



THE NOVELIST & THE RAPPER

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MICKEY HESS

STORIES AND ESSAYS

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PART I.

REAL BUT UNLIKELY-SOUNDING RAP NAMES

Glorious Graham
Pimp Pretty
Grandmaster Flowers

SOMEONE HAS PLAGIARIZED FAULKNER

SOMEONE HAS PLAGIARIZED Faulkner. Now there will be an assembly. Now each and every student at Somerset High School is required to sit in the multipurpose room for the last two hours of the last day of school.

Tomorrow and for weeks ahead the multipurpose room will be deserted. Students will be given cars and will wreck them. They will get their first part-time jobs, make new mistakes and discoveries. But for now, the students do nothing they haven't done before. They are playing with PSPs, checking cell phone messages. Lunch ladies are washing off taco trays. It could be any day, any time of the year.

William Faulkner, the famous American author, has been invited in person to Somerset High School, to clear up this matter, to teach the students that plagiarism is stealing and it isn't right to steal. He wears a sweatshirt a fan sent him in the mail, with a cartoon snowman on it. He wore the sweatshirt because he remembers the woman lives near Somer-

set, on the off chance she would attend the assembly. There is no A/C in the multipurpose room, and Faulkner regrets his decision.

Mr. Dignam, the principal, calls for order. He is a fat man, and this brings him no end of torment in his job. In fact, students are chanting as he calls for order. *PIGnam, PIGnam*. He introduces Mr. William Faulkner and suggests that he begin by telling the students what he does for a living.

Faulkner adjusts his microphone. "My work -- a life's work in the agony and sweat of the human spirit." But someone has taken this work, stolen it, written his own name at the top and performed it for classmates at a schoolwide talent show.

The principal wipes his forehead. He apologizes to Faulkner on the student's behalf, tells him nobody knows what's wrong with these kids today.

But Faulkner knows. "The young man or woman writing today has forgotten the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself which alone can make good writing because only that is worth writing about, worth the agony and the sweat."

Faulkner stares into the audience. He takes a sip from the styro-foam cup of coffee Dignam placed on the podium. The coffee is bad and too hot. Faulkner purses his lips. Across the front of the cup, written in black magic marker, is his name, misspelled.

IN THE FRONT row, a girl sits alone. Faulkner recognizes that the other students have sat as far back from the stage as possible. He watched them file in, the early arrivers taking the highest seats and the rollaway bleachers filling like a reluctant waterfall down toward his place at the po-

dium.

The girl fans herself with a yellow notebook. Faulkner remembers carrying such a notebook himself years ago, and he wonders what she has written in there. Love letters she'll never send, he decides. He decides she is like him.

He begins to direct his speech to her. "Using this moment as a pinnacle from which I might be listened to by the young men and women already dedicated to the same anguish and travail, among whom is already that one who will some day stand here where I am standing..."

But three students already stood there, last week at the schoolwide talent show. They are rappers, and the winners, hands down, by measure of student applause. They beat 4-H clog dancers and the girl who can play piano with her elbows. They impressed classmates and faculty. Their work, though, was not entirely their own. They incorporated a long sentence from Faulkner's *Light in August*, and now they have been brought onto stage to apologize. "Now," the principal says, "don't you have something to tell Mr. Faulkner?"

The three students look down at their sneakers. They wear t-shirts with airbrushed likenesses of themselves. "Mr. Faulkner is waiting," the principal says, but Faulkner is less interested in the apology than he is in the girl in the front row. This girl isn't listening, but she is *not* listening in a different way than the other kids are not listening. He made eye contact with her a few times, but she neither looked away nor truly met his gaze. She read a fashion magazine during his speech.

"Well..." the principal says.

One of the teenage rappers scratches his leg with his opposite foot.

“It was such a small usage. It was only on a skit. It was the most minimal usage to have a fight over it...”

The principal is furious. His plan was for a public apology, not an explanation. Faulkner smiles. He is patient but firm. “The poet’s, the writer’s duty is to write.”

“Definitely,” the rapper says, “But there’s so many ways of being creative.”

Principal Dignam reminds the rapper that this isn’t the first time he’s faced accusations of plagiarism. The rapper insists those incidents were misunderstandings. “Get on the phone and talk to Daryl Hall, or the gentleman from Steely Dan.”

DIGNAM HAD TRIED to talk to Steely Dan. In fact, he had spoken with who he thought was that rock group on the telephone. He organized an assembly much like this one, but had to cancel it at the last minute when Steely Dan arrived, not a rock band but one burly stripper.

He feared he was making the same mistake last month when he booked Officer Chuck, when he arrived in his too-tight police uniform. But Officer Chuck did not strip. Officer Chuck brought glass-encased samples of drugs to the students. Officer Chuck piqued the interest of Rebecca, the girl with the notebook and fashion magazine. She had never seen drugs, and his presentation made her want to try them.

Officer Chuck explained at length just how she should react when

faced with the day-to-day pressures of drugs. She has never been offered drugs, and now fears herself somehow socially deficient.

As assemblies go, the students find Faulkner's especially boring. Faulkner has no glass-encased drug paraphernalia. Faulker has no army recruitment video. Faulkner is being heckled.

"Do you write them stories to get laid?" a kid in the audience wants to know. A cocky kid in a basketball jersey, who is obnoxiously sucking on a neon pink blow-pop.

Faulkner remains calm. "Not for glory and least of all for profit, but to create out of the materials of the human spirit something which did not exist before."

The teenage rapper nods. "I honestly have nothing against anyone who created something feeling like that, because I'd feel that's your child, you have that right to feel that. We took a note from your life, put it with the note of this person's life and we played it and made something totally different out of it. We've always had the necessary sampling forms and everything and handed them in."

Faulkner begins to respond, but he is being heckled again, by the kid with the blow-pop, who is chanting *Hey Mr. Snowman Shirt*. Faulkner is getting annoyed. He glares at the kid. "I refuse to accept this."

Once, when Rebecca refused to recite Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" in front of her sophomore English class, Principal Dignam punished her by making her transcribe the poem, in its entirety, fifty times. She chose to copy the poem in columns rather than lines, so that the words lost

all meaning, so that she created new poems of her own. Pages in the notebook she carries still read:

Two
And
And
And
Two

She has not written in the notebook since.

Faulkner watches her flip through the pages of her old journal entries and poetry, which by now look as foreign to her as if Robert Frost had written them.

Faulkner is so transfixed by this girl, for some reason, that he misses a question from Principal Dignam about his stance on tardiness. Yet Faulkner's attention is not the only one Rebecca has captured. The kid with the blow-pop has turned his heckling attention toward her. He has walked down the bleachers and taken her yellow notebook. He is reading it aloud and laughing while the girl's face turns red.

This is too much for Faulkner. He points at the kid with the blow-pop: "When the last dingdong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny inexhaustible voice, still talking."

But the sound has stopped. The kid with the blow-pop is choking, the neon pink circle of candy lodged in his throat, and his only air coming

through the hollow plastic tube at its center. He stands up, silent.

Ambulances arrive. Faulkner considers if he willed this to happen.
Or if she did.

STUDENTS RUSH FROM the bleachers to the flung-open doors of the multipurpose room. Rebecca remains in her seat.

As the bell sounds, the rappers are freestyling in a circle, inventing rhymes about ambulances and blocked windpipes.

They offer Faulkner the mic, all forgiven, but he only smiles, shakes their hands quickly, and pushes past them. He has something to say to the girl.

He puts a hand on her shoulder and says: “The poet’s, the writer’s, duty is to write about these things. It is his privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past. The poet’s voice need not merely be the record of man, it can be one of the props, the pillars to help him endure and prevail.”

She nods, but does not look up. She watches William Faulkner walk across her school’s multipurpose room and through the balloon-adorned exit. She opens her notebook, smoothes out the creases, and begins to write.

** This story incorporates elements from William Faulkner's 1950 Nobel Banquet Speech and an interview with De La Soul from Alex Ogg's The Hip Hop Years: A History of Rap.*

THE FRESHMAN FIFTEEN

CARING UNCHARACTERISTICALLY, they visited an old folks' home (a veterans' hospital). They always found it depressing. Microphone design was the rapper's investment, his best-laid plan. "Here's a notable fact," the respected rap vocalist proposed. "*We'll* get this broken-down, all of us. Senior care right now leads to our future sponge-bathing."

They nodded, the freshmen. I unrolled my sleeves. Mic cord unfurled, the fronting rapper stood facing our audience. "Over the hill --" he began, the rapper's voice like clean air circulating. The response was long overdue: t-shirts shed, lights flashed, ears tingled with the rap lines. It was over before it began, really, but the rap show soothed the elderly.

Effortless freshmen piled into the nearest car, repeating the notable lines that stuck with them while Febrezing the car's interior. Headlights on, two green freshmen from Andrew Jackson State College appointed the spent rapper governor.

BUY NOTHING DAY

INSTEAD OF BUYING nothing he bought something. Tents in the Wal-Mart parking lot, protestors demonstrating for one day of no purchases. He declined to participate in the non-action.

Jean-Paul Sartre has been dragged to a Buy Nothing Day demonstration. His niece is an activist. She is yelling at the influx of customers, begging them not to go into Wal-Mart. She covers her face with a camouflage bandana. Sartre does not cover his face. There is no need. He is unrecognizable.

A man calling himself Diddy will introduce Sartre as the keynote speaker, but Sartre will not say anything. When Sartre is introduced, he will hide behind a fat woman.

Cardboard signs declare that Wal-Mart is killing small business, that it has racist and sexist business practices, that it builds Wal-

Marts on Aztec ruins. On these cardboard signs, wordplay is king. Sprawl-mart. Appall-Mart. Some of them don't even make sense.

Diddy is late. The activists look at their wristwatches. Wal-Mart's mechanical doors open and close.

It is the day after Thanksgiving, the biggest shopping day of the year. Consumers are looking for bargains, but really they are looking to be part of something. Sartre's niece and her friends have linked arms to form a human chain across the front of the soda machines.

DIDDY ARRIVES by helicopter. He lands on the Wal-Mart roof and rappels down the side of the building, dressed in clothes that all bear his own signature.

The activists cheer.

Diddy adjusts his sunglasses. "As I stand here, the best way to describe how I feel is that I've arrived this morning to a party that's been going on all night. Now I know the party has been going on for some time, and even though I am late, I am right on time."

He holds up a magazine with his face on the cover. "We read magazines so that they filter all the crap out there and tell you what you need. We pay them money to do this...we trust them. People are going to buy phones, subscriptions and downloads...a thing that they want, but someone has to tell them what they need. That's what they will pay for."

Sartre's niece, Samantha, is making out with an activist boy. They have lifted their bandanas to kiss. Another boy is lovingly decorating a brick to

be thrown at the plexiglass windows of Wal-mart. He asks Sartre to autograph it.

DIDDY UNFURLS a large chart. “Billions of dollars every year on music, on fast foods, on cosmetics, on soda, and yes, on consumer electronics and wireless communications technology. I’ve been doing my thing while you all have been playing with your cellphones. It’s all about the cellphones ... cellphones, cellphones, cellphones.”

Sartre has become distracted, watching a small boy ride a mechanical dinosaur. The child is unaware of Buy Nothing Day, unaware of the quarter his activist mother has furtively dropped into the dinosaur to propel it into motion and stop her son’s screaming. The boy is four years old, wearing a tiny Che Guevara shirt, with the tiny Che Guevara wearing his own, even tinier, Che Guevara shirt, with his own tiny face on it, into infinity.

“Most of you are familiar with the book *Understanding Media* by Marshall McLuhan,” Diddy continues. Sartre raises an eyebrow. “How you received the information changed the way you perceived the information....”

Sartre has not prepared a speech. In fact, he came here with no intention of speaking. Say nothing day. Diddy announces Sartre, but Sartre is hiding behind a fat woman. “Jean-Paul Sartre,” Diddy repeats. “Am I saying that right?” But Sartre doesn’t appear. There is a long moment of nothing, then Diddy calms the crowd. “Sartre has not shown up,” he an-

nounces. “Not wanting to appear stupid, I’ll wait a few minutes to see if I can figure out what this means.”

The crowd nods. They understand, but they don’t. “Try sitting in a car with no CD player or radio or 10 speakers,” Diddy suggests. “It won’t be easy. It will happen. It takes time, but everything is moving faster than it was two years ago. It’s all moving so fast.”

Instead of buying nothing, he bought a small plastic keychain. He dropped in a quarter and turned the metal crank of the keychain machine. No one saw him except for the four-year-old, who began crying for his mother to buy him one too. The keychain was shaped like a monkey.

** This story incorporates elements from Diddy’s speech at on Mar. 14, 2005 at the cellular industry’s annual confab in New Orleans, and Jean-Paul Sartre’s refusal to deliver a speech at the Nobel banquet in 1964.*

KNUT HAMSUN AT THE NOBEL BANQUET

KNUT HAMSUN and Ol' Dirty Bastard live with a teenage girl. Their house smells like sandalwood incense. They walk on new carpet (rose) except for the tiled kitchen and bathroom and the thin strips of laminated wood that connect tile to carpet. 4.6 billion pounds of carpet are sent to US landfills each year. This is unknown to Hamsun, reacted to with brief indignation by the teenage girl, and means nothing to Ol' Dirty Bastard.

Knut Hamsun writes novels and wins Nobel prizes. ODB jumps onstage at the Grammy Awards, expresses his disappointment in not winning. They are lovers. The girl's friends make fun of her two dads – Hamsun's waxy moustache, Ol' Dirty's gold teeth. They ask if he takes them out when they kiss. They ask which one she calls mom.

