the bathroom door, he would yell things to her. He said he just wanted her to know that her homemade lozenges were delicious. She had knees she should never cover with longer skirts or jeans, he said. He told her if he were to begin cataloguing her pluses, he'd soon find he'd have to build a large wooden card-holding construction with brass handles and cross references. If he were to catalogue her minuses, he would have but one card. *Too Many Pluses*. He said he could tell that it wasn't just that her skin was clear. He could tell her bones were, too.

But outside of the bathroom, he never gave her compliments. They once went to the seashore, and he—to hold down his towel—used four boulders. (As he collected these boulders and duck walked with them, though, he said nothing to her.) He swam out into the ocean far. (And said nothing to her.) He swam past the buoys the lifeguards said they shouldn't go beyond. He swam past the mussel farms. He swam past the rainbow-oily lanes for tanker ships. To her, he became his own speck, and when he started yelling at her—she could almost not hear him for all offshore wind—she knew he wasn't giving her a compliment.

## LEGACY PETS

He didn't have much to leave his daughter, so he thought, as a legacy, the best thing to pass on might be a pet. A tortoise—if he were to get one—would certainly outlive him. (He was sick, after all. Had weeping tubes coming out of his middle.)

Or maybe a parrot, an African Gray, would be the better creature to leave. If one of those could survive being stuffed into pantyhose and smuggled dangling in someone's pantleg, then certainly it could outlive him and spend another fifty years with his daughter. He'd train it not to pluck the feathers out of its chest and neck. He'd teach it to say something.

*"Let's go to Dad's grave!"*

*"You have your dad's legs!"*

He had heard there were fish near the bottom of the Marianas Trench that lived for over one-hundred years. It would be difficult to capture one live, of course. It would be hard to construct a pressurized tank filled with frigid water and cascading detritus. And the fish—it would look like a terror with its barbed underbite and gray eyes—would have to be kept sealed in a dark room. His daughter would be able to watch it only with infrared goggles.

Scorpions could live for fifteen years, he knew, and would be a far more unusual legacy than a cat. But his daughter might tire of feeding them baby mice—"Pinkies" they called them at the pet store. She might not want to see Pinkies stung and torn apart weekly.



Why, the way he felt, he knew a mouse would outlive him. That could be her Legacy Pet. A mouse.

Or even a Feeder Mouse—the defective and short-lived things the boys at the pet store sold as the living feed of pythons.

He felt a prickle on his arm and saw a beetle. (At first, he couldn't even spot the insect for all the purple and black splotches on his skin.)

A beetle.

Instead of flicking it away, he left it. He thought, "I'll let it outlive me."

## WHO DOES WHAT TO WHOM

"Syntax is the study of the principles and processes by which sentences are constructed in particular languages" is the first sentence of Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures*, a book few linguists consider still important.

"Syntax," I think, is the subject of the sentence—though I'm certainly no linguist.

"is" is the main verb—or maybe it's the "to be" verb.

"the study" is the subject complement. It's what my father calls a "predicate noun." I might be confused, though, in that this could be a gerund or the adverbial objective. It might be an expletive? I've never know the difference between "its" and "it's."

"of the principles and processes" is a prepositional phrase that modifies "the study." My father says strong writers are judicious with their prepositional phrases.

"by which sentences are constructed in particular languages" is an exhausting thing for Noam Chomsky to write. It serves to modify "the principles and processes."

But here I thought "Syntax" was the subject of a sentence when, really, it is sitting in its bed sick. Syntax has tried all sorts of remedies for its illnesses, but none of them

work. This instant, in fact, to no effect, Syntax has an entire mouthful of iron shavings in its mouth. While Syntax sucks on this stuff, its last remaining relative—The Study—secures a string of high-powered magnets around its neck.

"Now open your mouth, Sweet," The Study says to poor Syntax. Syntax opens its mouth, and the shavings creep out. They come out like insects on Syntax's lips and down its neck. The shavings inch slowly until they end up shivering on that string of magnets.

At the foot of Syntax's bed is a cedar chest that a man named Trumbull stands in.

In the doorway of Syntax's bedroom, there stoops a medical skeleton. Similar to nearly all skeletons, it hangs on a wheelie pole of a thing. This skeleton is knock-kneed and pigeon-toed, hanging. Yes, this skeleton looks so timid in Syntax's doorway.

The second sentence Noam Chomsky writes is this: "Syntactic investigation of a given language has as its goal the construction of a grammar that can be viewed as a device of some sort for producing the sentence of the language under analysis."

"Syntactic investigation of a given language" is the subject. That, or it's the passive voice in the imperative. It's a conditional subject.

"has" is the main verb. I pronounce it "haz," my father, "hass."

"as its goal" is a complement and, perhaps—though Noam Chomsky has never admitted this in any of his interviews—a selectively mute child. This child would not speak at home or at school, so her parents asked her if she'd like them to build her a shed.

"the construction of a grammar that can be viewed as a device of some sort for producing the sentence of the language under analysis" is a charming noun phrase—one that Noam Chomsky must have chuckled at as he created. The child's parents built her a shed out of Has and used As Its Goal as fasteners. In this shed, over and over again, the child would say to herself, "The construction of a grammar that can be viewed as a device of some sort for producing the sentence of the language under analysis."

Her parents heard her say this because they listened to the thin walls of her shed. Her parents eventually recorded her repetitions because they wanted to give tapes that proved she spoke to her teachers and prospective friends.

Syntax sits up more in its bed. It tries to get up, but The Study stops it.

"You're much too sick!" The Study reminds its relative. The Study puts a wool cap on Syntax's head and makes it lie down again. The Study has Syntax close its eyes and puts two powerful magnets on its eyelids. "The medicinal powers of magnets," The Study says.

It's now that Trumbull, standing in the cedar chest, says, "Now, Syntax, lock me in." He crouches down and shuts the cedar chest over his head. "Now lock me in!"

"Syntax is too sick for that!" The Study says.

"More generally, linguists must be concerned with the problem of determining the fundamental underlying properties of such successful grammars" is the sentence that follows the first two sentences in Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures*, a book that has never been read in its entirety on a beach or on a plane or in bed. A book that's never been read while a patient waits for a barium enema. There was once a scientist who had the gall to name a chimp that he thought was linguistically gifted Nim Chimsky.

"More generally" modifies the main verb of the sentence. My father says the weakest main verb is the "to be" verb. My father says that all sentences should be active.

"linguists" is the subject of the sentence that passeth understanding.

"must be concerned" is the main verb. It's not active. It's in the passive.

"with the problems" is a prepositional phrase. "Remove all prepositional phrases that you can!" my father screams as he stands over me. He waves andirons.

"of determining the fundamental underlying properties" is a prepositional phrase.

"Remove them!" my father shrieks. He stabs at our ceiling with the andirons.

Earlier, he had tried to shove Mother into the cold, vacant fireplace.

"of such successful grammars" is yet another prepositional phrase. This prepositional phrase is necessary, though, in that it provides light for Trumbull in that cedar chest he's in. As he waits for Syntax to lock the chest tight, he uses *Of Such Successful Grammars* to look around. He finds a hole. He pulls himself into it and sees it's a tunnel. He elbows and legs and groins himself into this tunnel. Sometimes, the tunnel feels like it's going up. Other times, it slants down. He comes to a part that feels like a wall—but then he sees there's a ladder he can climb up. And it's *Of Such Successful Grammars* that lights his way.

Meanwhile, *The Study* holds a piece of steel pipe over Syntax's closed eyes. Both magnets buzz up and off Syntax's eyelids and *clikclik* onto the pipe. Syntax quickly gets out of its bed, runs for its doorway, pushes its medical skeleton aside, and leaves its bedroom for some other place.

"I'm Trumbull's daughter Helvetia Pious," a young woman says to Syntax as it races down a staircase. On the wall next to the staircase is a painting that has the title, "*Of The Principles and Processes*." In it, a man weighs himself by standing on his son's back. There's another painting titled, "*Syntactic Investigations of a Given Language*."

This one shows a dog choking on a piece of meat.

"I'm Trumbull's daughter Helvetia Pious," this young woman says again. "I don't have a comma in front of my name because my father has many other daughters."

Helvetia, along with The Study, pursues Syntax as it clears the end of its staircase.

The fourth sentence Noam Chomsky writes in his less-than-corking book *Syntactic Structures* is "The ultimate outcome of these investigations should be a theory of linguistic structure in which the descriptive devices utilized in particular grammars are presented and studied abstractly, with no specific reference to particular languages."

"The ultimate outcome of these investigations" is the subject of this sentence.