2.

OL' DIRTY BASTARD has a toothache. It throbs at the growing tension between the teenage girl and Knut Hamsun, who are arguing far too politely. The girl, who does not like to be asked about her activities outside the house, is trying to provoke Hamsun, who asked. The topic is last night's slumber party, a game of truth or dare. Hamsun has read parenting books that teach him to ask questions not to police his teen's social existence, but out of his own sincere interest and concern. The teenage girl doubts his sincerity, and tries to sabotage his new interest in her life by telling him the absolute truth.

"A lot of the dares were kissing girls or bumping breasts together. We would be having some kissing event, and someone would always have to say, 'Imagine how much *better* it would feel if this was a boy doing it!' Cause then you weren't, like, lezzies."

"In the days of my blessed youth there were such occasions. In what young person's life do they not occur?"

"A lot of our friends had older sisters -- they were sixteen. And they'd tell us detailed stuff, like what it tastes like to go down on a guy."

"The only young people to whom this feeling is strange are those young conservatives who were born old, who do not know the meaning of being carried away."

"Then they showed us how with a Coke bottle."

"No worse fate can befall a young man or woman than becoming prematurely entrenched in prudence and negation."

“You’re not my real dad!” the girl reminds Hamsun. She slams a door after this, opens and slams it again for effect. The words hurt Hamsun, but the noise is what’s killing Ol’ Dirty, who is real dad to several kids, and has learned to disregard much of what the girl has to say to him. He holds a small bag of ice to the side of his face, considers if this new rose carpet is indeed any more attractive than last year’s chestnut taupe. The pile is already wearing down, and he questions what color could best replace this one. Even beige is not necessarily safe.

He and Hamsun, together, have chosen an approach to parenting that values honesty and does not like to impose boundaries. In one month, the girl will leave for a high school summer service campaign suggested by Ol’ Dirty as a way to enhance her college application, and touted by Hamsun as a way to turn an experience helping others into a stronger understanding of herself. On the side of a highway, she will find a dead bald eagle decaying in a garbage bag.

3.

THE NORWEGIAN NOVELIST and the addict rapper live with Nicole. She wears loose bracelets and dark eyeshadow, tries to copy the facial expressions of the girl from the zit commercial. She is bored by most conversations, and spends most of her day avoiding them.

They are going to the Nobel Reception. The novelist waxes his moustache in preparation. The rapper makes faces at himself in the metallic finish of the toaster oven. Nicole is think-

ing about youth and its impermanence. She thinks she would like to be an activist, or a fashion designer/activist.

Nicole was allowed to bring one friend, and she chose me. I was sixteen. I was sitting there dressed in a black garter belt, maybe with a red ribbon, black panties. I was a high school girl with no name, no car, omniscient. I came for the free food.

The ceremony is held this year in Ohio, in the multipurpose room of a community college. Folding tables are set up. Traces of straw remain on the floor from last night's 4-H talent show. The winner, a redfaced 12-year-old, sang a song about patriotism. Tonight the novelist flips through three jumbo notecards, front to back, then again. Nicole stretches, clasps her hands together and extends her arms and face toward the ceiling. Her father hands her a glass of non-alcoholic wine. "I raise my glass to the youth of Sweden, to young people everywhere, to all that is young in life." She rolls her eyes. He pretends not to notice.

The rapper licks his finger and dabs leftover wax from his companion's lip. The novelist smacks his hand. "What of it? We remain what we are and, no doubt, it is all very good for us!"

"Please calm down," urges the rapper. "I went and bought me an outfit today that cost me a lot of money."

"I will soon sit down again, but this is my great day." The novelist folds his arms and turns his back to the table.

The rapper looks down at his plate, probes his tongue over the aching tooth in his mouth, adding pressure to increase the pain.

The podium still bears a cardboard 4-H logo. A Nobel repre-

sentative serves as emcee, reminds the audience of the importance and history of this event, thanks Gerald's Auto Parts for their sponsorship. He seems uncomfortable in his clothes, and Nicole and I question if he usually dresses this way. Or what he would look like in, say, a muscle-shirt? The young, progressive rabbi and his wife, our chaperones, notice the flirtation.

At the emcee's prompt, Nobel recipients take the stage one-by-one to receive recognition for their various talents. They each try to disavow some of their talent, and they stare into the expanse of the multipurpose room, at each other, at themselves. Hamsun speaks third. He looks directly at his daughter. "What I should really like to do right now, in the full blaze of lights, before this illustrious assembly, is to shower every one of you with gifts, with flowers, with offerings of poetry -- to be young once more, to ride on the crest of the wave. That is what I should wish to do on this great occasion, this last opportunity for me. I dare not do it, for I would not be able to escape ridicule."

Indeed, the physicists heckle him.

Our peaceful moment is changed; no one knows what to do with the change, how to contain it. We are furious and silent.

To the side of the stage a door slams. It is Ol' Dirty, with a string tied to his rotten tooth. He wipes blood from his mouth and speaks to his partner's defense. "I don't know how you all see it, but when it comes to the children, Wu-Tang is for the children."

He jumps onto the stage. "Ya'll make me wanna cry or somethin'."

The physicists, shamed, stare down at their clipboards. Nicole takes a drink from her Coke bottle and winks at the emcee, who grew

sideburns. The young, progressive rabbi raises his eyebrows.

Then all attention returns to the stage, where the rapper addresses the novelist. “I apologize, my darling.”

The novelist smiles. “I no longer have my feet planted on the ground, I am walking on air, my head is spinning.”

“You’re very beautiful and your speech was also very beautiful. As a matter of fact, when me and you, with your speech, I think it was your speech that really attracted me up to the stage at that point of time to do that. So it’s no disrespect at all.”

Audience members, inspired by their exchange, have begun to hug and to weep. “I have had honours and riches heaped on me this day,” the novelist says. “I myself am what I am, but I have been swept off my feet by the tribute.” He winks. “It is as well perhaps that this is not the first time I have been swept off my feet.”

The rap artist shrugs. “Something just jumped into my blood and I was up there.” The two embrace, then lean into each other’s faces. This makes the emcee uncomfortable, because he never saw his own parents kiss.

** This story incorporates elements from Naomi Wolf’s Promiscuities, Knut Hamsun’s 1920 Nobel Banquet Speech, and Ol’ Dirty Bastard’s impromptu address after jumping onstage at the 1998 Grammy Awards.*

THE NOVELIST AND THE RAPPER

1.

What parallel courses did the rapper and the novelist follow that evening?

Starting united both at a normal walking pace from the rapper's recording studio, both reduced pace, bearing left, and followed Main Street, crossing the intersections of 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Streets. The novelist was receiving the Nobel Prize in literature. The rapper was debating retirement.

What was the rapper wearing?

One costume consisting of an oversized novelty nose (brown), Groucho Marx glasses and moustache. One Native American headdress. One leopard-print miniskirt.

And the novelist?

The same.

What did the rapper call himself when he dressed in this fashion?

MC Humpty Hump.

And the novelist?

Had not yet chosen an alter-ego. Did not yet have a rap name.

What did the duo discuss during their itinerary?

Music, literature, the Bay Area, the Yiddish language, ghosts, retirement, Nobel prizes, Burger King bathrooms, and women. They asked questions such as the following:

The rapper to the novelist: Why do you write in a dying language?

People ask me often, “Why do you write in a dying language?” And I want to explain it in a few words.

Firstly, I like to write ghost stories and nothing fits a ghost better than a dying language. The deader the language the more alive is the ghost. Ghosts love Yiddish and as far as I know, they all speak it.

Secondly, not only do I believe in ghosts, but also in resurrection. I am sure that millions of Yiddish speaking corpses will rise from their graves one day and their first question will be: “Is there any new Yiddish book to read?” For them Yiddish will not be dead.

Thirdly, for 2000 years Hebrew was considered a dead language. Suddenly it became strangely alive. What happened to Hebrew may also happen to Yiddish one day.

The novelist to the rapper: What are your reasons for retiring from music?

My reasons for retiring are:

1. I get no satisfaction or fulfillment from it anymore. It doesn't make me happy. On the contrary, it depresses me. Normally I'm not depressed, it's only surrounding the studio. I'm happy when I'm away from the studio.
2. Can't make a living at it. 90% of the studio work I've done in the last 6 years has all been either for free or for peanuts, and hasn't generated any income since.
3. It drives me to do drugs, cause I HATE BEING IN THE STUDIO.

If they had numbered their answers, why would they have done so?

Because this was their temperament. Or to ward off ghosts.

Were the duo old friends?

To the onlooker, to passersby, it would have appeared so, in the way they walked step for step with each other, headaddresses flowing behind them. In the way they spoke with a familiarity not often achieved as quickly as theirs had been, last night in the strip club.

Were they lonely?

They were.

What did the rapper say to elaborate on his reasons for his impending retirement?

Every man has the right to the pursuit of happiness and should first try a job that he might gain happiness and fulfillment from. This doesn't make me happy anymore. It makes me miserable and a drug addict. I'm 42 and have wants/needs/bills/responsibilities. So there it is, spread the word, I quit. I don't make beats, I don't do vocals, I don't write vocals, NONE OF IT.

Did writing make the novelist happy?

It did sometimes. He liked writing but nothing that went along with it. He hated book reviews and literary criticism and pompousness and self-doubt.

Did the novelist have any advice for his new friend?

Having met him only the night previous, having marveled both at his capacity for alcohol and at his hip-hop prowess, and having himself in earlier days also put too much pressure on himself and his work, the novelist felt he had no wisdom to offer his younger friend.

Was this a copout?

It was.

2.

What act did the novelist make on their arrival at their destination?

At the steps leading to the Nobel Banquet, he paused, then turned to glance at himself in the rounded mirror of an SUV parked in the street. He slicked back his eyebrows, adjusted his novelty glasses, headdress, and miniskirt, and invited the rapper to precede him through the entrance.

Where was the Nobel Banquet held?

In the multipurpose room of a local high school, following the girls' junior varsity basketball practice.

Were there folding tables?

There were. This was a catered event to be preceded by a speech from the Superintendent. The ceiling of the multipurpose room was still adorned with prom decorations, which school officials felt lent the Nobel Banquet the formal and somber tone it deserved.

On which decorative choices did the novelist and the rapper agree?

On the contrasting effects of purple and yellow, on the sequins affixed to the Styrofoam letters spelling P-R-O-M.

At what moment did the rapper and the novelist recognize that their similar tastes might bring them into competition?

Upon catching each other gazing at a young woman fastening her hairnet.

And who was this young woman?

The dropout daughter of the Superintendent. Here ostensibly to make her dad proud via her new job with the catering company.

More likely, though?

To embarrass him. The rapper and the novelist listened in on a conversation she was having with another member of the catering crew. They heard her describe her displeasure with her father, with education, with jobs in the service industry. “What I really want to be,” she said, “is an actor.”

Who emerged as the prominent figure of her narration?

Stephanie, actor and caterer. Last year she delivered a stunning performance as herself during a school event called Ghost Out, designed to frighten students into avoiding drug use and drinking and driving. Stephanie had been so convincing in pantomiming her own heroin overdose and subsequent funeral, and had dropped out of high school so soon afterward, that many classmates and teachers believe that she is actually dead.

At what point did the novelist and the rapper part ways, the rapper securing a seat at the foremost table and the novelist obligated to shake hands with Swedish royalty and school board officials?

As Stephanie broke away from her coworker to place yellow and purple napkins on each of the folding tables, the rapper and the novelist moved quickly to these new positions, as if to disguise that their trajectories had been interrupted by eavesdropping.

What plans for after retirement did the rapper write on a yellow napkin as he sat awaiting his friend's speech?

I most likely will try my hand at some of these:

1. Writing
2. Acting
3. Regular jobs in service (like clubs, hotels, restaurants, who knows?)

Did the rapper look at the young actress/caterer as he wrote this list?

He did. He watched her walk toward and begin speaking to the novelist. The author shook her hand, then nodded, listening, as she whispered something into his ear.

What did Stephanie request of the novelist?

That he ask his friend the rapper for an autograph.

Had she read the novelist's work?

She had, and found it terribly boring.

Did she tell him this?

She did.

What was the rapper's opinion of the novelist's work?

Having read and appreciated most of his stories in their original Yiddish, the rapper felt a vicarious pride in his friend's award.

What prohibited the novelist from relaying Stephanie's request for the rapper's autograph?

Her father the Superintendent had begun his speech, warning children to

finish their educations or else never find a good job. This speech was interrupted, though, by two things:

1st, Stephanie dropping a large box of confectioner's sugar, which consumed her in a cloud of white.

2nd, Mrs. Hansford, the math teacher, screaming upon seeing Stephanie, who she believed to be dead from heroin.

What was Stephanie's response?

“Ooooh ... I'm a ghooost.” Waving her fingers and wavering her voice. Leaping onto a table and taking a bow.

Did her father then introduce the novelist?

He did, and the novelist began his speech: “Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses, Ladies and Gentlemen...”

Did he look at the rapper as he spoke?

He did.

Did he see Stephanie approach the rapper with a pen and autograph book?

He did, and he saw the rapper smile.

And Stephanie?

Smiling too, she bookmarked the rapper's signature and took the empty seat next to him, calling friends on her cell phone, missing the best parts of the novelist's speech.

Did her actions frustrate the novelist?

At first, but she made him remember something important.

How many reasons did the novelist have for why he began to write for children?

Five hundred, but to save time he would mention only ten of them.