"should be" is the main verb. It's the "to be" verb. My father had tried to push Mother into the fireplace. This instant, he tries to push me into it. Our fireplace is the size of a puppet theatre and is empty of any flames. My father pushes me into the fireplace. I get to the back of it and put my palms against its brick. It's been so long since we've had it cleaned. And its flue must be filthy.

"a theory" is the subject complement, a predicate noun. That, or it's the difference

between "further" and "farther." It's the difference between a "clever" horse and a "clever" child. It's when someone uses "loan" as a verb when, really, they should use "lend." It's when someone uses a word—an indefinite pronoun—like "someone" and later uses "they" instead of "he" or "she" to refer back to it. Or A Theory is Trumbull's oldest daughter. She once woke to a man fastening iron gauntlets, anklets, and a choker to her. "What's all this?" she said to him. He told her how they were going to wear iron things on their bodies and then try to run through a hall tiled with powerful magnets.

"of linguistic structure" is yet another prepositional phrase. If my father were to see it, it would give him paroxysms. In the back of the fireplace, I feel the rungs of a ladder. I pull myself onto them to escape the tips of my father's andirons. "Cast a sentence in the active!" he yells after me. "Ask yourself, 'Who does What to Whom?'" I head for the flue.

"in which the descriptive devices utilized in particular grammars are presented and studied abstractly" is something that Nim Chimsky—that cheekily-named chimp—never wrote or understood. Nim, alas, wasn't really linguistically gifted. (Other scientists debunked him.) There was once a horse named Clever Hans—and he, too, wasn't linguistically gifted. (Debunked.) Is A.L.Ex, the Avian Learning Experiment (an African gray parrot that says, "Want a nanner" when it wants a wad of banana) linguistically gifted?



"with no specific reference to particular languages" are two more prepositional phrases. To give strength to each other, they hold hands.

Syntax hides, and The Study and Helvetia Pious look for it. The Study sees an oriental rug sagging oddly into the hardwood floor. It yanks the rug aside—only to reveal that the rug had covered an oblong hole. The Study puts its head into the hole. Then, its entire body. Unlike Trumbull, it has no prepositional phrase to see with. With which to see. Helvetia Pious, from the hole's lip, watches The Study's form recede.

"One function of this theory is to provide a general method for selecting a grammar for each language, given a corpus of sentence of this language" is what, according to Noam Chomsky, comes next.

"One function of this theory" is the subject. A man to whom Helvetia Pious was engaged bought a horse named One Function of This Theory. What he did to this creature was shoe it with powerful magnets. He next set up—by way of extreme personal expense—a quarter mile track tiled with, yes, powerful magnets. This man thought he would be able to ride One Function of This Theory onto this track. Then, once he got the horse galloping, he was certain the horse would glide around and around. It would be free of all friction. (He had, after all, arranged the horse's

magnets and the track's magnets so that their like poles would be facing each other. Pluses to pluses or minuses to minuses.) But this didn't work. The horse broke its legs.

"is" is the main verb. Another "to be" verb. "The weakest verb a strong writer could select," my father says. I hear his andirons clatter in the fireplace far below me, for I have pulled myself up—by ladder rungs—half our chimney. But, oddly, instead of ascending toward the flue, I begin to climb what must be diagonally. And then I'm moving horizontally. I'm certain I'm on my knees going over ladder rungs.

"to provide a general method" is a noun phrase that's in the interrogative. It's the phrase to select when you'd like to express something that you wish would happen or that is contrary to all you take for granted. It's the subjunctive—or what the Spanish call the ablative.

"for selecting a grammar" is a prepositional phrase that A.L.Ex could say after "Want a nanner."

"for each language" is a prepositional phrase that Clever Hans could stamp at but not understand.

"given a corpus of sentence of this language" is a participial phrase that once clothed

the limbs of the fallen medical skeleton in Syntax's doorway.

The Study is in a tunnel but has no prepositional phrase it can use for light. As it moves, it's certain it can hear Trumbull's voice. The man says, "It's been so long since I've seen my daughter Helvetia Pious. It's been so long since I've seen my daughter The Study. In fact, both of my daughters must be the principle of the construction that can be an investigation of a grammar that's under analysis."

And The Study—as it crawls in its tunnel, as it makes out a dull prepositional light—hears what must be Syntax. It says, "I've had enough with magnets. They're not improving my sicknesses. Nevertheless, with fundamental investigation, properties must be concerned with linguists."

The chimney I'm in—it's really become more of a tunnel—now angles down. I crawl tentatively until I hear odd voices hush. I crawl until I see a light go out. I crawl until the front of my face hits another warm body.

## INVENTS

What he did had several steps to it, but it began with a tank of helium. A hose was connected to the tank, and—on the hose—a valve. After the valve, another hose—only this hose’s mouth was much smaller. And screwed into this rubber mouth? A needle.

So what he did started with his filling tiny balloons, balloons he never filled past a cat’s eye size. (Balloon colors: myriad.) What’s more, to tie-off the balloons, he couldn’t expect to use his fingers—however fine and nimble his digits might have been. (These balloons were *small*. He could have tied the hair strands of children to them in place of strings. He could have tied them to the hands of mice.) No, he used glue to seal them. What he did had several steps.

Whatever it was he wore on his head, it worked like a phone. But it wasn’t a phone, had nothing phonic about it—at least on his end. What did he think a phone was? To him, it was a black plastic crab that hunched on his desk. Or it sat on a special pedestal he had bought for it. He imagined screwing off the crab’s ear- and mouthpiece. Better yet, cracking them. He imagined cracking them open and seeing white meat abuzz with electricity. That was a phone.

What he wore on his head, however, worked like a phone—it transmitted voices—and yet, it wasn’t a phone. It was energized copper plates affixed with conductive gel to his forehead.

It was—if anything—antiphonic. He didn't have to speak to use it. All he had to do was lip his words, mouth them, pretend.

What went through the telephone wires outside, amazingly, was still his voice. He spoke with his mother.

“Miecrub,” she addressed him, “was it you who put wads of soggy tobacco leaves in Shapland's armpits as she slept?”

“\*,” he said.

“She woke in the morning woozy and sicked on my floors. And she had your little balloons in her vomit. You teach her that trick?”

“\*.”

“Yes, well those little things are still on my ceiling as we speak. I'm surprised her bile didn't pop them inside. How do they manage it?”

He could make other things. He once grafted the root of a manioc plant to the shoot of a tomato sprawl—ended up with fruit full of natural cyanides. He could have given those tomatoes to Shapland—what for her ignoring him. He knew she liked to eat slices off a plate. She liked them garnished with nothing save sea salt.

He tipped some beef broth into his mouth and swallowed some balloons he had made. One balloon—or two ones—one green one and one blue—ran errant on him, but he got most down. He gulped them in—a whole inflated birthday.

Finally—and what he did had several steps—he sank himself to the bottom of a swimming pool. Once on the bottom (and this was tough with all that helium in him), he used a wand to sick himself. He waved the wand down his throat.

His brown vomit clouded the water, but then his balloons cleared themselves of it. They rose, broke the surface.

He bobbed up, too, and watched his balloons. Already small and buzzing away, they zipped higher and sent themselves farther than bigger balloons.

## THE SHRIMPS IN THE GM SECTION OF THE DETROIT NORTH AMERICAN INTERNATIONAL AUTO SHOW

In 2001, at the Detroit North American International Auto Show, the shrimps in the REFRESHMENTS AREA FOR GM WORKERS AND THEIR FAMILIES were large and sweet. They were of the Gulf White variety and were dispensed out of a life-sized wax model of Rick Wagoner. This wax model was over seven feet tall. It had rubies for eyes and long platinum teeth. The acne scars on its jowls were gilt, and it dispensed a seemingly endless supply of fat Gulf White shrimps through a hole in its left palm. (To get shrimps, all a GM worker—or member of its family—had to do was shake the right hand of Rick Wagoner. Then, a second later, out of the left palm, shrimps.)

The GM workers and their families ate their shrimps in Corvettes instead of at tables. Sauces and sparkling drinks were to be found in glove boxes.

In 2003, the shrimps were no longer Gulf Whites. They were Gulf Browns that had had to be soaked in brine to get rid of their bitterness. Some of them still had dark green veins up their spines. And Rick Wagoner? There was no true-to-life wax model of him, no. Instead, there were a pair of basketball shoes he had worn at Duke ("To Represent Hard Work") and a solar-powered calculator he had used at Harvard Business School ("To Represent Responsibility"). GM workers and their families sat

on folding chairs and hunched over styrofoam plates as they ate their shrimps.

In 2007, at the Detroit North American International Auto Show, the shrimps in the REFRESHMENTS AREA FOR GM WORKERS (alas, families were no longer allowed) were small. Miniscule. They were the tiny orange type devoid of all taste that can sometimes be found in odd stir fries. To eat them, GM workers had to use plastic figurines of a triumphant Rick Wagoner. These little Ricks held micro swords with which GM workers could stab at their shrimps. Once finished, they would throw their little Ricks into the trash, leave the REFRESHMENTS AREA FOR GM WORKERS, and rejoin their families.

In 2008, the sign simply read AREA FOR GM WORKERS. Gone were all refreshments. The "AREA" was a cinderblock room with a linoleum floor. In it, there were some chairs and some cots. On one wall, there was a ripped poster of a Corvette. On another wall, however, a GM worker swore that he smelled something like shrimps. It was as if Rick Wagoner had opened one of those tin foil packets of Shrimp Flavor that come with cheap noodles and had wiped it on the wall.



## THE MEN FROM LIFE

I have a photograph, and in it, my much older friend and I sit at the foot of a hotel bed. Also in the photo are men from LIFE magazine. They ask my older friend, not me, questions.

“How did you two meet?” one of the men from LIFE asks. My older friend says, when he had first met me, I had smelled proudly of the carnival and still had smoking lapels.

My older friend answers all the questions the men from LIFE have.

He’s responsive, honest, my older friend. Says he masturbates into his socks and is sorry for the launderer. Says he taped a pinwheel to his mailbox and has me look for letters only when the thing spins.

“What kinds of letters do you get?” the men from LIFE ask.

“Acceptances,” my older friend says.

He says I won’t take him home at times because I’m afraid he will break his antique furniture. He says he’s been on three models of ambulance and never calms when in jail.

As an undergraduate, he had kept slim by clutching train tracks and dancing.

The men from LIFE take notes and sketches. They take pictures. They call for whiskey, ice, services.

“You drink, do you?” the men from LIFE ask him.

“I eat ice,” he says.

He says he was once a pin lifter—that he would pick diamond sticks off necks, heads, and chests.

He'd had a wealthy suicide father, but the man had left him nothing but a small name, something whispered, something that meant no ancestry.

He says his mother had had him lift the bottoms of her breasts and that he never liked that electric lights disturb shade trees.

“Call us ‘pal,’” the men from LIFE say. “Say ‘Ah.’ Say ‘O.’”

In the photo that I have, at the foot of the bed, my older friend and I cross our legs over our thighs. It looks as if we're seeing who has the slimmest hips.

This older friend of mine is a sleek man, tweedy, a talker. He wears elegant overcoats and worsted suits. He favors fountain pens. He likes to steer.

“Two to six inches of ash covered everything,” he says, responding to the questions of the men from LIFE.

He shakes his head, continues.

He explains how the sailors of the day knew nothing of a certain volcanic eruption. For them, between spars and ropes and their arms, the sky too quickly became gray, the sea gray. Strange fine grains collected at the backs of their throats. They felt as if they no longer sailed on the sea but, instead, trundled on the soggy ground. On an island beneath a shuddering mount, thousands of purple centipedes scuttled into a sugar-cane refinery. Vipers, out from porous rocks and into muddy streets, went for tailored hems, tanned shins. Horses suffocated on sulfur air. Black rain. Black clouds

with 1,000° of Farenheited steam. Only a few people survived—one was a man locked in an underground prison for a tawdry bar fight. He joined Barnum & Bailey after, became famous for living. He never had to touch a trapeze's bar or a big cat's tooth. He just had to stand while the audience imagined 50,000 dead. "The Man Who Survived Doomsday!" lived to see Troy, Baltimore, Detroit, beans on his plate, clam bouillon.

The men from LIFE pose my older friend. They have him put his foot up on the windowsill, the radiator, the bathtub. They have him sit on the end of the bed with me.

"Why don't you pretend to write something!" the men from LIFE say.

"I could write something," he says.

"Why don't you *pretend* to write something."

He says he once saw an entire discarded Victorian staircase at a dump in New Jersey. He pretends to write something. *Famous for living.*

The men from LIFE leave.

I sleep in the hotel bed. My older friend rides a taxi, waves to a stranger, and jumps off a bridge. But he doesn't drown in a river that's gone scummed at the edges. He doesn't die of trauma. He suffocates on the air—as if there is something material in it. Later, people find his name etched carefully into his necklace. In one of his shoes, they pick out his name on a check I had made out for him. It's for rent. And the men from LIFE, they soak their silvered images.

A BOUNCE IN MY STRINGS

**HELEN BENT’S “Once Over from the Waist Down” says...**

Well, what do you think all you Bent Sores out there, all you Bent’s Cravers?

*What?*

*You haven’t heard?*

You haven’t heard that John Nodge—yes, THE John Nodge, THE It Boy with the carved, crushing looks and the wooden acting chops—has joined the latest Felty project?

*Qué?*

*“What project?”* you ask.

Only THE project worth mentioning by your insipid reporter, I say. Only THE project that includes the Implausible Hith Bith. Yes, Hith Bith—that unearthly talent made of Michigan pine. The single lodestar in our God-absent universe, in my ‘pinion, says I.

Stay with me, Bent sores. There’s forever more on this one.

**WRITE FOR OUR  
DESCRIPTIVE  
CIRCULARS**

**WANTED  
LADY SOUSAPHONE  
&  
SMALL VAMP SHOES**

**Yes.**

A boy sits in a dressing room that's full of exposed wires and yellow lights. Even though the theatre does not have Internet access, on the back of the last page of his script for *The Ruination of the Temptation of St. Anthony*, he drafts an email to his father.

dear father I do not understand how you could have overlooked the highly unjustified simulated sex scene in this play could you check with the labor laws or the child actors union or my contract on this I am only twelve and quite famous and have a certain reputation to uphold etc etc director felty is very domineering and keeps only his own interests and persuasions in mind the puppet hith bith is as odd as advertised and is rumored to be operated by a pedophile or an insane though ive never seen this operator because its in hith biths contract that we cannot look up into the rafters or try to look up and no one can ever touch his strings and oh how I want to yank his strings

A rap on the door—someone with a toy mallet for a fist. The boy stops writing, and Hith Bith, the puppet, shoves on the door and skips in. His lead-weighted, size 2-AAA shoes sound like satyr hooves on the concrete floor. He's three-feet tall, but his every step bounds him up to four. His marionette strings stretch taught against the top of the dressing room's doorframe.

“ ‘t ain't true,” the puppet says. He shakes his head. He pulls himself up on the back of the boy's chair and says, “Nun. ‘t ain't true! You scared?”

Director Felty rushes into the dressing room. As usual, he wears a squib vest underneath a plastic jacket of sealed fake blood. He squeezes his fists—there’s a *bangbang*—and fake blood comes out of his armpits.

“Nodge. My John. *Compadre*. Are you ready to give the sex scene a try?” he says. He comes up close to the boy and Hith Bith, making sure not to touch the puppet’s strings. It’s hard to tell if Felty smells more of spit or of sweat. “I was thinking, my John, that we shouldn’t simulate the intercourse. This play’s about sex, temptation, the *stink*. So you’ll hunch it the old way—not the pretend way. Okay, compoodle?”

### **HELEN BENT’S “Once Over from the Waist Down” says...**

Anything for Hith Bith, folks. Anything.

Now, you know how I like my Sundays, all you Bent Sores out there. You know my routine. You know I like to read *Psychopathia Sexualis* out loud to myself and have my terriers lick brie cheese off my feet. But when Hith Bith calls, I drop my Sunday, folks.

I met H.B. at the theatre.

He was waiting for me on the dark stage. No one in the place. His marionette strings invisible.

He wore a silk robe and a fez (Very corny, I know. Very “theatre”), but who am I to crit?

Even though he's a puppet—just wood, rod, and hinge—he looked thinner. Maybe a bit more hollow around the eyes.

He motioned for me to sit on the stage, so I sat. He crawled into my lap and sat on my knee.

**Me:** *Ah, Hith Bith, it's wonderful to see you again. May your strings stitch the heavens forever. But I can't help but to see that you look drawn. (Dear, don't look for the pun!) And I've heard rumors you've found this Felty project taxing. True? Throw a whisper onto the porch of my ear.*

Folks, he squirmed on my knee.

**H.B.:** *Nun. Can't say. Let's keep it on the play.*

**Me:** *Fine, H.B. Then I suppose you don't want to hear what one of your fellow cast members spilled to me about young John Nodge. She told it to me over cocktails. We were both uncrossing our legs...*

He shook his fezzed head no and jumped off my knee.