1) Children read books, not reviews. They don't give a hoot about the critics.

#2) Children don't read to find their identity.

3) They don't read to free themselves of guilt, to quench the thirst for rebellion, or to get rid of alienation.

4) They have no use for psychology.

#5) They detest sociology.

6) They don't try to understand Kafka or *Finnegan's Wake*.

7) They still believe in God, the family, angels, devils, witches, goblins, logic, clarity, punctuation, and other such obsolete stuff.

#8) They love interesting stories, not commentary, guides, or footnotes.

9) When a book is boring, they yawn openly, without any shame or fear of authority.

And 10?

It was coming. He preceded it with a dramatic pause, and he motioned for the soundman to focus a spotlight on his friend in the front row.

Number 10) They don't expect their beloved writer to redeem humanity. Young as they are, they know that it is not in his power. Only the adults have such childish illusions.

3.

After the banquet, the award, and the handshaking, to where did the duo, now trio, proceed?

To a New Year's Eve party at the home of the Superintendent and his drop-out daughter. School board officials and Swedish nobility congregated upstairs around the vegetable dip, while Stephanie, the rapper, and the nov-

elist, who was himself the guest of honor, retreated to the unfinished basement.

Was there a karaoke machine?

There was. The rapper and Stephanie sang “Rhinestone Cowboy” with pretend Swedish accents, and the novelist, in tribute to his new friend, recited “The Humpty Dance.”

Was the novelist given a rap name?

He was.

Was it midnight yet?

It was close.

Had the trio linked arms?

They had, bracing toward a future that was certainly coming.

When?

In 3 ... 2 ... 1...

** This story incorporates elements from the 2005 letter Shock-G circulated to announce his retirement, and Isaac Bashevis Singer's 1978 Nobel Banquet Speech.*

PART II.

REAL BUT UNLIKELY-SOUNDING RAP NAMES

Prince Vince
White Magic
Greyson & Jaysun

NON SEQUITURS IN THE LYRICS OF THE RAP DUO NICE & SMOOTH

Found out she liked to eat noodles. For her birthday, I bought her a French Poodle. Now, get down, get down (How to Flow, 1991).

A teeny, weeny midget fell in a well. I knew way back that my shit would sell (Paranoia, 1991).

So I can get mellow, lay back and let my girl play the cello. Hello. I hate Jell-O (Funky for You, 1989).

Hey yo, Dizzy Gillespie played the sax.* Me myself I love to max (Funky for You, 1989).

Greg Nice, my life's like a fairy tale. Orca was a great big whale. I knew a fat girl who broke the scale. You won't tell, I won't tell. (Hip Hop Junkies, 1991)

Remember the man with the manicure. My sister had a baby; it was premature (Step by Step, 1991).

** He didn't*

SHITTIN' ON A JET

IF YOU ASK me the greatest hip hop success story has to be that of Brian “Birdman” Williams, founder of Cash Money Records. In his song “Poppin Bottles,” Birdman takes the typical American Dream story to a new level. Generally, American success stories take us from rags to riches or from the poorhouse to the penthouse, but Birdman tells us that he “went from shittin’ in a cell, to shittin’ on a jet.” In that one line, Birdman re-envisions success as going from shitting in one place to shitting in another.

I have been thinking about the idea of status as linked to where a man shits.

One crisp morning last September, I went from shitting in a Minneapolis immigrant welcome center to shitting in a Day’s Inn in Iowa City.

That was a start.

Why was I in Minneapolis?

I was invited to a bookstore to talk about rap music.

I had written a book about it, and people were coming from far and wide to hear me read words from that book out loud.

The book retailed for \$39.95. I was to receive roughly \$1.59 for each copy that sold.

How many sold?

By last count, I believe it was in the low dozens.

That morning in Minneapolis, I went from planning to shit in my friend Andy Schondelmeyer's apartment, where the toilet was impossibly broken, to trying to shit in a locked bathroom in a park near Schondelmeyer's house, to considering shitting in the bushes in that same park.

My friend and fellow writer Brian and I were in Minneapolis for one night, and Andy was gracious enough to put us up, and to buy us food at a bar that was also a bowling alley. In exchange for this hospitality, I gave him the following: one book that I had written and thus was of \$1.59 value to me, and one Village People's Greatest Hits LP, so scratched that they would not buy it from me at a used record store in Chicago.

Andy Schondelmeyer has a moustache that makes him look like he comes from an Old West photograph.

He often wears scarves.

I met Andy Schondelmeyer when we both lived in Kentucky, before he moved to Minneapolis for what he called no reason at all.

“Do you have friends there?”

“No.”

“Is it for school or a job or something?”

“No.”

Andy spent a few years on a mission to get a parking ticket in each of America’s fifty states. Once he accomplished this mission, he did a series of paintings that replicated the tickets one by one.

I think, secretly, that Andy’s love of scarves is the reason he moved to the colder climate of Minneapolis.

It was the night before I shit in the immigrant welcome center, and Andy had to work the morning shift at an art gallery. I was concerned that Brian and I were keeping him up late. I know that Andy Schondelmeyer is a man who needs his sleep. I personally have seen him fall asleep in a bar in Chicago, using his scarf as a pillow while the rest of us talked about Appalachian literature. Andy wasn’t drunk. He was just sleepy.

After leaving the bar/bowling alley and arriving at the house that contained his apartment, Andy left Brian and me downstairs in his landlord’s apartment while he went upstairs to make his own apartment presentable. Andy’s landlord talked about hating his job as a teacher of English, and offered us some of the whiskey he drank to make his job more tolerable.

When Andy finished cleaning, we went to sleep, Andy Schondelmeyer in his bed, me on Andy’s rug, and Brian zipped up in his green vinyl sleeping bag.

The combination of the landlord’s whiskey and the food from the bar/bowling alley was such that I woke up the next morning with an intense need to shit in Andy Schondelmeyer’s bathroom. But the door was closed. And my

feet were wet.

Andy emerged from the bathroom muttering, and I jumped at the sight of the open door. I had barely shut it, though, before Andy knocked on it desperately.

“Don’t use the toilet,” he said.

I looked at him. I looked at Brian, still asleep, in a puddle that had not been on the carpet when we fell asleep.

“The toilet’s broken,” Andy said.

“Oh,” I said. “Ok.” I watched Andy get ready for work and draw us a map of Minneapolis, in case Brian and I wanted to go anywhere.

Assuming the map would lead me to where I could shit, I did not swallow my pride to ask Andy if he knew of the closest bathroom.

Andy left us a key to his apartment, and told us to drop it into his mail slot on the front porch before we left town.

We left Brian sleeping in a pool of toilet water. Andy left for work, and I left in search of a place to shit, Birdman’s lyrics in my head. *Went from shittin’ in cell, to shittin’ on a jet.*

“What’s the big deal?” I remembered Brian saying when we listened to Birdman on the ride from Saint Louis to Minneapolis.

“What do you mean?”

“That line about the jet. I don’t get it.”

“What don’t you get? It’s a success story, you know? Shittin’ in a cell to shittin’ on a jet? That pretty much says it all.”

“Well I get that. He used to be in jail, right, but the jet thing. Why was that such a goal for him?”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“He’s just setting his sights pretty low. I mean, is he saying he got to ride on an airplane?”

Then I realized Brian had pictured Birdman squeezing through the aisle, sliding closed the OCCUPIED lever in a cramped Southwest Airlines bathroom, looking at himself in the tiny mirror above the sink and thinking *I made it.*”

SHITTING IN AN airplane bathroom is maybe three steps above shitting in a cell. In between you have gas station, hospital waiting room, and Burger King.

But Birdman doesn’t say airplane. He says jet. Jet implies private jet. I bet Birdman’s is made of diamonds.

Interpretation is a powerful thing. There is also the possibility, I suppose, of picturing Birdman squatting, pants around his ankles, shitting on top of a jet, rather than shitting while on board a jet. Would this be his revenge on the system?

That morning in Minneapolis, I would have shit in a Southwest Airlines bathroom. I would have shit in a Burger King. Does Minneapolis not have Burger Kings? They were conspicuously absent from Andy Schondelmeier’s map, which included only three points of interest: Andy’s house, Lake Minnetonka, and a hip hop store called Fifth Element.

I would have shit in Fifth Element. But it was very far away from Andy’s house, unlikely to be open at eight in the morning, and unlikely to invite me into its employees-only restroom.

I would have shit in Lake Minnetonka. I would have befouled

the waters in which Appollonia cleansed herself in the film *Purple Rain*.

But Lake Minnetonka was also far away, although Andy's map was to no kind of scale. His house did not sit on the park as the map would indicate, but was in fact several blocks from the park.

Minnesota, are your park restrooms all permanently locked? Do you unlock them at a certain time in the morning? Is 8:30 AM too early for park use? It was not too early for the joggers whose presence prevented me from shitting behind the tennis courts.

Minneapolis, why are your affordable neighborhoods so residential? Are your citizens as nice as the stereotypes would insist? Are they nice enough to allow strangers to shit in their homes? Should I have knocked on their doors?

I would have been willing to buy something in order to use a store's restroom. But there were houses only, no businesses except ones that must open later than 9 o'clock in the morning. The only public institution I could find was an elementary school, where I did not feel I could ask to shit.

So it was a long, slow morning walk for me in Minneapolis, until I found an immigrant welcome center, finally, where I considered requesting use of the restroom in a fake foreign accent, but in the end played it straight.

Locking the stall door behind me, I thought about where my life's journey had taken me. I went from being prevented from shitting in Andy Schondelmeyer's broken toilet, to shitting in the immigrant welcome center.

Not bad for a morning's work. All was well, I thought.

But when I returned to Andy's apartment -- the map or my interpretation of it leading me the wrong direction initially -- I found that the key Andy gave me did not open the door to his building, but only to his specific apartment on the top floor.

Andy was working at the art gallery. Brian was probably still asleep in a pool of whatever was flowing out of Andy's broken toilet, and I was standing outside, shit-empty and locked out. I looked up at the windows. I had no idea which one was Andy's.

This time gave me pause to think about status. I had, after all, slept in sewage and then taken a shit in an immigrant welcome center. This was not, by any perspective, my most shining moment.

In Minneapolis, Brian and I had read from our books to a crowd of twelve people, and we were thoroughly thrilled with this number. It was better than Saint Louis, where we read to a crowd of three.

Better than Oak Park, Illinois, where nobody showed up at all.

We had chosen the wrong century to be writers. Maybe this was the problem. Writing in this century, it is perhaps best not to think in terms of numbers.

It is perhaps best to say that the Saint Louis crowd blew away Oak Park's, and the Minneapolis crowd quadrupled.

After the St. Louis stop of our fabulous book tour, Brian and I talked about success and status as we sat by the murky pool in the Days Inn Express. I told him about the Appalachian author Jesse Stuart, and the success he had during his lifetime. Brian had never heard of him. No

one has. I told Brian about my ex-rock-star real estate agent, who used to be in one of Kentucky's most famous punk bands.

Draped over a deck chair beside the pool is a pair of Wal-Mart-brand Levi's knockoffs, a line they call Faded Glory, which seems like a devastating concept to name a product after. I scan the pool for the person who bought these jeans, someone who looks like he might say, "I had it all, once. Now all I can afford is Wal-Mart pants."

IN CONTRAST TO this soul-crushing brand of jeans, there is a pseudo-punk band with the pseudo-inspiring name Newfound Glory. My wife once called them "Newfound Gloryhole," which I believe is a much better name for a band.

Brian and I sat there, watching a man clean the Day's Inn pool. There were worse things to be than a writer. Brian had written a book about punk music, which says you are not supposed to own things. I had written a book about hip hop, which says that you're supposed to be born with nothing, but end up rich and buy lots of things so that everyone knows it.

What would Birdman do if he were locked out of his house this morning?

He would buy a new house.

And he would christen that house by shitting in it.

Shittin' in a cell. My wife, who likes Internet gossip the way I like rap, tells me that for the first few days Paris Hilton spent in jail for DUI charges, she refused to go to the bathroom. She

was afraid somebody would take a picture of her on the prison toilet.

She went from shittin' on a jet to trying to hold her shit in a cell. Paris Hilton is perhaps the antithesis to Birdman's story.

People sometimes ask the question, "Why is Paris Hilton famous?" I think it's because it's fun to despise her. None of us knew her before she got rich. Before she got rich, she didn't exist.

It's easy to resent Paris Hilton for what she was born with, but I have no problem with what Birdman has accumulated through hard work, and crime, and writing songs about where he shits. So it is fun for me to see Paris Hilton arrested. It is even more fun for me to think about her shitting in a cell. Shitting in a cell is as low as it gets.

I have taken a shit in some undesirable places, no question. Once, when my plumbing went haywire over Thanksgiving weekend, I took a shit in a garbage bag while crouching in my aluminum storage shed.

But I have never shat in a cell.

And I have never shat on a jet.

My life, in shitting, is too middle-of-the-road, perhaps. My life's trajectory is too even.

But one crisp September morning, I took a shit in an immigrant welcome center and locked myself out of a house. Andy Schondelmeyer was at work. Brian was still sleeping somewhere upstairs with an overflowed toilet soaking his green vinyl sleeping bag.

I chose one window and threw a rock at it. I rang the doorbells of seven different apartments until someone woke up

and came outside.

It was not Brian. It was the Appalachian author Jesse Stuart. He had a blanket wrapped around himself like a toga.

“I got locked out,” I said. “Sorry I woke you up.”

Jesse Stuart looked at me and shook his head. “My dad always told us never to live where we could see the smoke from another man’s chimney.”