**H.B.:** *The play's the thing.*

**Me:** *Yes. The play. It's called "The Ruination of the Temptation of St. Anthony."*

*What's it all about, H.B.?*

**H.B.:** *No matter.*

**Me:** *What? I heard the play's a twist—a fun—on an old puppet show standby, "The Temptation of St. Anthony." In the original play, the audience watches a dear little saint deny himself the sweets of thighs and the gifts of kings.*

*In your play, though, I was told that St. Anthony—played by you, H.B.—never even gets the chance to be tempted. Whenever a historical hussy like the Queen of Sheba boom-bah-booms up to you to proffer the goods, a double of you—a guy played by John Nodge—slides in and takes her for himself. This all true?*

**H.B.:** *Yuhn.*

**Me:** *How does it all end?*

Hith Bith didn't answer me, folks. He started prying up one of the boards in the theatre's stage. (Don't ask me how he did this—what, since his hands are always in fists.)



**Me:** *Well, I'll guess, H.B. As all the tempters and temptresses bottleneck around John Nodge, you get more frustrated. All to the delight of the audience. And the whole thing ends with you and your double getting into a knockabout fight. Right?*

Somehow, underneath the stage, Hith Bith found dirt. He was rapidly digging himself into a hole. It was so dark at the time, but it seemed like he was already ten feet down.

**H.B.:** *Nun. 't ain't true. Lower me a sandwich? A sausage?*

Now that touched me, Bent Sores. Here was Hith Bith, my prime, shining entertainment guide, asking me for something. I would have given him anything—even one of my terriers dead and eviscerated.

**Me:** *Oh, I'll give you a saucheech, H.B. But tell me this: Does this project exhaust you because young John Nodge is so inexperienced and unprofessional? That's what I hear. I hear he objects to certain scenes—ones that require him to Old-It-Up unadulterated with some temptresses on the stage.*

He threw some dirt fifteen feet up and into my eyes. An admission?

**WANTED**  
**A Kennel of Acrobatic Bull**  
**Terriers**

**PROSTHETICS**  
of all descriptions, no  
matter how large, small,  
complicated, (or private).  
Write for catalogue.

**RUBBERTO**  
THE MAN WHO  
CANNOT  
BE ELECTROCUTED

**Yes, yes, and yes.**

“Never? Never! But your father said you’ve been hunching it since you were eight!”

Director Felty says. He squeezes his hands, and squibs explode around his neck.

Fake blood freaks his chin and runs down his throat. “Nodge. My John, you and your father misled me. I’ve been led into a ditch.”

On stage, Hith Bith wears his monk’s robes and kneels, penitent-like, in his hermit’s shack. He has a sausage tied to his fist. He laughs raspily, and his laugh is strange. It seems not to come from his mouth, and, like a bat, it flutters in the mezzanine, in the rafters, in the orchestra pit.

“We were all so excited,” Felty says. “‘Not only,’ I told myself, ‘am I getting the boy who *PAUCITY* magazine judged The Pulchritudiest Beauty Alive, I’m also getting a *hexual* hellion who’s truly *depraved*. Your daddy said you kinked it since you were eight!”

A piglet with firecrackers tied around its middle trots onto the stage. There are crabs clawing about. A dyed-red poodle chews wetly between its legs. Stagehands work to arrange a pile of hay while the boy, also in the robes of a monk, suggests they simulate the sex scene—"It was originally written that way." He adjusts his rope belt, says, "Maybe we could cut it altogether?"

"Cut it!" Felty shrieks. "This play's about the stink! Temptation! It's about this age! Where do you think we got these 'actresses' anyway? We didn't consult an *agency*. We called a *service*." He gestures at the three women standing near the pile of hay. The woman playing the Queen of Sheba pulls a pair of clear underwear out of her mouth.

"Do you have any idea how many heavyweights wanted your role? They all had goat's legs! They all wanted to work with Hith Bith and hunch it for the oldsters," Felty says. He stomps on a crab, and it expels what looks like white cheese. The poodle looks up.

"Well, we'll have to work through this," Felty says. "We'll get your snuff up."

The boy steals a look up into the rafters and finds the ends of Hith Bith's strings. He sees dark silhouettes of seven? eight? bobbing heads. Seven pedophiles? Insanes? It's as if they're acknowledging the boy's shriveling virginity.

"Couldn't we cut the scene, Hith Bith?" the boy says. The puppet says nothing. Again, his disembodied laugh.

**HELEN BENT'S "Once Over from the Waist Down" says...**

This is it, all you Skin Boxes of Spare Parts and Meat, all you Bent-o's. This is it. Despite all the in-fighting, the lawsuit threats, the script changes, and the drugged or drunk fathers on the set, *The Ruination of the Temptation of St. Anthony* is ready to premiere tomorrow.

*Oh, and who do you think got an invite?*

*Who do you think has a back row seat to this theatrical nocturnal pollution?*

Bent Sores, know I'm smuggling high-powered binocs into this one. You'll get the Real Grease, the Ins-and-Outs of Nodge's performance from me.

**LADY PARTNER  
WANTED  
Write IMMEDIATELY,  
sending photos, stating age,  
experience, etc., etc.  
Amateurs, save your spit  
and stamps!**

**Yes. Certainly, Yes.**

The boy has a recent issue of *PAUCITY* entertainment magazine on his lap, and through his closed dressing room door, he hears Hith Bith whistling what sounds like "For He's a Jolly Good Fellow." The puppet whistles the tune slowly; it takes on an aspect of the funereal. The boy rushes to finish something he's writing on one of his

old headshots. With a sharp-smelling black marker, he lashes the following over his glossy face:

have never been so embarrassed so humiliated father the hay at my naked back father the stagehands chuckling felty yelling trying to get me to squat one way stretch another putting his clammy hands on my stomach on my back the queen of sheba smelling like a sack of wet onions im already nothing felty yelling about getting towels in there patting at my legs and all along hith bith acts his part hith bith does nothing to help me hes no help just laughs I actually touched one of his strings he screamed

Hith Bith's sad whistling stops. The door opens, and the puppet trudges in, wearing a suit made out of cheap paper and a cap of bread dough.

"You going to leave me for dead?" he asks. The boy hides his scrawled-over headshot in a make-up drawer. "Now that you've touched my strings, you going to leave me for dead—like they did to my friend Pinocchio?"

"I don't understand you. I never understand you," the boy says. He waves the *PAUCITY* in front of Hith Bith. "And you've never backed me. Why did you invite this interview? Why let this horrible woman write these things?"

Hith Bith gets himself onto the boy's lap and lightly punches the boy's chin. The boy cringes.

" 't ain't true," the puppet says.

Somehow, though he doesn't have fingers, Hith Bith manages to open the magazine to the interview. But he doesn't read it. His plastic eyes settle on the ads instead.

“Rubberto...The Man Who Cannot Be Electrocuted. Did you know I once danced on his chest? Do you think he’d leave me for dead?”

Hith Bith opens his paper jacket, and the boy sees it’s tailored out of printed pages covered with smudgy sentences and crude illustrations. The boy sees the words:

#### CHAPTER XV

*How the murderers follow Pinocchio, and  
having caught up with him,  
hang him on a branch of the Great Oak.*

There’s a picture of a puppet hanging by its neck from a tree. The wind blows. He’s alone.

“Poor Pinocchio,” Hith Bith says. “That’s where the story was supposed to end.” He gets out of the boy’s lap and begins a slow dance on the concrete floor of the dressing room. His strings tug against the doorframe.

Director Felty comes in, seems distracted. “Hey, nice dance, H.B.,” he says. The puppet scrapes a lead foot against the floor and hops to one side. He hops to another side.

Felty leans into the boy’s neck and speaks into ear. He says, “Nodge, I’ve been thinking. We need to get you up to snuff. I’ve devised an exercise for you—something to get you strong where you need to be, in control where you have to be.”

Slowly, Hith Bith spins. His multiple strings become one black rope.

“To get you strong,” Felty whispers, “next time you urinate, next time you piss, I want you to turn the waterworks on and off. Get it going, then turn it off. Get it going, then turn it off. Think of it as pushups or situps for your Little Friend, your Johnny. Maybe then you’ll get strong.”

Blood, real blood, starts coming out of Felty’s nose, and he laughs. He searches for a handkerchief but can’t find one. Hith Bith unspins before he rips off his sleeve and hands it to the director. After he wipes himself, Felty holds the smeared paper to the yellow light and reads, “ ‘He closed his eyes, opened his mouth, straightened his legs and, giving a great shudder, hung there as if frozen stiff.’” He licks his lips and says, “Now that’s the kink!”

### **HELEN BENT’S “Once Over from the Waist Down” says...**

I know you’re Rabid For What Happened, Bent-a-thons, but you’re going to have to get it from someone else. (Please, be quiet. I’ve pity and disdain for all of you.)

This puppy, this little Hel, is sick, put down. I’m already shot full of sodium pentobarbital—I’m ready to do the Last Twitch and Stretch.

To cut to it, I’ve seen enough. I’m packing up the terriers, the Krafft-Ebing, and the wheels of brie to go to the hotel at the bottom of the Marianas Trench. I want to do nothing but stare out of six-inch-thick glass and see magnified darkness and 100-year-old swimming nightmares. Anything to forget that cursed performance. How can I care about entertainment now that Hith Bith’s dead? Oh, and if you’re still reading, Bent-out-of-commissions, if you’re with me to the end, **I Will Pay \$5,000**

**(Every Bill Autographed and Personalized) To Anyone Who Shockingly Disfigures John Nodge.**

**VAUNTED  
THE HUMAN  
EMBELLISHMENT  
HAS NO REAL  
COMPETITOR**

**ARTISTS  
DO NOT BE MISLED**

**Yes. Now? Then?**

Velvet theatre curtains part, collect. Firecrackers explode around the piglet, wounding it on cue. Making it scream an introduction. The red poodle steals Hith Bith's—Saint Anthony's—sausage as it was trained to do. The Seven Deadly Sins come out on gold wheels to tempt Saint Anthony, but the boy, the double, intercepts them and riotously accepts their gifts (fake gold, plastic banquets, mirrored splendor, the rubber heads and genitals of enemies). The little saint looks mad. Audience laughs. Hilarion (on six-foot stilts), Buddha (fat), the Heresiarchs, Lust and Death all become the double's friends. To him, they whisper secrets and detail tricks that were meant for the Saint's ears. Audience laughs.

Beautiful women sway over to tempt Saint Anthony. Here comes Helena, Prosperpina, and the Queen of Sheba. The double intercepts them all. He leads them



over to—and makes sure they’re comfortable in—the pile of hay. Hith Bith, play acts mad. He beats himself over the head with his fists. The audience laughs.

Pink and purple make-up has been put on the boy’s sex so those in the back rows can see it. Red make-up has been put between the temptresses legs.

Then, with a silent kind of ventriloquism, the puppet throws his voice so that it flaps into the boy’s head. He says, “You practice your pissing pushups, friend?”

The audience doesn’t know what’s happening so, at first, they laugh when they see the boy lunge at Hith Bith. The boy jumps on the puppet. By the neck, he holds the struggling thing with one hand.

“Nun! Nun!”

With his other hand, the boy grabs the puppets strings. He yanks on them and pulls them down. The audience—one intake of breath. The boy pulls on the strings, but there’s hardly any resistance. There’s no tug-o’-war. A pedophile, an insane, does not fall out of the rafters. No. Only rubber balloons come down. Eight rubber balloons. A woman cries in the back of the audience. Shots, not squibs, report offstage. The boy lets loose the strings and the balloons fly back into the rafters. Hith Bith gets up, removes his monk’s robes, says, “Yuhn. And there it ends.” He rises on his strings, but this is not an apotheosis play. Marionette angels do not come and caress him on his way heavenward. He stops, halfway up, and hangs. Hanged. Nothing but wood, rod, and hinge.

## TOY BOAT, TOY BOAT, TOY BOYT

Look at Taliaferro for as long as you can. He is in the Mens Pants section of the building he works at. His job is to go through all the pants that have come in and measure their waist sizes and leg lengths. It's astonishing how a jeans manufacturer might label a pair of their product "33/30," when, really, they are "44/28." And Taliaferro is the one who puts things aright. He finds the true measurement of whatever jeans he's judging. Next, he writes the correct size on a tag, ties the tag to a beltloop, and puts the jeans where they should go. If they're "28/34" and not "30/30," then that's where they go.

But still look at Taliaferro if that's what you like. Or you should go? Now, Taliaferro is in his building's Literature section. There, he puts second-hand books into their appropriate places. Some titles go to "Stuttering—Juvenile Fiction," while others he slips to "Adventure—Adult" or "Missing Fathers—Childrens." He puts some in "Mesmerism—Erotic," and as he does this, he finds a plastic tube—he can't see from what source it comes—tucked between two books. He holds this tube to his face and feels air *sisss*. The air smells like rootbeer. He holds the tube to his ear, and for a bit, it just blows onto him. But then he hears language. He hears behavior. He hears a father and a young son sitting at a table and eating steaks. He hears that, earlier, the father and son had found that they did not have knives with which to eat their steaks, so what they did was put their steaks directly on the table, break their

plates by throwing them to the floor, and use plate shards for blades.

"Funny how these plates work better than knives, eh?" the father asks his son. The son, in the way he replies to everything, says, "As well as?" The father puts a finger in his mouth to move a lump of steak from one cheek to the other. He says to his son, "We're going on a medical vacation I planned." He goes on to tell his son he calculated that—for the price of a penile implant in The States—he could get one for a half-inch of the price on an island tucked between two far-away continents. For well over a week, they would be able to enjoy beaches, cliff faces, and lava fields. Sandalwood forests. They'd eat the priciest entrees at restaurants and stay at the worthiest hotel the island had. He, the father, would get his penile implant, sure, but he wouldn't have to deal with the pre-hustle and fluorescent-lit post-op he certainly would have had to endure if he had decided to have his surgery in The States. No, on this island he found—this haven—he'd get to relax before having a doctor named "Chicago" put a fillable rubber tube into the trunk of his penis and a toggle switch in his scrotum. A small motor capable of distributing a thick liquid called "Trekkle" in his abdomen. He'd get to relax.

Watch as Taliaferro takes the tube from his ear. He's perplexed by what he heard. He wonders why such a scene would come out on the air of a tube. And to make everything even more confusing, Taliaferro has some books he doesn't know how to shelve. Where should he put *The Distressed School Committee*, *Interiors of Modern Play*, and *Olivia's Passionate Sketches*?

Watch Taliaferro? Maybe you should go. Maybe you should take the blanket off your bed, put it on your shoulders, and walk in the road outside. It's just rained, so the pavement is wet. If you're not going to leave—if you're going to stay and watch—then know that Taliaferro has a dog, a fat thing with a thyroid problem. He got her from The Poodle Rescue League, and they told him her name was Dince and that she was prone to seizures. They told him he had to give her certain medicines. They told him he should give Dince raspberry leaf tea. They told him he should take Dince to the vet to get bioscanned for \$1800.

But, soon, Taliaferro ran out of money for Dince's medicines, and though he had planned the investment, he never saved enough for a bioscan. He *did* give Dince raspberry leaf tea, which she seemed to drink humbly, gratefully. He did give Dince a small tank top to wear, a shirt he had found in the Beach Gear section of the building he works at. With puffy paint, he wrote "Dince" on her tank's back so anyone could read it. And Dince did get seizures. They came for her as if sent. On one occasion, while Taliaferro was paddling a rowboat on a lake, Dince had one on the beach—amongst brown rocks and green goose shit. Another time, in the building's Seniors Dance Studio, Dince had a seizure. On her fat side, she kicked herself in circles and clacked her teeth while no less than twenty tapshoe-shod grandmas danced, flung their arms, and chanted, "We! Are! Old! Gals! We! Are! Old! Gals!"

Days after Taliaferro's discovery of the tube in the Literature section, he's in the Mens Pants section again. So far, all the pants' waists and leg lengths he's measured

have been legitimate. He has Dince near his feet. She's wearing her tank top.

"These jeans say '38' on their waist, yet you've stowed them in the '28's," a man tells Taliaferro. "You wrote '28' on this incorrect tag." He shows Taliaferro the tag tied to one of the jeans' beltloops.

Taliaferro dangles his measuring tape in front of the man's face. The man bats it away.

"Now I'm a '38'," the man says. "How would I have ever found these jeans if they're in the '28's?"

The man looks to the ground and sees Dince. He reads her tank top. "Dince?" he says. He leaves Taliaferro for the Mens Changing Room. He has his jeans over his shoulder.

Look at Taliaferro if you didn't go outside with your blanket. If you decided not to walk on wet pavement. He finds a tube hanging out of the fly of a pair of pants. Black houndstooth slacks. This tube, too, has air that comes out of it—air that smells like rootbeer. It *siss*ses. He holds it to his ear, and he hears that same father and son in the back of a cab. They are being shuttled to the airport, and the father tells his son that they're going to fly on different planes so that—even if one of their planes crashes—one of them will survive and be able to perpetuate the family.

"Thanks to you and I, our like will be around for centuries, eh?" the father says.

"As well as?" the son says. He looks out the cab window.