“Huh?”

“He told us we should never live so close to another house that the chickens would mingle in the woods.”

“Oh. Ok.”

He sat down next to me on the porch steps. He produced a stick and a pocketknife and commenced what is known as whittling.

Jesse Stuart was the former poet laureate of Kentucky. He had a thirty-year run, until he died in 1984. That was twenty-three years ago, but now he was back with a brand new novel.

He was the first novelist to resurrect himself to write in a new century.

But nobody cared.

The back-cover blurbs for his new novel read:

“Ignored by serious literary critics”

and

“His work lies outside the
currently fashionable modes.”

These were the best blurbs he could find.

In 1943, his novel *Taps for Private Tussie* sold more than a million copies. *The Atlantic Monthly* published a story he wrote when he was a sophomore in high school. In those days, he could have shit on a jet.

“Jesse Stuart,” I said. “Have I picked the wrong century to be a writer?”

Satisfied with his whittling, he pulled a small yellow notebook from his back pocket and started writing. I was interrupting his morning ritual. He bit off a little corner of notebook paper and spat it across the porch. “I spoke one time at Breadloaf Writers School,” he said. “While I was speaking, I noticed Robert Frost taking notes. Afterward, he came up to me and asked me where I learned to talk like that. I told him we all talked like that in Appalachia.”

“Wow.”

“Yes sir.”

“Jesse Stuart, do you think people want to read a story where you and I have a conversation?”

The resurrected author put down his notebook. He sighed and spat something else out of his mouth. Maybe chewing tobacco.

“Write something to suit yourself and many people will like it,” he said. “Write something to suit everybody and scarcely anyone will care for it.”

I considered this.

I was still considering it when we heard a great thunderous crash

from overhead, and then the entire top floor of Andy Schondelmeyer's building burst into a waterfall. Water exploded out of the windows, bringing a cascade of the contents of Andy's apartment onto the lawn in front of Jesse Stuart and me.

Books. Scarves. A television. A small dog. The toilet itself. And Brian, still in his sleeping bag, looking like a human-sized waterborn caterpillar. He looked like it was not a good way to wake up. He lay there with his eyes open and his mouth frozen in shock. It did not look good.

But when Jesse Stuart and I rushed over, Brian burst into laughter. He sat up and shook the toilet water out of his hair just like the dog had done, but he didn't stop laughing.

We laughed too. It was the kind of laughter that makes Jesse Stuart slap his knees.

The kind of laughter that you don't know if you're going to be able to stop, deep laughter that required us to sit down to avoid falling over, and any glance at the deluge of Andy's apartment brought it back to full force.

Finally Jesse Stuart stood up, blanket still wrapped around him. He took off his glasses and wiped his eyes and said, "I reckon the Greeks and the Appalachians are a whole lot alike."

"What?" Brian asked.

"That'd be a good book," said Jesse Stuart.

"Yeah," I told him. "I reckon it would be."

** This story incorporates elements from Dave Peyton's "Conversations with Jesse Stuart" in The Huntington Advertiser, May 5, 1975.*

THE WIG DISTRICT

THE NEW STREET vendor's cart didn't cast the shadow of a cart. It cast the shadow of a tree. Against the aluminum garage door that covered the front window of a failing shop in the Wig District, the cart cast a tree's shadow.

Nobody knew what the cart sold. Some of us believed it to be abandoned, like so many things on our side of town. The Wig District was not what it used to be. To live in the Wig District did not mean what it once meant.

Kids from the rougher neighborhoods were robbing the wig shoppes. It became such a problem that the wig district fell into disrepair. First, we saw a boarded-up shoppe between every two shoppes that were still in business. Then it was two closed shoppes for every one open. Then the mayor required the few remaining wig shop-

pes to remove the extra Ps and Es from their signs.

There simply weren't enough letters to go around. A citywide wig recession was no time for the indulgence of quaint, archaic spelling.

By the time the cart started selling replicas of itself, many of us had lost our civic pride. Our wigs were dirty and uncombed. Our shops were no longer shoppes.

Our district could no longer be distinguished from the neighboring Crime District to the east, or Graffiti District to the north.

But then the cart that cast a tree's shadow began selling replicas of itself to those of us who still had some money. Our wigs may no longer have sparkled or gave off that new wig smell, but we bought tiny ceramic replicas of the cart, which we could place on our kitchen tables and cast the shadows of small trees onto our kitchen walls.

This was what we did in those times.

Then the birds began stealing our wigs right off our heads. Someone suggested poisoning the birds. Someone else said this was cruel. So we hired a man to scare the birds away with a fireworks display.

This succeeded only in deafening them. Mornings rang with the cacophony of their off-key singing. The deaf birds didn't leave town, and they didn't leave our wigs alone. They started incorporating our wigs into nests they built not in the trees, but in the new shadows of trees cast by other objects. They clenched bits and pieces of wigs and shadows in their bird feet and wove them together into nests.

This is what crippled the Birdbath and Fountain District. The

birds no longer wanted to bathe in the fountains we bought for them. They wanted shadow nests in shadow trees.

“Why do the birds not frolic in the shadows our fountains cast?” asked Arnold Davis II, who was fast spending the last few thousands of his dead father’s birdbath and fountain fortune.

That was when we discovered that our birdbaths weren’t casting shadows of birdbaths. They were casting shadows of cats.

Our cats were casting shadows of wheelbarrows.

Our wheelbarrows were casting shadows of seahorses.

One of them murdered the police captain.

The fountain-makers local 277 went on strike, and their picket signs cast shadows of mayoral candidates, one of whom won in an upset that caused many of us to put up our houses for sale.

“He’s no mayor of mine,” said some people, but he very cleverly ran on an anti-cop-killing and anti-shadow platform. His performance in the debate with the incumbent could not be ignored.

Some of us, especially the older people, could not wrap our heads around this new era. In our day, shadows came attached to something, and they knew better than to go looking like some other object. They elongated at certain times of day, but they held their essential shape. When we waved at our shadows, you better believe that our shadows waved back.

Our world was changing, we agreed. We never thought we’d have a shadow cast by a picket sign for mayor. The Shadow District didn’t even have its own councilman.

On the day of the mayoral inauguration, we sat on our porches with

our wigs in our hands and our arms folded in front of us, looking at the shadows we cast: an anchor, a stop sign, a brick wall. Some local toughs wheeled the town's Revolutionary War cannon from the graveyard into the elementary school playground at the top of the hill, where it cast the menacing shadow of the dawn of a new day.

DIAGNOSIS: BREAKDANCER

On October 22, I was diagnosed with breakdancing. This is what has happened so far.

9/22

I went for my yearly exam. Gave the nurse practitioner a pound and jumped into my tight breaks. She said it's probably just a cyst. I do headspins, backspins, windmills, flares, airtracks, jackhammers, and hand glides. I'm only 29, so it's probably nothing.

10/17

I go to the appointment with Dr. Yancey. He thinks it's probably nothing but he still wants to run some tests. I have an appointment for Friday the 22nd to get the results.

10/22

Dr. Yancey's office calls and asks me to come in, the results are back. I'm still convinced that it's probably nothing. I go in to the exam room and wait for Dr. Yancey. He comes in and tells me that I'm a breakdancer. I think my brain shuts down. I'm not really understanding what he is saying, but I go out to the main office, windmill into a headspin. He's trying to schedule a blood test. I hear him on the phone saying, "He's only 29, can you get him in soon?" He wants to see me do air flares but I can't do any.

10/23

I wake up, and for a minute I don't think about breakdancing. I open the closet to get some clothes and see the headbands I've hidden in there. The phone rings. It's the nurse practitioner. Dr. Yancey has called her; she's asking me if I have any questions, if I need anything. I just want to know all kinds of toplocks, footworks, freezes, powermoves and whatever so if there is someone there who knows all of them I would like them to tell me.

10/24

I tell Julie at school that I breakdance. It's getting easier to say it. I tell people at the office that I am having surgery. I know maybe I need to do more airchairs to strengthen my shoulder and get flexibility.

10/27

I have to check in at 7:45 A.M. When I go back to my room to wait for surgery they give me Valium. I think it's not doing anything until I try to get up to go to the bathroom. Then I feel like I'm dancing drunk.

The room is cold. I wake up in recovery and I am still cold. The exploratory was positive for breakdancing. "It was worse than we thought," Dr. Yancey says.

I see myself from outside of myself. There is a body lying on a hospital bed, climbing forward, standing. One leg rotates in circles below the body and just above the floor. As the right leg swings around wide, I lean over onto the right hand, hop slightly with the left foot, and swing the right leg under the left leg. From there, the weight returns to the left leg as the right leg

continues

swinging

around

GHOST WALK

FOR OUR WEDDING anniversary, you take me to a fondue restaurant called the Melting Pot. The name of this restaurant is both clever and not clever at all.

The name, although completely literal, brings to mind an image of all races, all creeds, flooding the parking lot in tired huddled masses, coming together to dip vegetables in melted cheese.

The literal is overtaking metaphor. Things are turning back into things.

We got married at 20, in an apartment we paid for with student loans. The man in our photographs, who gave us such a good deal on the ceremony, was not licensed to conduct weddings, the city of Louisville later discovered. We saw him on television in handcuffs, but the marriages stood. They still counted.

We considered renewing our vows this year for our tenth anniversary, but it seemed like so much ceremony to reaffirm something we already are. At five years, I took you to Europe. You snapped pictures of me at the end of each meal. There were photos of you beside London landmarks, in front of Reykjavik's rocky terrain, and me inside restaurants, paying for food.

You were proud of these photos, and I tried to share your excitement. But seeing so much sameness depressed me. The same poses, same faces of concentration no matter where I was in the world.

The Melting Pot is new in town, although there are others in other towns, and the people here are excited. "I want a new theme song," you tell me. When we were dating I walked into a fancy restaurant underdressed and the man at the piano shifted from Frank Sinatra to Smells Like Teen Spirit. "So this is your theme song," you said.

I argue that your theme song shouldn't change, that it's like deciding to change your nickname. It should be chosen so carefully that it fits you no matter what.

"Why shouldn't my theme song change? I've changed."

What I want to tell you is that I don't believe people ever change, really. What I want to tell you is that I need renewal, but I don't know where to begin. What I say is this: my whole life I've been terrified of drowning. I never learned to swim because I can't make myself go all the way underwater. But I've been baptized twice, once at age ten and again at thirteen. Both times I worried about it for weeks. The preacher practiced with me in a dry baptismal so I wouldn't hyperventilate in front of the church. Close your eyes. Hold your breath. You're being reborn. I liked the feeling. It

was worth the hydrophobia. But it didn't stick.

You snap a picture of me paying the bill, scooping our leftovers into a Styrofoam container. "Let me take you to Mexico. I can teach you to swim."

FOR OUR WEDDING anniversary, you take me on something called a ghost walk. We become tourists in our own city. I pay a man in a top hat and cape twenty dollars to lead us through the lobbies of historic hotels now operated by international corporations who attach their name to the original name. The Seelbach has become the Seelbach Ramada. The Brown has become the Camberly Brown. I did this to your name when you married me.

We see hotels tonight, historic theaters and mansions. Our ghost guide shows us an album of pictures he's taken. In each of them there is a small glare somewhere on the photograph. A reflection off a window, a glitch in the processing. These are *orbs*, he says. These are evidence of ghosts.

I feel like we are visiting a relative we don't like very much. He is sitting between us on a park bench, narrating his photographs. But instead of Grand Canyon vacations he is showing us orbs, describing the conditions under which he took the photographs (most involve dark nights spent alone), and the tingle that crept up his spine when he had them developed.

Do I believe in ghosts? You happened to take a picture of me on the phone at the exact moment I was informed of my grandmother's death. You were taking pictures of our cats, and when you developed them, there I was in the background. You told me about the picture,

described the look on my face. “Why would you *tell* me that?” I asked, and you ripped the picture apart and threw it away.

I understand now that you described it to me because you felt you had documented somehow my love for my grandmother. And I both wish, and don’t at all wish, that the picture still existed.

YOU HAVE A tendency to destroy things. Our cat broke a dish your maternal grandmother had given you, that had belonged to your paternal grandmother, who you never met, who died before you were born. I placed that dish on display on a wooden end table I put together from a \$10 kit. The first piece of furniture you and I bought. When the cat broke it, I tried to get you to blame me, and when that didn’t work I transferred blame to the table.

You took that tiny pressed wood table, the one with the legs I screwed into the top, and you smashed it outside by the dumpster. Thank God I didn’t blame the cat. It made you feel better, but it made me feel worse, like I had betrayed that table. Sentenced it to death for something that was in no way its fault. I preserved the shattered pieces of the serving dish in a box for you, and as much as I wanted to, I didn’t preserve the broken pieces of the table for myself.

“THE GHOSTS DON’T want us here,” our tour guide is telling us in front of a 5th street mansion. “In the 80s the city got it listed on the national registry and they started giving tours.

But then things started breaking.”

A plate glass window upstairs shattered while tourists were standing in front of it. Dishes shot out of cabinets downstairs. Light bulbs spontaneously exploded.

“Can we go inside?” you ask.

“Well, I have some *pictures* of the inside.”

Some things you can't return to what they were. Some things you can't salvage. And saving the pieces becomes ridiculous.

ALL HOTELS HAVE their elevator shaft stories, our Ghost Guide tells us. Brides scorned in the honeymoon suites, hurling themselves twelve floors to the lobby. The thing with ghosts, he says, is that they never really leave a place.

We are exploring our own city this anniversary because we have just bought a house together, and to leave town this soon seems to both of us somehow to be cheating on it.

Our house is 100 years old. Old enough to be left by itself. Our neighborhood is run-down, but promising. There is renovation, houses being refurbished, factories turned into condos. New people in the old neighborhood. We met with these new people, and we made plans for improvement.

We organized a community cleanup.

We planted flowers at the park and the city mowed over them.

We got free, oversized, t-shirts that said “Let's take back the community!” But from whom?

Our friends from the neighborhood, Meagan and John, who helped us plant those ill-fated flowers, are divorced now. Meagan, who likes to ask people questions, once asked us what was the hardest year of our marriage. We looked at each other and we didn't know what to say.

And now, a few months later, Meagan divorced her husband. Did we mislead her? Should we have thought harder about the hardest year?

We were planting flowers, all of our hands in the dirt. The perimeter of that park now lined with chrysanthemums, John with his arm around Meagan. Her question haunted me – the hardest year. “I broke John out his shell,” she told you, “got him active in the community.” You talked about us like we weren't there, working five feet away from you. You talked about making us better.

“I want to teach Mickey to swim, but he won't let me.”

Do you know how many people have tried to teach me to swim? Uncles, high school friends with pools in their backyards. My mom even paid for swimming lessons, but nothing works. I've made it 30 years without swimming, and I don't see it happening now.

Why am I afraid to call this difficult?

Tired and dirty, we watched television back at our new house, which was set on fire and abandoned, then rebuilt. The shell is the same, but the fixtures are different. They fall from the kitchen ceiling, breaking plates and cracking our table.

We could have hyphenated our names, but we agreed that we are not hyphen people. You suggested we trade last names,

and I would have, if yours had been better-sounding.

Even our cat gets my last name. The vet has labeled her carrier with a sticker that reads “Blackie Hess.” You remind people that her full name is Black Ulysses.

I have joked that we should rename the cat Destructo. We bought her a purple collar with a bell on it so we could hear her coming.

This cat hates to see me read or exercise, anything that might lead to self-improvement. Push-ups send her over to nose on my elbows. She walks across books, sits down in the middle of them in my lap. “Stop this,” she pleads with her eyes.

Once I hit the cat with a pillow. When we had just bought that new bed frame and spent all night putting it together, she woke me up destroying it. She wanted to claw that bedframe and I wanted to sleep. I swung the pillow and it knocked her kind of sideways and I felt bad for doing it. I thought, man, that’s like if somebody hit me with a mattress.

Destructo is not our only cat. Our other cat we named for a Greek politician. He carries a rope toy in his mouth, dragging its plastic handle across the floor at night, wailing. Like a ghost cat dragging his chains.

All these nicknames for our cats: Ghost Cat, Destructo, Penis Jenkins, Butthole Jones. I tell myself names don’t matter, but I remember us both laughing at a friend who made up a new name for himself. Behind his back, we made fun of him for wanting people to call him Ratchett instead of Bill.

But was Ratchett a different person than Bill? Did he feel different about himself, or was Bill still there underneath? When Bill woke up in the morning, did he have to remind himself of the change? It's Ratchett now. Ratchett.

At a party I made a point to forget the change. I called him Bill all night, said his name far more than I would have normally. Hello there *Bill*. Would you like more popcorn, *Bill*?

I am sorry, Bill. I should have called you whatever you wanted.

AT THE HISTORIC theater, two women on a ladder are replacing the old sign with a new one. The theater is recently renovated, and is haunted by the ghost of a projectionist who fell from his station in the top of the building. But the fall didn't kill him. He survived until the paramedics dropped his stretcher and he hit headfirst on the sidewalk outside. He haunts the incompetent.

Our tour guide tells us that black people see ghosts more often than white people. "Now this is going to sound racist," he says, leaning in close.

I am not enjoying myself on this ghost walk. Am I trying? This man tonight placed us into our roles immediately. You, the one who made the call to arrange the ghost walk, are the believer, and I, who frowned at the mention of twenty dollars, am the skeptic. He tries to bond with each of us, telling me he was a skeptic too, until he realized how many people have seen things they can't explain.

What does he do when he isn't going on ghost walks? I imagine he's no

different at home, once he takes off his cape and the top hat.

I feel like I am here to entertain him. He has my twenty dollars, yet I'm the one working to act interested.

Now he is knocking on the window of a Metro Cab, trying to convey through hand gestures that he wants directions to the haunted prison.

I am sincerely thinking about ditching our ghost guide. Taking off when he suggests that we all shut our eyes so we can sense any spirits. We could do it. We could disappear and give him a new story to tell, because maybe *we* were ghosts.

I don't do it tonight. Five years ago I would have done it. Five years ago it would have seemed like the perfect idea.

What I meant about names is that I never knew what to call my parents after I outgrew calling them Mommy and Daddy. The transition to Mom and Dad was tough. I stopped calling my dad anything at all, just started waiting until he looked at me when I had something I wanted to say, stared at him til he caught my gaze.

Did I tell you this already?

My friend Doug had parents who called each other Mom and Dad, like those were their names. "Can I make you some dinner, Dad?" "You're looking sexy, Mom."

What I'm saying is that what we call things changes them. Your old friend, the one with the tattoos, the one who's in all those metal bands? He calls you Dani, which isn't that different, but it's different, still.

Dani had shorter hair – I've seen pictures – and it was Danielle who

I met and attached my name to. When I met you, you were hanging half-way out a car window to throw rocks at another car.

Danielle will take me to Mexico. Before we arrive, hurricanes will wipe out one third of the resort, but they'll be rebuilding. You will teach me to swim. I trust you. I am willing to let go of who I am, of this non-swimming identity. I will go all the way underwater. Workers will cheer from the scaffolding. Through a bus window, you'll take a picture of a cellular phone tower ripped from the earth and snapped in two, Mayan ruins in the background.

THE GHOST WALK ends in front of the home of an abortion doctor who spawned virtuoso children. If we close our eyes, we can sense him here. He lost his medical license in the Thirties, but his seven grown children remained in this house, the one they were born in, until the last of them died. Two sisters played piano, and our guide claims that sometimes early in the morning people can still hear piano music. The sisters were famous. When they toured Europe, they traveled with their own pianos.

I am less interested in ghost stories than I am in the histories of these buildings. Not the people who lived here, but the buildings themselves. Their rise to prominence, their decline as people moved away from downtown to the suburbs. This hotel was constructed to be a hotel, but it became a warehouse, then a temporary office for the school board, then was threatened with demolition before its transformation back into what it once was. It could have just as easily been restored to a warehouse, or a temporary office

for the school board, or an abandoned structure.

You're disappointed that our leftovers didn't survive the ghost walk, but fondue isn't known for its staying power.

What else do we have at home? We have dried plums. We aren't calling them prunes anymore. Prunes remind us of old people.

"Dried plums rule!" says the orange and purple package. But you aren't convinced.

It was so crowded at the Melting Pot, all of us pressed together and hungry, the servers turned sideways to squeeze between tables. Fondue is making a comeback, you tell me, fondue and pressure cookers. We want to eat like our parents. We want to eat like our grandparents.

Last week you were happy to find an antique-style sugar container, one that I recognize would have matched your grandmother's serving dish. While I'm looking through cabinets tonight, the light fixture falls onto the table, smashing glass and sugar across our kitchen. You were standing so close that you thought you'd had an aneurysm. You thought it was your head exploding.

But it wasn't faulty workmanship that brought down that light fixture. It was a ghost. The abortion doctor, the projectionist. The famous piano-playing sisters. The you I first met, or the me from five years ago.

What are ghosts, really, but people who want things the way they were?

FAQ: GHOST IN THE FONDUE FOUNTAIN

(Questions from The Original Chocolate Fondue Fountain FAQ
Answers from DC Ghosts and Hauntings FAQ)

What is the best way to melt chocolate for dipping?

Ghosts.

Where can I find more pictures of the chocolate fondue?

There are a lot of photos out there that caught a spirit on film during weddings, birthdays, and other special events. Also, a child's—and especially a teenager's—emotional energy seems to attract spirits.

Can I use the fountain outdoors?

Doesn't matter. Bright daytime? Nope. It doesn't matter. If there's a spirit present, it'll be there no matter what.

How does the chocolate get to the top of the fountain?

There's not really an easy answer for that question. Some people perform exorcisms or some type of elaborate ceremony. Some believe you can politely ask the spirit. You can't really make them go anywhere if they don't want to, is what I personally believe, even though I think it doesn't hurt to *politely* ask. Always have respect for something you can't see.

How long can the chocolate fountain run for before the chocolate solidifies?

I get this question a lot! OK... one was getting colder and colder during the hours we were out there and there were kids playing pranks. For the most part, the average ghost/spirit seems to be harmless. It's a lot of walking around or being stationary, taking pictures and hoping for something to happen.

There are other companies hiring chocolate fountains. Why should we choose your company?

To put it simply, a ghost hunter/investigator goes to a place and tries to get proof that a ghost might be, or is, there. For most of us it is sort of a pastime we enjoy very much, but we are pretty serious about it.

Do chocolate fountains break down and does fruit get stuck in the machine?

I love skeptics because they keep you grounded. This isn't an exact science, so you're open to making errors. I tell people that they don't have to believe in ghosts at all, just the possibility of them.

PART III.

REAL BUT UNLIKELY-SOUNDING RAP NAMES

Psycho Les
Lil Half-Dead
Ron De-vu
Waterbed Kev

METAFICTION AND METANARRATION IN THE MUSIC OF NICE & SMOOTH

THE RECENT RESURGENCE of interest in metafiction (and its distinction from metanarration, as presented by literary critics Birgit Neumann and Ansgar Nünning) has led me to revisit the role of metafiction and metanarration in the music of Nice & Smooth, and in particular in the 1994 Nice & Smooth song “Let’s All Get Down,” featuring Slick Rick, aka Rick the Ruler, who elevated rap storytelling to an art form in the 1980s.

“Let’s All Get Down” depicts Nice & Smooth’s reunion with Rick after his release from prison, where he’d spent nearly six years facing deportation. Nice & Smooth greet Rick, and after some discussion of how to spend the evening, they elect to get drunk – Rick declines to partake of the marijuana that Nice & Smooth have reincorporated into the tobacco-leaf wrapping from a cigar – and attend a hip hop performance, which Rick asserts will be the “utmost amount of fun.”

At the arena, Slick Rick dances lightheartedly in a style (the “Wop”)

that would have greatly declined in popularity in the six years since his incarceration. Yet all is not fun and games, as Rick – with the terms of his work release in mind – seeks to avoid an altercation with a man glaring at him from across the room:

Should have heard them groupies scream for ...
Wonder why this brother lookin' at me all mean for?
Ignored it, kept Woppin' til my neck hurt
Then Rick, Nice, and Smooth did this very same record.

This verse raises the question of how Rick, Nice, and Smooth manage to perform a record which did not yet exist, as the plotline includes no moment to account for the song's creation. The song chronicles the sequence of events that take place during the evening of its own invention, as Rick's narration moves directly from avoiding the dancefloor altercation to performing the song that depicts his avoiding the dancefloor altercation.

To consider "Let's All Get Down," then, is to call into question the basic narrative element of timeline, and the authority with which narrators speak about past events. As Slick Rick's verse refers to the performance of the same song within which the verse exists – and does so, sequentially, before the song could have existed – the listener begins to question the authority of the storyteller in presenting and sequencing lived events (cf. Paul Ricoeur, for whom narrative time arcs through three distinct levels of mimesis, connecting an awareness of the range of potential actions inherent in a narrative situation through the plotting and commitment to a specific action to the resultant refiguration of the reader's world).

Nice & Smooth again challenge concepts of narrative linearity in their music video for 1991's "Hip Hop Junkies," in which Nice & Smooth meet at a movie theater to attend the debut screening for the video for "Hip Hop Junkies, Featuring Nice & Smooth." At the 0:18 mark in the video, Nice & Smooth enter the theater and begin dancing in the aisle, yet the frame at 0:24 clearly shows the duo already seated in the theater, wearing the same clothing as their aisle-dancing doppelgangers.

Therefore, although Nice & Smooth exit the theater at the 2:45 mark, they continue to dance in the theater aisle (again, at the premier of the same Nice & Smooth video we are currently watching) through the end of the video. As if entering a hall of mirrors, we become viewers of Nice & Smooth viewing themselves on a movie screen. Which are the real Nice & Smooth? The black-and-white versions of themselves that they view on the screen, after all, are only flickering images, ghosts of the Nice & Smooth who originally performed for the camera.

GHOST OUT

THE SUPERINTENDENT WAS on board. The idea was to shock the kids into staying away from drugs and alcohol and reckless driving and playing their music too loud. We prefaced the whole thing with an announcement the previous Friday afternoon, asking everyone to play along, students and teachers alike, to live this day as if tragedy were actually happening.

The first announcement came around 8:15 on Monday. Just as the kids were preparing to leave Mrs. Baker's homeroom, a local news anchor dressed as the grim reaper knocked on the classroom door and asked Stacie Patterson to come with him. The principal turned on the intercom and cleared his throat and said, "Stacie Patterson is dead."

He cleared his throat again. "I'm sorry to interrupt your day with bad news, but we've heard this morning that we've lost one of our PCHS community. Stacie Patterson, junior varsity soccer star with a 3.5 GPA, was

killed today. She was struck by a car and killed. She didn't hear it coming because like a lot of you in our parking lot she had her earphones on too high a volume. Instead of listening for the roar of oncoming traffic, she spent her last moments listening to the Notorious B.I.G. That is all."