"You'll enjoy seeing what Dr. Chicago does to me," the father says. "It's fine for you to have such experiences." He gives his son a plastic boat the size of a bar of

soap.

Taliaferro takes the tube from his ear. Two large teen boys come up to him. One boy is on the shoulders of the other. These are the boys who compete in the demolition derbies that are held every third Friday of the month. These are the boys who were expelled from the Teens Center, which is next to the Seniors Dance Studio in the building Taliaferro works at. What these boys had done that was so bad was take a stray cat, a mild calico, and anesthetize it with some chloroform they had stolen from high school. While the cat was out, they cut off its front legs. They left it—it was still sleeping off the chloroform—behind the pop machine in the Teens Center. It was a quarter hour later, when lots of teens were committing frottage to loud music and dark lights, that the cat awoke and started yowling and pushing itself around the floor of the Teens Center with its rear legs. It left a ruby streak on the floor that looked like the letters "RW."

"Tuffy, we need special pants," the teen on his friend's shoulders says to Taliaferro.

"We need pants that have an inseam of '34' but that have a waist that will reach over my head," the one on the bottom—the one holding his friend's legs—says.

"And we need a long dark coat."

"Or a cape."

"We need a hat."

"Or a mask."

"Do you still have extension ladders in the back of the building?"

"We're almost ten-feet tall like this."

Taliaferro doesn't answer these boys. Nervous, he shows the plastic tube he's holding to Dince. She licks at the air that comes out of it.

"Why keep that dog alive, Tuffy?" the teen on his friend's shoulders says. He shakes his head.

"It's name is Dince. Dince," says the one on the bottom, the one holding legs. "Dince."

"We need a mask, Tuffy. Or a hat."

"We should tie her to the bumper in the next derby Friday night. We'd demolish her out of mercy."

Taliaferro holds the tube to Dince's ear. Leave if you want. Go if you like. Don't watch. Or look at Taliaferro for as long as you can. See him hold the tube to Dince's ear. She doesn't understand what she hears, but she hears the son on an airplane. He sits in a crowded middle row and has the plastic boat his father had given him on his lap. He doesn't believe it when he first sees the toy boat grow a little, but it grows a little. It goes from being the size of a bar of soap to the size of a shoebox. And he doesn't believe it when he first sees it, but now it has plastic people inside it. One plastic person has his arm in a sling. Another is a woman who has a child of hers on a leash. The plastic captain of the boat is staring.

"*Hello, sad passengers,*" the pilot of the plane says on the intercom. The son looks up from his toy boat, and the pilot tells everyone that he will have to make the 747 do barrel rolls since they're about to fly over a parade. "*I'm about to try it,*" he

says. So he has the 747 do a barrel roll. He has it do another barrel roll, and all those that didn't buckle their belts are on the ceiling of the plane's cabin before they crash back to their seats and magazines.

Taliaferro takes the tube from Dince and tucks it back into the fly of the pair of pants. The man who had gone into the Mens Changing room so long ago comes out and says, "Well, I guess I won't be wearing these jeans." The teens are gone.

See Taliaferro? Do you see him? It's night. Here, have a flashlight. An emergency flare. Taliaferro is outside—in a cleared, muddy area behind the building he works at. He sits in the rowboat he had taken to a lake with Dince.

And Dince is somewhere behind Taliaferro. Taliaferro can hear her drinking raspberry leaf tea out of a dish he had given her. It's as if she's on the shore again.

And the interstate is nearby. Across from it, there's a broken church. Part of its roof has collapsed, the bell in its tower has no clapper, and its cross on top must have lost a nail because it's in the shape of an "X." The side of the church that faces the interstate, instead of being painted white, has a crude, hand-painted mural that advertises the demolition derby. In the painting, cars crack into each other as cartoon-eyed fiends hang their heads and arms out of driver's side windows. Strange, bat-winged creatures fly above the destruction in this painting. They fly between tall fires and pillars of black smoke. "FRIDAY NITE!!!" the mural proclaims in yellow letters. "SEE CARS DIE!!!" in red.

And it sounds like Dince is having a seizure. Taliaferro hears her struggling



against the ground. Maybe she's convulsing amongst the goose shit once more.

Hears her gurgling. It sounds as if the seizure is a sack, and she's being shoved into it. But when Taliaferro leaves his boat gets to where her bowl of tea is, he finds no Dince. He finds only her tank top—and it's trampled and ripped.

Taliaferro has not been able to find Dince. Do you see Taliaferro? Do you see Dince? Why don't you go to an animal shelter—something like The Poodle Rescue League—and get yourself a dog? A salvage cat? The dog you'd find would be a brindled red and black. It would have a docked tail and scabby elbows. It would like to get bioscanned for \$1800 dollars. If you were to have this dog bioscanned, the results would show that it's dangerously high in nickel. So you wouldn't be able to give this dog water in nickel bowls. You'd use plastic. Ceramic. Maybe you'd select the dog that sleeps under the animal shelter's statue of an elephant. Taliaferro has not been able to find Dince, but he still has her tank top as proof she existed. Whenever Taliaferro goes outside, he thinks he hears a whimper of Dince's on the air. But then, when he looks, he can't find her.

Back in the building he works at, Taliaferro is on his way to the Literature section with the books *The Quiet Fray's Victims* and *French Bugles on Broken Wind* when he decides he should use the restroom that's off the Beach Gear section. Before he lets himself in to this restroom, though, he notices something he's never seen before in its door: a brass peephole. This peephole is strange in that, instead of being at eye-level, it's no more than four feet off the ground. It's also weird because, when Taliaferro

bends over to look at it, he sees that, instead of allowing people inside the bathroom to look out, it permits him, Taliaferro, to look *inside*. Taliaferro looks inside.

What he sees isn't someone struggling on a toilet seat. He sees a man and a woman alone and sitting together on a large commercial airplane. The plane, evidently, is flying.

"No one else on this flight, eh?" the man says.

"Yes. Oh, yes," the woman says. She's wearing a one-piece swimsuit and a rubber cap.

"I have a son," he says. "My boy will have to wait for me—what since our flight was five hours delayed."

"Those protesters on the runway!" she says. "What was it they wanted?"

"My son's plane just took off in them," he says. He then continues with, "Penile implants have such a stigma attached to them."

"Oh, yes," she says. "So unfairly."

"Some men have nothing more than congenital skin flaps between their legs. Humiliating. Some men have had spinal injuries that make their pud dysfunctionate," he says. "It never gets past the consistency of mozzarella cheese."

"Then phalloplasty is in order," she says.

"Well, I've had one already, but I'm unhappy with it," he says. "I had a rod of green silicone inserted. But now the problem is that I'm forever erect. I have to tie myself to my leg with dental floss."

"Oh, yes."

"When I sit on the toilet to shit—*ahem*—I can't fit myself in the bowl. I have to keep myself out, and sometimes there's a jet of piss."

"Oh."

"When I lie on my back, I can balance a marble on the end of myself. Like a circus seal."

"Yes."

"But, on the island we're flying to, I've found a doctor who will be able to insert mechanics into my pud. I'll flick a switch in my sack when I want to be erect. I'll be able to fit in the toilet bowl."

"When I get there, I'll go to the beach first thing," the woman says. She snaps her rubber cap against her forehead and says, "After, may I accompany you when you get your implant?"

"Well, there's my son..." the father says. "But sure."

Taliaferro is leaning over, staring into the peephole, still clutching the books he should be shelving, when the door jerks open and hits him on the forehead. An elderly woman steps out of the restroom. She's wearing tap shoes, and she has some of her dress tucked into the back of the waist of her hose.

Look. See? Watch. On the island the father and son fly to, there are kids digging a trench in the sand. Kids make drip castles by letting soggy sand dribble out of their cupped hands. They make regal piles that have squiggly spires.

There is a woman missing all her back teeth. She has four up front on the top and

four up front on the bottom. She has brown and yellow orchids in her hair. Many men have kissed her.

There are half dead palm trees with fronds rattling.

There is a clownfish. An anemone. A microscopic nematode on this island.

There are penile implants to be had. There are fine meals waiting to be eaten. Dr. Chicago has just finished a surgery. Her patient is still out from the anesthetic he received. To test what she had just implanted, Dr. Chicago flips a toggle switch that now lives in her patient's scrotum. As expected, she hears a small motor *whirr* in his abdomen. She hears the motor distribute a thick liquid, "Trekkle," into the fillable tube in the trunk of her patient's penis. See?

There is a man juggling scythes on the beach. He stops and slices a fish the size of an infant to show beachgoers what he's doing is sharp.

There is a funeral where, in the end, the priest asks all the mourners to walk strange to their homes or their cars or the bus. That way, the dead will be confused and won't follow them. Won't find them.