We had planned for the emotional impact of Stacie's desks sitting empty throughout her classes that day. What we hadn't planned for is the number of kids who were absent last Friday or went home ten minutes early and missed the announcement about today's Ghost Out event. That, combined with Stacie Patterson's popularity and the push among the drama teachers for students to really play out their feelings, made it tough to tell who was genuinely grieving and who was looking for extra credit points.

Worse, there was a bet going between the principal's office staff and the guidance counselors to see who would first break the façade. The receptionist rubbed her eyes with her fists to create a fake redness and accented that with a steady flow of Visine drops she applied in the alcove next to her desk. The school nurse came to school without her wig and with no makeup, which gave her a disheveled, grieving look. The art teacher's strategy was to think of the saddest real-life things he could, all day long, continuously. We all did a little of this. We had all seen our share of sadness.

Kids streamed into the office, some crying or biting their nails, and we offered them Tylenol. That was ok, as long as their parents had signed the permission forms at the start of the school year. We didn't know if they knew the truth, but we didn't tell them the truth. Ghost Out wasn't about truth, and we knew Tylenol would hurt them less. "Where is Stacie now," a

pretty sophomore asked the assistant baseball coach, and he couldn't very well say she was eating doughnuts in the multipurpose room, preparing to climb into a cardboard coffin for the mid-day assembly.

"Nobody knows where we go when we die," said the assistant baseball coach, a Gulf War veteran who blamed his premature baldness on the chemical warfare to which his country had knowingly exposed him. "Some people believe in heaven and hell, but not me."

"So it's possible that we go nowhere," said the sophomore. "Stacie was somewhere -- here -- yesterday, and now she's nowhere at all?"

The assistant baseball coach nodded. "That idea will hurt you less, the more senseless deaths you live to witness. That idea will come to comfort you, and for now you can take comfort in the fact that Stacie's life ended before she was forced to face such a depressing view of the afterlife."

This response seemed to satisfy the sophomore. She stopped sputtering and her tears had almost stopped flowing when the principal's second announcement came over the intercom: "Mr. Newcomb is dead. This is an unfortunate day for PCHS indeed, and I am pained to bring all of you more bad news this morning. Mr. Newcomb, our beloved history teacher, has taken his own life. We don't yet know the full scope of his suicide note, but we do know that he was a lifelong alcoholic, and although he was not driving when he decided to die by his own hand, it was perhaps the unrelenting guilt of his past drunk driving experiences that led him to do it. Assembly at 1 PM today. That is all."

Between first and second periods, the hallways were filled with the silence that comes with choking back the sobs of youth faced with its own

mortality, and faced with a deep hatred of history that made students feel somehow responsible for Mr. Newcomb's death. If they had cared more about the Treaty of Versailles, if they had studied harder in the unit on Thomas Paine, perhaps they could have prevented their teacher's death. Perhaps he would not have turned to the bottle and then to the noose.

I want you to believe that this is what we wanted Ghost Out to create, a heightened sensitivity to loss. We'd done the research. We'd consulted with the guidance counselors across town. We wanted our students to feel the pain and the guilt and the emptiness. We wanted them to slow down their cars and turn down their earphones and save drinking for college. That is all.

Things got complicated when the governor actually died. "The governor of our great state is dead," announced the principal. "Teachers, please turn on your classroom televisions. This is a black day indeed." The intercom announcement devastated us all. The students who had not been aware of Ghost Out now questioned first Stacie Patterson, then Mr. Newcomb, now the governor? They believed that this was the most terrible day in history, the end of the world perhaps. This belief led to at least two suicides.

The students and teachers who had been playing along, however, now questioned how the principal could have taken Ghost Out to this extreme. Had he no morals? Had he the technical know-how to hack into the local news stations?

The principal declared over the intercom that Ghost Out was officially over. The local newsanchor was sent back to his regular job, where his re

placement, the weekend anchor, was botching what should have been the year's biggest news story.

"The governor is really dead," the principal's announcement continued. "All deaths announced before second period were false. Stacie Patterson is still with us. Mr. Newcomb is visiting his sick aunt in Decatur. Our state's leader, however, has really and truly been killed by an assassin's bullet during a town hall meeting. We can all stop pretending to grieve for Newcomb and join the rest of our state in mourning. Any other deaths I announce today will be real deaths. That is all."

Some of us accepted this. Some of us did not. Some of us sat with our heads in our hands, weeping. He wasn't a good governor, but he was ours.

THE STUDENTS WERE more forceful in sorting out fact from fiction and correcting the lies of the day. They marched to the principal's office and demanded that he produce Stacie Patterson, should she truly be alive. But to produce her, which the principal readily agreed to do, proved impossible. Stacie had taken advantage of a day that she was to spend playing dead and sneaked out of the multipurpose room and away from the school. She was gone before the governor died. By now she was probably shoplifting lingerie, or wasting her parents' money at the local arcade. Do they still have arcades?

The word spread that Stacie could not be produced, and this led to a general acceptance among the students that death was real. It had been a confusing day, none of us certain by this point how "in" we were on the

joke. But we processed the events of the day, each in our own minds and in our own time, and things calmed down during third period, until the grim reaper appeared again, in Mr. Newcomb's leaderless class. When he signed in at the front office we looked at him, then at the newsanchor's face on the television screen, then back at the grim reaper in front of us. What was going on here? We gave him his laminated visitor's pass.

His lanky figure knocked on the door of Newcomb's classroom and pointed directly at a senior named Tom Vanderbilt. Tom immediately clutched his throat and fell to the floor in grotesque spasms that gave way to a final shudder, then nothing.

"Pills," the grim reaper moaned. "Someone gave him pills at the bus stop this morning. Tom was already drunk on his way to school when he swallowed them with a last swig of vodka. And now look at him."

Students from the track team had rushed past the grim reaper and out of the classroom before Tom hit the floor. Two girls from the swim team put their lifeguard training to use giving Tom mouth-to-mouth as the grim reaper wailed, "Too late, too late."

Members of the debate team stood up. "What can we give you in exchange for the lives of our classmates?" they asked. "We are at the bargaining stage of our grieving process, and this moment could be your opportunity to take full advantage of our grief. What do you want from us? We'll give you anything. Just bring them back. All of them. We want Tom and Stacie, and the governor, and Mr. Newcomb."

"I could bring them back," said the reaper. "But what won't come back with them is that part of yourselves that didn't know this kind of loss. You

may still drink and take pills from strangers and hang yourself, but you won't do it because death hasn't touched you. You'll do it because it has. I will bargain with you. I will bring back Stacie and Tom and I will untie Mr. Newcomb's noose, but what else has died today? What else will you never recover?"

The debate team sighed. Their classmates around them sighed. But the sighs were a stall. Two wrestling team members had approached the grim reaper from either side and now swept him to the floor, pinning the cloaked figure and high-fiving each other.

The wrestlers were wrenching death's ankles in victory when they heard a crackling new voice come over the intercom. "God is dead."

It was Friedrich Nietzsche, who had himself recently returned from the dead and taken a job as school custodian (our economy made no room for philosophers). "God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?"

It was not until Nietzsche spoke that I realized that we in the PCHS administrative staff had become gods in designing the school-wide Ghost Out event. In the absence of God we had taken it upon ourselves to decide who died, and to teach other students how to feel about it. This was before we began to understand. We believed that our biggest foes were uncensored

rap music and drinking and reckless driving or piling too many kids into one car. This was before we knew what death was. We just wanted them to listen to us.

That is why in elementary school we made them read *Charlotte's Web* and *Where the Red Fern Grows*. That is why we told them their friends were dead and made them come in and stare at those empty desks during roll call. We wanted to make them feel the presence of their absence. That is all. We wanted to make them feel the hole in themselves that they left in us.

MEMOIR

Professor Bliss, about that time, had undertaken to write a history of General Clark, and the memoir had probably come into his possession for that purpose. But he was shot on the street in Louisville, September 26, 1842. by a rival editor of a newspaper, and died from the wound, having written but a few pages of his contemplated history.

The memoir seems to have been in the form of a letter, and the word "Sir" at the beginning indicates that it was, at least, not addressed to Jefferson and Madison jointly, or to more than one person.

-- William Hayden English

One:

Sir,

When I left Kentucky, October 1st, 1777, I plainly saw that every eye was turned toward me, as if expecting some stroke in their favor. Some

doubted my return. A few gentlemen made some attempts to persuade the people to pay no attention to them.

Under great apprehensions that the Indians, under the influence of the British, would shortly make a break upon the country and no time ought to be lost in getting it in a state of defense, and, apprehending no immediate danger in the wilderness road, Mr. Jones and myself attempted to pass, without waiting for other company, but had great cause to regret it. The second day we discovered alarming signs. We were under great apprehensions. On the third day Mr. Jones's horse gave out.

I made a phone call across time zones, from Vancouver to Louisville. I called you sir when you answered the phone.

“I’m not a sir,” you said. “I’m a lady.”

I wanted to tell you that if you had been a man instead of a woman when we met, I would have still gone for you. No question. You know what I mean, right?

You told me you’d have to think about it.

Maybe I’m gayer than you are. Maybe I call women sir. I read too many Peanuts comics when I was a kid. Peppermint Pattie and what was her name? Marcie. I started calling my mom sir, my grandmother. Have I grown out of this phase?

Ma’am is insulting to women. I know this. I remember my fourth grade teacher asking us specifically not to call her ma’am because it made her feel old and ugly. I pay attention to these things. I am sensitive to issues of gender.

I left you in Louisville. I spent ten days away from you, exploring to the Northwest. I was not William Clark of Lewis and Clark, but his older, less recognized brother.

These ten days were the longest I'd spent away from you. Not that the days themselves were longer (although they felt that way), but the time period altogether, ten days, was the longest you and I had spent apart. Ten days in as many years.

“Are you finding what you were looking for?” you asked on the phone.

I found a Mexican bar where I stared at a taxidermied deer's head, spraypainted completely white, even the eyeballs, surrounded by Christmas lights.

I rode in the back seat next to a guitar and an amplifier, under a window that wouldn't roll up. The rain persisted and the men became sick. Colonel Henderson had purchased some items from a health food store, hummus and some meats made from soy. These items should have been refrigerated.

In Los Angeles I slept on a fold-out sofa with Mr. Jones. Snores like fucking crazy. I got up at 4 AM to sit in the courtyard and make a phone call to you at home. When I turned around I had no idea which door belonged to our room.

Sir, there is nothing worse than the feeling that something you live for has become silly or a waste of time. I walked through strange new territories and thought about how I would feel embarrassed back home even calling it an expedition. How friends would italicize the word: how was the expedition? As if it really weren't

an expedition at all.

I was feeling foolish, like it was time to give up these conquests, like I should be doing something else with my life. That, and the comparison of these new experiences to the happiness I felt at home, was what made me think about having a baby.

I had the idea that you were feeling the same way I was. That somehow, although we hadn't talked about it, we were on the same page with this thing.

I talked about you to other women, about our ten-year success story. Married at 20, still married at 30. "Do you have any kids?" "Not yet," I said. "Not yet."

I was thinking that I'm so happy at home with you that a baby would be too, and honestly that this expedition was a foolish idea of youth, and that having given up on it, I was ready to devote my attention to something or someone else, to not worry about being able to explore and take forts anymore. I was feeling old, but not in a negative way. Just like a phase of my life was over and I wasn't at all sorry to see it go. Sorry I was hanging onto it for one last expedition.

When I came home and mentioned it, it was the last thing on your mind.

I told you I'd been thinking about having a baby and you told me you'd been thinking about getting a tattoo.

Two:

In a short time after I had set out, Colonel Todd arrived at the same place, and, after some consultation, concluded that they were able to go to the river and bring on the ammunition and other stores, and accordingly set out with ten men, and between the Blue Lick and the river, on December 25, met the Indians on our trail and got totally routed. Mr. Jones was killed, and three others got killed and taken prisoner. This led me to a long train of thinking. Those ideas caused me to view Kenucky in the most favorable point of view, as a place of the greatest consequence.

Killed *and* taken prisoner. The worst way to go. But I know you hate jokes about grammar. You think I'm saying, without saying it, that I'm better than, smarter than you are.

I am smart enough to know I'm no match for you. I know useless things, like how to find humor in sentence structures. Useful things, like logic, lie entirely to you. You correct my mistakes on our taxes. You can beat me at Indian leg wrestling. It is you who can unclog toilets. You who can add new cord to the weed eater.

I am pretending to be General George Rogers Clark. Do you remember our picnic on the waterfront, the man who cast a shadow across our blanket? That was him. That was his statue, pointing the way to the West.

We thought he was the same Clark from Lewis and Clark, but I've been doing some research. After we had that fight I went to the

university library. I found a spot in the 24-hour study room, but I couldn't sleep. That was when I found it, his memoir of his conquest of the Northwest Territory. Boxes of microfilm that document his founding of our great city.

My own expedition met with hostility in all those we encountered. In San Francisco we stayed with Colonel Davis, whose fiancé woke us up screaming. The three of us pressed together on bunk beds and her ordering Davis to go out there and tell those people to leave. In Portland my old friend Martin met us at the door, but his wife never came out of the bedroom. "Clinically depressed," he said.

And what those Indians did to Mr. Jones.

Colonel Henderson's friends in Los Angeles, recently divorced, from the outset of their brief marriage had designated themselves "polyamorous." Bad signs, bad things to come.

All the couples I saw falling apart, relationships crumbling. This may have contributed to it. Maybe you were seeing the same thing at home in Louisville, but who knows? Who knows what you were seeing? Something that made you desire a tattoo.

That damn tattoo. You've been talking about it for years now. You say I told you once that I wouldn't find you attractive anymore if you got one, but it isn't true. That was the nipple rings.

What I wanted to tell you is that you're so beautiful now that I can't see these additions as anything potentially positive. I can't imagine you getting any better.

I tried to tell you I'd trade a baby for a tattoo, but you wouldn't

go for it.

You refused to talk about it and even said we should talk to someone, get counseling before this becomes a problem down the road. The most against it you've ever been. We talked about it years ago, about how someday, sure, why wouldn't we want to have children, somewhere down the road.

We pretended to talk to the spirits of our future children on your Ouija board. We have a box of baby clothes that we bought when we were 19. We have forced them onto our cats and taken pictures.

I mentioned that this down the road talk started ten years ago. I mentioned that Colonel Henderson, 34 years old and balding, told me he thinks of himself and his friends as eternally 17, and I told you that it was one of the most unattractive qualities I can imagine. You asked me if I was talking about you. And I guess I was, really. I was hoping you felt old like me.

Three:

To the Inhabitants of Post Vincennes:

GENTLEMEN-Being now within two miles of your village with my army, determined to take your fort this night, and not being willing to surprise you, I take this method to request such of you as are true citizens and willing to enjoy the liberty I bring you, to remain still in your houses; and that those, if any there be, that are friends to the king of England, will instantly repair to the fort and join his troops and

fight like men. And if any such as do not go to the fort should hereafter be discovered that did not repair to the garrison, they may depend on severe punishment. On the contrary, those who are true friends to liberty may expect to be well treated as such, and I once more request that they may keep out of the streets, for every person found under arms, on my arrival, will be treated as an enemy.

(Signed)
G. R. CLARK.

There was a girl in that library, using the microfiche, scanning through newspaper headlines from the 1800s. Information about her dead relatives.

She had on one of those backpacks that are designed to hold very little, and I could tell she'd spent a long time on her hair, to come here to the library. She leaned forward in her chair, her face almost pressed to the screen.

She is young. Too young to seem that sad. It took me years to become that sad.

I stared across the San Francisco Bay with Colonel Henderson and Colonel Todd, none of us talking. I wanted to call you but I had left the phone in the glove compartment, next to the unrefrigerated vegan bologna.

Times in my life that I have spent with only men have been dismal. The things cowboys write songs about. Boy Scouts. Little League. Something is missing. You have no idea how we talk about

you when we are among ourselves.

I tried to tell the men about George Rogers Clark, forgotten Revolutionary War hero. How Thomas Jefferson offered him the Lewis and Clark mission, exploring to the Pacific. But he turned it down. “I have long since laid aside all idea of public affairs, by bad fortune and ill health I have become incapable of persueing those enterprising and active persuites which I have been fond of from my youth. But I will with greatest pleasure give my bro. William every information in my power.”

The men were uninterested. “Alcatraz,” Colonel Todd stated. Colonel Henderson nodded, and began to relate the story of a young woman who lives in his apartment building. “She’s hot, but not very interesting.” By not interesting, of course, he meant not interested, in him.

Clark gave that mission to his little brother and he stayed in Louisville. But he wasn’t happy there. Conquest was in his blood.

You remember where Will and Kirsten got married. That was the estate where Clark died. I want you to rent it for me. We’ll have a party. We’ll invite friends and celebrate ten years, or however many since Clark’s conquest of the Illinois. A George Rogers Clark anniversary party. We’ll dress up. We’ll be fucking frontiersmen.

You’ve told me the story of how your parents’ relationship ended, how your dad, in the middle of a fight, just said “I want a divorce,” and your mom said “Fine, you got one.” You laugh when you tell it, amused by their mutual stubbornness. But it always scares me.

You prefer to walk away from arguments instead of talking them through. You believe that talking solves nothing.

We visited your brother in prison. I'm trying to be better about it. Maybe he is inclined to build meth labs. Maybe it's biological. I think you're afraid of that. We have an addict cat, and I say it comes from your side of the family. We cannot have Reddi Whip topping in our house. He can hear the metal can rattle when we open the refrigerator door.

It was bad. You eased him off the junk onto some kind of milk designed for cats. See? I said. Look how good you are with him.

But a baby? You're afraid it would hate you, or you would hate it. You're afraid it would die.

Your cousin had a stillborn baby. Her husband brought it out of the delivery room to show the rest of your family. You weren't there, but you heard reports. Your mother has never been skilled at knowing what information to give people. She bit a baby once, to teach it some kind of lesson.

You're also afraid it would be fucked up, predisposed to drugs or crime and the other problems that run in your family. I try to convince you that we could nurture it, we could steer it away from those things, but you aren't convinced. You believe that some people are born to fuck up their lives, and there's no saving them, no matter how hard you try.

We could read parenting books, I say.

We used to read all the same books. Now I've skipped your Anne Rice phase, and you've been less interested in the memoirs of Kentucky statesmen.

We're two different people now, you say.

I read other things in the library. I made a discovery. There aren't any good books about stable relationships, characters who have been married for ten years. "No successful two-person short stories," says her Intro to American Lit professor.

She is reading *A Farewell to Arms*, the same as we did, not enjoying it. "All the war stuff is boring. But I do like when she dies."

We don't have any role models. Hemingway kills off Jake's nurse before things can get complicated.

"My friend's band is playing tonight," she said. But these pursuits are too enterprising and active.

Four:

The Chicasaws being at war, I wished to have some correspondence with them, to feel their pulse.

It is summer. You are sucking on a tube of raspberry-flavored honey, walking with me to the Atomic Saucer, where you'll carefully read the chalkboard menu before ordering what you always get.

You're declaring things.

I had planned to walk down to the grocery store to buy envelopes, but you tell me "That's the old people grocery store."

"What are you talking about?"

"They're only gonna have the old-fashioned kind because most old people aren't going to buy self-adhesive envelopes."

I am buying self-adhesive envelopes because it has become my job to lick them. You refuse. You say no one should have to. The technology is out there. I, on the other hand, have insisted on finishing out the box of one hundred before I pay for another box. I am rethinking this.

These envelopes taste like shit and chemicals. Now we're walking through our Germantown neighborhood in search of the peel-off kind.

At the old people grocery store, you will buy two fashion magazines, fall edition, and at home you will turn them face-down. You pace while you listen to music, bite your fingernails. You have a specific walk for listening to records. Very determined. I have pictures of you doing it, caught in action. It's hard to get a legitimate picture of you because you always freeze, then adjust, when you see a camera.

I have rolls of film I took trying to surprise you, but the shutter wasn't fast enough to click before you could realize I was there. In most of them you just look angry.

Five:

Liberty and freedom, and huzzaiing for the Americans, rang through the whole town. While we were resting ourselves four men came to us who had been exploring land in that quarter, and informed us of the situation of affairs in Kentucky.

“So what do you do about other women?”

Late night, driving from San Francisco to Eugene, Oregon, Colonel Henderson asked me, having been married for so many years, about my stance on women who are not my wife.

“What do I do about them?”

“Yeah, I mean, do you still get crushes on them and stuff?”

There is someone, in fact, with whom I have a weird, but good, sexual tension. I don't do anything about her. I will think about her in passing and then there she is, like I conjured her. I can feel when I'm going to see her. In front of the library we talked for a few minutes because we're vague friends now, acquaintances. We have listened to some of the same bands. We say hi but avoid eye contact. Hey what's up? What have you been doing? What about those bands that we both enjoy? Well, see you later, and then she walked into something. Maybe a person. I didn't look back.

I had a dream that she lived on our street, two houses past the old man that we have learned to avoid. I saw her sitting on her porch, and when I went inside it was the inside of the YMCA from the town where

I grew up. In the dream she wanted to hire me to transport a large dog from her attic to somewhere in Kansas City.

You and I bought a house together and planted a holly tree. We dug up ugly things from the front yard and replaced them with prettier things.

You often tell me about people from television who you think are attractive. The day we moved into our first apartment, you asked me to tell you the actress I found most attractive, out of anyone. I tried to think of what you wanted me to say. I tried to think of the one who looked most like you.

What do I do about them? When I was a younger man I passed notes. Do you like me? Check a box: yes/no. And the girls would all write in maybe.

Do you still like me? You told me once that you'd be perfectly happy alone – “completely satisfied” were your words.

Fine, I said. Whatever. I went to sleep on the couch but I woke up in bed with you.

When we woke up we were clinging to each other, and we had sex immediately. I thought about impregnating you.

Six:

We were now at a loss for some time to determine what to do. When the wind appeared to die away, we proposed setting fire to the houses, as we intended.

Your parents divorced before your first birthday. Mine stayed together, but not really. For years I slept on the couch at night because my dad moved his stuff into my room. When I was eleven I pulled a shoebox of letters from the top of the closet. Correspondence between my parents, mailed from the living room to the bedroom. The shoebox was hidden under my dad's Air Force uniform, the one he tried on at 50, to prove to himself that it no longer fit.

In the letters he apologized. Mom said that she could forgive him. If I had stopped reading there, I would have seen a beautiful picture of their relationship. Regret and forgiveness. But I flipped through more of these same letters, with different dates, and they became terser and shorter until they finally stopped existing.

Your parents let one argument end their marriage. Mine argued for years over the same things, like the wooden pipe rack my dad bought when he was in the Air Force. What happened was that Mom had cleaned out some of the clutter from our very small house, and she was storing things in abandoned cars my dad kept for parts.

I don't know why this seemed like a good idea.

Everything she stored in those cars got mildewed and ruined. Photo albums. My sister's baby clothes. Mom would rather let something get ruined than throw it away.

A decade later, Dad would bring up his pipe rack. He'd say she did it on purpose, to tell him something.

Mom would say that he knew where it was the whole time, that he could have brought it inside, that he let it get ruined so he could have his grudge.

Maybe they were in love but just not very good at it. Or maybe you're right.

If you let something be destroyed like that, if you just sit there and let it happen, you never wanted to keep it in the first place.

Seven:

The summer was spent to advantage, as we were careful to spread such reports as suited our interest. I remained at Louisville until the spring following, continually discharging the multiplicity of business that was constantly brought from every quarter.

We now began to feel the effect of the depreciated state of the paper currency. Everything was at two or three prices, and scarcely to be had at any price. We set out on a plan of laying up, this fall, great quantities of jerked meat.

They've seen me out there wrestling with nature, trying to dig

up the grass from the front yard and replace it with more attractive grass. You kill all the ugly little flowers.

The Kentucky Derby is happening, and you and I have been invited to a party. Our small crisis, which we make big, is revealing to our new neighbors our vegetarianism. This would have been best taken care of upon the initial invitation. When they said “We’re gonna grill up some burgers -- you all should come over,” I should have said “I’ll bring the Not Dogs. The False-age Links.”

But I didn’t.

Maybe I didn’t take their invitation seriously, or maybe I didn’t intend to go, but they began to mention their cook-out each time I saw them, and I became less comfortable with bringing up veggie burgers.

Honestly, I was afraid they would think I’m a pussy. Our new neighborhood is already suspicious of me, since I painted our front steps bright blue. They’ve seen you in the front yard repairing the lawnmower, me planting chrysanthemums.

Once I saw our neighbor chase his daughter out the front door and into the street, screaming “You ain’t no better than me!”

In a fight once, you accused me of thinking I’m better than the people on our street, better than your family, better than lots of people.

The next day you wrote me a letter to apologize. I accept. But I’m not clear whether you were apologizing for saying it or believing it.

Last night, before I fell asleep, you put your hands under my pillow. I could feel you staring into my eyelids. “You’d never want to sleep with anyone else, would you?”

The first night we slept in the same bed, I said something ridiculous in my sleep. We had a roommate then, and you felt uncomfortable having sex with him there in the next room. “It’s cool,” I said. “I understand.”

Then, sometime during the night, you tell me I turned to you and said “We totally could have fucked and he wouldn’t have known.”

We totally could have fucked. I have no memory of saying this, only the image you gave me the next morning. I was lucky enough that you thought it was funny. But I wonder. What else have I been telling you?

I told you no, I don’t want to have sex with anyone else. Don’t worry. Go to sleep. But there is a girl with whom I have a weird but good sexual tension. She smells like a baby.

I was sitting in the Filson Historical Society. I’ve been doing some research – the nation’s storehouse for Lewis & Clark information. Why was she there? She played Sacajawea once in a school play, only black girl in the school. I was in a play about conservation. I was a guitar-playing shark.

She had on this terrycloth hoodie. Baby blue. She pulled the hood tight and chewed on the plastic thing at the end of one of the cords.

In the Lewis and Clark room she showed me a boar's jawbone, the only animal artifact from the expedition. She pointed this out to me. "Did you know they didn't take enough food? They had to eat their colts."

"What? They ate horses?"

"They ate *baby* horses."

Does she spend her days studying Lewis and Clark at the Filson, smelling like infants? Was it the smell of youth still clinging to her?

I found out she works in a nursery.

You and I, I mostly, have talked about having a baby. You're afraid it would turn out like your brother, that something stupid and criminal runs in your family. You presented adoption as some sort of compromise, and when that didn't sit well with me, you suggested something else was behind it. Something biological.

Is this true? If I'm biologically inclined to impregnate women, then I'm inclined toward other traits: competition, aggression. Could I eat a pony?

Your brother once told me "Well the cavemen ate meat and that's good enough for me!"

Well, yeah, I said. But the cavemen did lots of things I don't do. They all lived together in caves, for instance. I think there's also evolution, I said, which didn't sit well with him, which I think he took the wrong way.