A day later—or does it matter which day?—and no Dince. It doesn't matter which day, really. It could be in the past or all mixed up. It could be halfway through the nine-hour-and-fifty minute day on Jupiter. It could be in the spring of Jupiter's 4,332.71 year. It could be a day later. It could be the time you woke in your bed only to find a large hole with burnt edges in your ceiling. Through this hole, you saw a plane fly by and drop lots of packages that waltzed to the ground on parachutes. In

these packages?

Taliaferro, at times, thinks he can hear Dince's calls on the air. Dince. Her sounds seem to come across the air above the interstate, the broken church.

A day later, and Taliaferro notices there's another peephole in the door of the restroom that's off the Beach Gear section. He looks into the one he had already looked into first, but he sees that the father and the swimsuited woman are still on that same plane and are still saying the same things. (“...*have such a stigma...Oh....a marble...I'll go to the beach...*”) An exact replay.

So Taliaferro looks into the new peephole. There, he sees the father's son waiting outside the front of a small airport. The airport is nothing more than tarmac, a tower, and a covered area—some poles and a roof of corrugated tin—where people can wait. Taliaferro sees that, three hours ago, the boy had waved goodbye to his pilot. The man had opened the window of his 747's cockpit and had said, "Your dad will come!"

"As well as?" the boy said.

The boy's toy boat is now larger than a shoebox. It's at least the size of a manageable dog, and the boy has it behind him. The people in the boat are no longer plastic. Now, they are dolls made of cloth and have porcelain hands, feet, and faces. A woman still has her child on a leash. A man still has his arm in a sling. The captain's porcelain face has staring eyes.

By the way the boy stands, Taliaferro sees that, an hour ago, the boy had seen a procession of people walk by backwards. None of their steps were steady. They all swayed and jerked about.

Taliaferro watches, and a covered truck stops in front of the boy. The back door of the truck opens, and a young man comes out with the end of a long rope. He steps up to the boy and slips the rope around the boy's waist.

"Would you mind tying this around yourself?" the young man asks.

"As well as?" the boy says.

"Yes, do it as well as you can," the young man says.

The boy does not tie the rope. He lets it fall to the ground and kicks it into the road.

The young man picks up the rope and puts it around the boy's waist again.

"Now tie it around yourself. That way, I can later say you're compliant," he says.

But the boy still resists.

"It should be around your neck," the young man says.

The boy secures the rope around his waist with a tight knot. Satisfied, the young man returns to the back of his truck, hops inside, and starts pulling the boy in. The boy scoops up his toy boat and holds it to his chest. The doll captain falls out. Overboard. The captain's porcelain face hits the road and breaks. He gets left.

"As well as! As well as! As well as!" the boy cries.

"Thanks for agreeing to do this," the young man says. "I certainly didn't expect this of you." He pulls the boy into the back of the truck, and in the back, the boy sees three baby horses trying to stand and some things that look like cannonballs on the floor. The young man closes the back door.

"So let's have an understanding," the young man says. He is now in the driver's

seat. He has the truck moving. "Your toy boat will be your payment. And that's generous, right?" He sticks one of his pinkies into his ear as he drives. He explains to the boy that they're going to put the baby horses on the roofs of buildings. Then, they'll go to the aquarium in order to throw cannonballs at the underground shark and seal tanks. The young man drives, and the baby horses skid around until they fall and decide to stay folded on the floor. The cannonballs roll, take oblique angles, bang against the sides of the truck.

Taliaferro feels the back of one of his ears get flicked. He turns around and sees the two large teen boys. One's not on the other's shoulders this time. They're not combined.

"What are you doing, Tuffy?" one of them asks him.

The other teen starts pounding on the restroom's peepholed door. "Do you know you're being watched?" this teen shouts through the door.

"Do you know where Dince is, Tuffy?" the first one asks. "Have you seen Dince?"

"You're being watched!" the other teen shouts.

"You should come to the derby tonight, Tuffy. That might be a place where Dince is."

The other teen opens the restroom door and sees no one is inside. So he walks in, leaves the door open, doesn't bother to lift the toilet lid, and pisses all over it.

"Dince," this teen says. "Dince."

Find your own tube and listen to it. You are the type, after all, that would find a tube that isn't yours and listen to it. You'd pull back a corner of your carpet, maybe, and find a plastic tube. You'd hold it to your face—rootbeer air would be *sisssing* out of it—and you'd hear a father and a woman wearing a swimsuit talking in front of an island's small airport. The woman would convince the father that his son is already at the beach.

"No point in looking for him here at this airport," she'd say.

They'd rent one moped for the two of them and ride it to the beach. She'd steer, and he'd be behind her with his arms wrapped around her waist. ("My! You are forever erect!" she'd say.) On their way to the beach, they would see that none of the signs on the island are electrified. No, they're all on flags. As they'd putter on, they'd see (and you'd hear)

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stitched into flying silks with gold thread.

The father would look up at the tops of buildings and see horses looking down



and him.

"Why're there horses up there?" he'd ask the woman. She'd tell him she'd read that people on this island put horses up on the tops of buildings when the horses are still little, when they're ponies.

"They take them up when they can still hold them in their arms or get them to fit into elevators," she'd say. "So then they grow on the roofs and can never get down," she'd say. "Unless they jump."

Or find your own misplaced peephole to look through. Find one in the wall of your sister's bedroom and see a boy with a rope around his waist and a young man carrying a pony up flights of stairs. See them give the pony a bag of oats on the roof before your sister stomps into her room and pushes you out.

Or maybe, after repairing your car's taillight with red tape, you find a peephole in your kitchen floor. Why not kneel down and look into it for as long as you like? Why not see a father and a woman eating in an island's priciest restaurant? They eat fried sugarcane spiders and agree the tastiest meat is the firm white stuff in the spiders' heads. They eat aged mold spore. They eat piles of pink fish eggs, and they've all but forgotten that the father has a young son—that it was the son who was supposed to spend a medical vacation with his father, not a woman always wearing a swimsuit and a rubber cap.

A field of dirt enclosed with concrete highway barriers and chainlink fence.

Overhead lights powered by red generators. An overhead PA system proclaiming

numbers and names. Cars designed to custom smash. Spectators and their open mouths.

FRIDAY NITE!!!

Volunteer firefighters, their arms crossed over their chests, waiting for carflames. Cars in collision. "Referees"—men dressed as clowns—running amongst crudely spray-painted cars. Referees tap drivers on their helmeted heads. Issue warnings. A car with swirling fires in its rear wheel wells.

SEE CARS DIE!!!

A car with "NAUGHTY" painted on its side. Out. One with "MR. CHUBBS." Gone. Towed out by a backhoe. One with "WET PAINT." Down. One with "MOMS AND DADS AND FREINDS." Still active.

See the two large teen boys? They drive a stationwagon they had painted white. In black, on the car's side, they have a number and the words "R.I.P. DINCE."

Earlier, when the announcer on the PA introduced the demolition derby's contestants, the teen boys strode out to their car with one on the other's shoulders. They wore their custom pants and a long black coat. They had a cape flipped rakishly over one shoulder. They wore a hat and a rubber fright mask. They were nearly ten-foot tall, and all watchers cheered for them, knowing them to be the teen boys who win it all nearly every third Friday night of the month. Before the teens got into their car through its windows (they had welded shut its doors), they separated. One hopped off the other's shoulders—the tails of his long coat trailing in the dirt—and all who were watching laughed.

Now, though, the teens are in their bout. Twelve of twenty cars have been eliminated—and most of these by the teens. But do you see Taliaferro? You are sitting on your house's roof. You let yourself out through a small attic window. You see a tall mound of dirt in the distance, and, to you, it seems to grow. It grows—as if some underground source is feeding it. But do you see Taliaferro? Taliaferro had watched the teens for a bit, but once he saw their threat regarding Dince was nothing more than a spray-painted sign on their car, he decided to walk around. He bought a Bloomin' Onion from concessions and ate it. He drank a waxed box of lemonade, so now he's waiting in line for a Portable John. See Taliaferro? He doesn't see the teens force their stationwagon backwards onto another contestant. Once the teens see they've disabled yet another car, they slide out of their own vehicle, combine to make their tall man, and do something of a dance. A referee dressed as a wino warns them to cut the celebration, but before they separate and get back into their car, they reach into their stationwagon's backseat and remove a small animal that looks limp with sedation. It wears a tank top? Could there be puffy paint on its tank? Dince? Quickly—still combined—they tie this creature to the rear bumper of their stationwagon. They're in their car again. They're chugging backwards.

Taliaferro waits at the front of the Portable John line. He had just seen a man and what looked like the man's young son open the blue plastic door of the chemical toilet and step inside.

"Don't think too hard about it," Taliaferro hears this man say to his son. "Try to think about the cars crashing instead."

A peephole. A peephole in the door of the Portable John. Taliaferro puts an eye to it.

Someone shouts disgust behind him.

In the peephole, Taliaferro does not see the father and son who had been in front of him in line. He sees the son that he had heard eat steaks with his father. He sees the son that Dince had heard on the airplane. He sees the son he had seen in the back of a truck with cannonballs and ponies.

Someone has their hands on Taliaferro's shoulders and pulls. Someone has one of Taliaferro's arms.

Taliaferro sees the son is in an underground aquarium.

"Get the fuck!" someone yells behind Taliaferro.

The son is in an underground aquarium, and the toy boat he has is the size of a golfcart. The people who are on the toy boat—the woman and her leashed child, the man with his arm in a sling—are alive. They are alive, though they aren't more than two-feet tall apiece.

"We've lost our captain!" the woman says, her voice comically heliumed. She jerks her child by the leash.

"We're adrift!" the man says. He winces because of his arm in a sling.

The son stands in front of a tank full of purple-splotched octopi. He watches as one of the creatures stuffs itself through a hole the size of a quarter.

"My child!" the woman shouts. "He'll perish!"

"This sea is so black!" the man shouts. "It's as black as the air in a drain!"

The son feels a tug from the rope around his waist, and the young man pulls him near. He stands in front of the shark tank, a tank that must be at least two stories tall and full of fluorescent blue water. Nurse sharks hover above the boy. Manta rays. Hammerhead sharks with woggling heads. Reef sharks with black-tipped fins. A tiger shark that must be longer than fifteen feet.

The young man picks up a cannonball. He hands it to the boy and says, "Now, you throw this at the seal tank. It's around the bend."

"As well as?" the boy says.

"Yes, yes, of course," the man says.

So Taliaferro sees the boy mince to the seal tank with a cannonball cupped in his hands. This tank, too, is tall. The boy watches the creatures—they look like the smoothest, most smiling dogs—corkscrew in the water. The boy hears pleas by the shark tank. Then screams. There's water at his feet. People run past him, and then the young man is at him.

"You said you'd do it as well as you can!" he says. He grabs the cannonball from the boy. "The shark tank's certainly well-cracked and is ready to give!" he says. He steadies the cannonball, lifts it over his head, and throws it against the glass of the seal tank.

First, in the seal tank, there is a crack.

Then, there are cracks.

It's cracking.

It's cracked.

It's been cracked.

And then, around the bend, the shark tank gives. And the seal tank gives. And the boy is being shoved under water by more water. He's shoved under that more water by more water. And more water. It's no longer fluorescent blue. It's black. The boy struggles to the surface, and he's next to his toy boat, which is now the size of a boat. A boat. The people on it are life-sized, and they help him aboard. On deck, the boy pulls in the rope he has around his waist. He goes hand-over-hand and finds that there's no one at the end of it.

"Get the fuck!" someone yells behind Taliaferro again. Taliaferro turns around, and lots of angry people are at him. They've become a squad. Their heads say so many things. Most of their words conveyed on spit. Profanes. Their hands hold, sock, and beat him. Their legs would like to carry him away. Each toe would like to take him away.

The man in the Portable John—a father, for sure—steps out. His son is behind him, still in front of the mouth of the chemical toilet. His son has small jeans around his ankles.

Is the jeans waist size 20"? 22"? The 38" of a fat kid? Could Taliaferro figure it out with his measuring tape and file those jeans?

"Don't think about what I'll do," the man says to his son as he plods, with grim steps, toward Taliaferro.

Taliaferro breaks from all these people. He runs through demolition derby spectators and soon finds himself close to the dirt ring. He stops. Two cars survive.

One is manned by the teens. The other has "MOMS AND DADS AND FREINDS" on its side. And Taliaferro sees the teens' stationwagon has the red tatters of a small creature tied to its bumper. He sees a ripped tank top. "R.I.P. DINCE." And the mad squad is atop him again. The father atop him. The son is alone in the Portable John. The son is left, and Taliaferro has so much weight on him that he lets out a keen and all his inside lemonade.

A brass peephole has grown in your palm. You look into it and see a woman wearing a swimsuit. Her rubber cap in her hand. She weeps. There's another woman—a doctor—who wears a white coat. In blue cursive, over her left breast, you see the words "Cat Chicago, M.D."

"I'm sorry. There were unforeseen complexities," the doctor says.

But you know it's not the remains of Dince on that bumper.

You know it's an athletic sock with catfish nuggets and strawberry preserves in it.

You know it's a doll animal stuffed with yesterday's butchered guts and old blood.

You had seen such a doll in a passion play. You had read about such a doll in the long forgotten novel *Please Give Away*.

No, you know it's another poor feline victim. A white Persian mix. A cat anesthetized and tank-topped.

Look at Taliaferro for as long as you can? He's no longer something to look at? He

has expired in your eyes? He's on the half-collapsed roof of the broken church, and it's night. There's an extension ladder leaning against the cross that looks like an "X." There's a bundle of something tied to that "X."

Watching Taliaferro and watching him watch the insignificant must be exhausting.

Here, have a lantern. Have a candle. Have one of those hideous black fish that swim at the bottoms of the deepest oceans. Those fish have nodes of light they dangle in front of their under-bit faces. Hold those fish and use their light to look at Taliaferro for as long as you can.

At the demolition derby, it didn't take too long for Taliaferro to get battered. All he had to do was struggle while the angry people and the father of the toilet boy struck him until he could no longer see out of one of his eyes or hear out of one of his ears. He couldn't move half his mouth, and his belt got taken. Whipped out of his beltloops.

It didn't take long for Taliaferro to find out that the popped thing on the bumper of the teens' car wasn't Dince. All he had to do was toss himself into the demolition derby's dirt field.

The teens were out of their car. They were dancing as a tall man—a trophy as tall as a person was their partner. Taliaferro didn't find poodle hair stuck to the car's rear bumper. He found cat hair. He didn't find a rectangular poodle ear. He found a triangular cat ear. He found a tank top that had "Dince" written on it in puffy paint. But that "Dince" wasn't his handwriting. And it wasn't even spelled correctly. It was



"Dints." Dints.

It didn't take long for Taliaferro to hobble back to the building he works at. It was dark inside, but he managed to get through the Seniors Dance Studio and the Teens Center. He got himself through the Beach Gear section. The Literature section. Mens Pants. He got outside, and there he heard Dince. He heard her on the air, and he realized she came from the broken church.

It didn't take long.

Taliaferro is on the roof of the church. You had been on the roof of your house. You had seen a mound of dirt grow, but Taliaferro is on the roof a church, and what he sees is Dince tied upside-down to the center of an "X." So he climbs the ladder that's propped against the "X." He unties Dince—not sure if she's alive or dead. She's not moving, not making noises. She's minus her tank.

He lays her at the foot of the “X” before he goes to the bell tower. There, he finds the bell with no clapper. He rips the bell off its hinges—he does this though it had taken four men and a crane to put it up there in the first place—and he walks to the edge of the roof with it before he throws it down to the interstate. He goes back to the bell tower and finds a new bell has grown in the old bell's place. This one, too, has no clapper, and Taliaferro rips it out. Throws it down. The interstate cracks.

How many peepholes have you looked through? Have you ever encountered a tube? Has someone watched you?

Taliaferro throws bell after bell. More than a dozen of them. Water froths out of the cracks in the interstate. Another bell. Bells. They don't have clappers, but,

because Taliaferro throws one bell on top of another, there are odd gongs in the night.

A white stationwagon drives backwards toward the pile of bells. It looks like it's been in an accident.

Taliaferro throws a bell at this car.

He throws two bells at the same time, and now this car is demolished. A tall, ugly man pulls himself out one of this car's windows. He's a ten-foot stain. Taliaferro throws a bell at this man.

Water bursts out of what is now a hole in the interstate. Waves. A boat surfaces out of this hole. A man with one arm is on the deck.

"I used to have it in a sling. But, hey!" he shouts up at Taliaferro.

A young man appears to be the captain. He has a frayed rope around his waist. He's behind a wheel, and, next to him, there's an older woman. His mother? No.

And then Taliaferro sees there's also a teen boy on the deck. The boy has a telescope pointed at Taliaferro.

Taliaferro does not throw a bell at this boat—this boat that was once a toy. He does not throw a bell at these people—these people who had had to come to life.

When Taliaferro takes a step back to get out of the view of the telescope, he falls into the portion of the church's roof that had collapsed.

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