I hid out in the house with you on Derby Day, neither one of us wanting to go to the party across the street, because knowing the neighbors too well can only lead to more social obligations, to more trouble down the road.

We sneaked out to rent those movies and buy whiskey when we had turned down free alcohol at the party. And they saw us coming back.

We are terrible people.

People like to challenge our vegetarianism, make arguments about how we're supposed to eat meat, take our place at the top of the food chain.

I haven't understood the resentment til now. But I see what they're thinking. I want to be better than human.

Eight:

The defense of our forts, the procuring of provisions, and, when possible, suppressing the Indians (which was frequently done), burying the dead and dressing the wounded, seemed to be all our business. A small boat made her escape, which was all that was saved.

In the cemetery where Colonel Sanders is buried, we took a walk to the top of the hill. To the grave of George Rogers Clark, the founder of our great city. It was like he was calling me there. You were smiling, impressed, coming around.

Did you know that Clark joined the French army? That George

Washington sent out orders for his arrest? He funded the 1777 expedition himself, bought ammunition and supplies for his men to secure Kentucky. The government wouldn't reimburse him.

Here he is, under a tiny headstone, a miniature American flag. And Colonel Sanders with his million-dollar monument.

Our wedding was held in our apartment. You wore a 20 dollar skirt. We didn't invite our families. We didn't have a cake.

We didn't do what we were supposed to, and we were sure that's what made it work. But more than that, we didn't want anyone watching us. Some couples get off on having sex in front of other people. We didn't even want someone watching us get married. We then spent months in that apartment, not returning friends' calls, coming out late at night for long walks around our dangerous neighborhood. We laid aside all idea of public affairs.

Getting married was selfish and somehow rebellious, and there is new excitement, after ten years, in having stayed married. People are interested. People are impressed.

But the stories we've read tell us that people married for this long are bored and resentful. Too content, or not content at all.

Sir, it is uncertain to whom Clark was addressing his memoir. The historians say Thomas Jefferson, or James Madison, but I prefer to believe it was me. I was meant to discover his memoir in that library study room. 200-year-old stories of conquest and glory were exactly what I needed to hear that night.

You and I talk about things happening at the right moments

in our lives. When is the time to do what? We got married at 20, against everyone's advice. But we listened to their advice on children: wait.

Now I want to convince you that we've waited as long as we should. That we're getting older, which is a terrible realization to come to, even worse to have forced upon you.

It came up again in Mexico, celebrating our ten-year anniversary. We had a fight at the bar while I ate spicy peanuts from those never-ending bowls. The tension and spiciness gave me hiccups. We went back to our room and went to bed without saying goodnight or anything else.

Without kids I worry that my life will never change, that it will stay as it is. I want to look into the future and see my life as different.

You like our lives as they are.

When I woke up I put my hands under your pillow. If I had been in another city I would have called you, or written you a letter. But lying in bed next to you these ideas seemed ridiculous. So instead I said what I say sometimes: "Tell me all your secrets."

"I don't have any secrets," you said. But it isn't true.

I have no idea what you think about. About your brother in prison, facing all those years. His third drug offense. I had almost convinced myself that he likes it in there. He's always smiling when we come to visit. After he got out two years ago he talked about it like it was summer camp.

But it can't be easy for you. I get depressed because my sis-

ter doesn't like her new job.

When you stare into whatever future you see, what does it look like? Have we given up the enterprising and active pursuits of our youth, and if so, what replaced them? Did you get your tattoo?

The distance of the expedition did something to us, I think. We used to brag about having never spent a night apart.

I parted ways with the men from the expedition fully expecting I'd never see them again. By the time we reached Vancouver only Colonel Henderson and I were left, staring out opposite car windows. There was never enough depth to our conversations. We bonded only when we discovered we were each secretly making desperate phone calls, trying to arrange flights to get away from each other.

It is not easy for me to get along with people, for people to get along with me. I have always held this as a testament to the power of my relationship with you.

When I came home you told me that you had been perfectly happy alone. But it wasn't true. What you said you were asking me, later, after that fight, was not to go away again.

I made it home just in time for your 30th birthday. I left you alone for the ten days of dread leading up to it.

I had tried to make plans, but you weren't interested in staging a mock Sweet Sixteen party, or a Southern Belle's coming out party. Instead, you wanted to walk through the cemetery.

If I were my dad standing here at 30, my life would be more than half

over. He died young, unexpectedly, quietly. I don't think he ever wanted to get old.

George Rogers Clark died a miserable death. He had a stroke and fell into a fireplace. They had to amputate his leg, and the legend goes that he refused anesthetic. He hired a drummer and fifer to play outside his bedroom throughout the operation.

How would things have been different if he had accepted that mission exploring west? He would have still died, but would he have died out there somewhere instead of broken, taken in by his sister?

Clark was a lifelong bachelor. They wrote plays about him during the Civil War era – a love story between him and a Spanish princess. His moment of glory had passed. He was a forgotten hero, fucked over by George Washington and living in the shadow of his little brother. He believed that he wasn't good enough for her.

Am I good enough for you? A man walking with his wife stares you up and down and asks me, "Is she your sister?"

"No."

"Well you're lucky then."

I am lucky you're not my sister.

Last year, when we found ourselves spending far too much time with friends ten years younger than us, we talked one night about which of them would be suitable offspring. My first choice, you said, is exactly

the reason you're afraid to have children. Too self-destructive, gets his heart broken too easily. The kind of kid who would move in with his girlfriend and never call his parents.

There should be some kind of program to adopt 18-year-olds. Low commitment, like a test-parenting kind of thing. You liked the one who is painfully shy, the one I tried to talk out of smoking. The one whose girlfriend was stolen by my initial choice. I agree. He makes the list. Can I add this girl from the library, the one who shares some of my interests in music? She's good at research, sort of obsessed with mortality.

Couples are pushing strollers through this cemetery. A man carries two screaming infants and a disappointed look in his eyes, a warning to you and me, holding hands.

** This story incorporates elements from George Rogers Clark's Memoir, from Conquest of the Country Northwest of the River Ohio 1778-1783 and Life of Gen. George Rogers Clark by William Hayden English, and from The George Rogers Clark Teaching Units.*

DIARY

September 2, 1805, Ordway

we call this place dismal Swamp this is a verry lonesome place.

September 3, 1805, Clark

we met with a great misfortune, in haveing our last Thmometer broken by accident, we dined at a branch eat the last of our pork &.C. Some of the men threaten to kill a colt to eat they being hungry, but puts it off untill tomorrow

September 4, 1805, Clark

The Chiefs haranged untill late at night, Smoked our pipe and appeared Satisfied. I was the first white man who ever wer on the waters of this river.

September 13, 1805, Clark

I tasted this water and found it hot & not bad tasted in further examination I found this water nearly boiling hot

September 14, 1805, Gass

Capt. Lewis gave out some portable soup. Some of the men did not relish this soup, and agreed to kill a colt; which they immediately did, and set about roasting it; and which appeared to me to be good eating.

September 16, 1805, Clark

Killed a Second Colt which we all Suped hartily on and thought it fine meat to describe the road of this day would be a repetition of yesterday except the Snow which made it much wors to proseed.

September 17, 1805, Clark

Killed a few Pheasents which was not Sufficient for our Supper which compelled us to kill Something. a coal being the most useless part of our Stock he fell a Prey to our appetites

September 17, 1805, Whitehouse

the mare which owned the colt, which we killed, went back & led 4 more horses back to where we took dinner yesterday. the most of the other horses

found Scatd. on the mountain, but we did not find them all untill 12 oClock.

September 21, 1805, Clark

he Soon joind me, I found him a Chearfull man with apparent Siincerity, I gave him a medal &c. and Smoked untill 1 oClock a. m. and went to Sleep I am verry Sick to day and puke which relive me.*

**the illness that struck the expedition could well have been from the change in diet*

LIFE STORY

Dadgummit! Ever since I was seventy-four and got paid two million dollars for my fried-chicken franchising business – that I started when I was sixty-five and was thinking about settling down with my Social Security check – folks has been hounding me to write my life story. All kinds of things has happened to me. Some good. Some bad. Most of them pretty excitin’. – Colonel Sanders

LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY IS known for the people who have left it. The actor, the boxer, the journalist. Some people in bands chose to move out of town and start new bands in bigger cities. In the dawn of the 21st century, this became the thing to do. Youth culture and artistic innovation disappeared from our city. Some of us stayed behind, but there was nothing there for us. Our music venues were abandoned and boarded up. We started burning down buildings.

The celebrities who did come to town came mainly to stand holding pro-

test signs in front of the world headquarters of a fast food restaurant named for our state. We saw socialites and comedians and British pop stars. They told us not to eat the chicken that we were known for frying and spicing so well. It was cruel, they said, and then they wore 19th-century hats and applauded as millionaires forced horses to try to outrun each other.

“Where are your local celebrities?” they asked, and some of us pretended that we had fallen asleep and so didn’t hear the question. We didn’t like to talk about it, but we knew that the exodus of our musicians and actors was nothing new. People had been leaving Kentucky for ages. Lewis and Clark, who were neither one from Kentucky, met in Louisville to embark upon their voyage of discovery in 1805. They, too, saw it as a good place to leave.

Two

Dadgummit, I wish more young folks would stay in small towns today instead of going to big cities.

COLONEL SANDERS WAS not a real colonel. There is a picture of him on a building in Louisville, a picture of him on the state flag.

Before I left town, I read his autobiography.

He had never before written an autobiography, he said, and he wanted my input, so I met up with him in a bar.

Lewis and Clark were there too.

My friends were all ghosts, so I was leaving Kentucky. I hadn’t told

them yet. I didn't want to steal the thunder from Colonel Sanders' book deal, or Lewis and Clark's Voyage of Discovery.

But I did hate them a little for succeeding.

My friends all lived in large buildings painted with enormous likenesses of themselves. I had not made such a mark. I could slip out of town unnoticed, and I often thought about doing it this way.

But instead I arrived at the bar with penciled-in comments on the Colonel's autobiography. "This sentence confused me," I had written, and, "I would like more detail here."

We toasted to new adventures.

HAVING LIVED IN Kentucky for the first thirty-one years of my life, I was ready for new adventures. I clinked glasses with my old friends and I told them I would be leaving. I was quitting my job and selling my house. I was moving away.

We drank. We drank some more. Colonel Sanders was anxious about how people would react to his autobiography. I was thinking of what kind of mark I had left on Louisville. We were solemn.

And when last call was announced and the lights turned on, Meriwether Lewis said, "This day I completed my thirty first year, and conceived that I had in all human probability now existed about half the period which I am to remain in this Sublunary world. I reflected that I had as yet done but little, very little indeed, to further the happiness of the human race, or to advance the information of the succeeding generation. I viewed with regret the many hours I have spent in indolence, and now sorely feel the

want of that information which those hours would have given me had they been judiciously expended.”

The rest of us looked at each other. No one knew it was his birthday.

COLONEL SANDERS AND I tried to console Lewis. Clark was busy carving his name into someone else’s table. “I observed some Indian marks,” he yelled to us. “I went to the rock which jutted over the water and marked my name and the day of the month and year.”

Then, “The natives have engraved on the face of this rock the figures of animals, near which I marked my name and the day of the month and year.”

“That’s not a rock,” I said. “It’s a table.” But there was no convincing Clark.

Lewis and Clark cannot hold their liquor. The bartenders chased us out and the explorers sat weeping in the street. Lewis was regretting his birthday and his wasted years on this earth. Clark was scratching his name into the sidewalk with his keys.

In their own ways, both of them wanted to say the same thing: I was here.

Three

With me, gravy is a mighty important thing.

THE SUMMER WAS one long going away-party. I spent my days researching the historical figures of Louisville and my nights drinking Kentucky bourbon. The dive bars of Louisville, Kentucky became more interesting because I was moving away.

Everything had an air of impending finality, and the crapshoot of when my house would sell added a randomness that made any one of these nights feel like it could be our last one together.

My friends entered bars with Mylar balloons saying “Good Luck” and “So Long” and eventually with joke balloons like “Get Well Soon” and “Happy Retirement.”

I was writing a story about leaving Kentucky and Colonel Sanders was finishing his autobiography. We were both thinking about endings. We designed a new drinking game that required us to eavesdrop in bars and identify good final lines for stories. These could be seemingly arbitrary phrases, imbued with a slow, haunting quality, with a resonance that only an ending can carry.

Given the right rhythm, almost anything could work. We’d overhear a bartender turn down a customer and we’d create the context leading up to these final lines, the cascade of sentences that prepared the reader for true importance:

The bartender looked to the neon sign, and in that moment he saw things clearer than he ever had – the way life had deceived him and promised things it never delivered. He looked back at the old man. He wanted to lie to the man, but he didn’t. “I know we have a Captain Morgan’s sign,” he said, “but we don’t have Captain

Morgan's."

This was the way the game was played. This is how we spent most of our time, eavesdropping on strangers and making up story endings. Colonel Sanders has a list somewhere of ninety-seven of them.

Four

"I've got a warrant for you, colonel," he said.

"What reason?" I said.

"For practicing law without a license."

COLONEL SANDERS WAS unsure what to title his autobiography. He was concerned about what was truth and what was lies, but I reminded him that this was a book by a man who spent a few years calling himself a lawyer, and most of his life calling himself a colonel.

We all knew he wasn't really a colonel. The truth wasn't what we were concerned with.

The Colonel told me he regretted selling his company. He founded it when he was sixty-five and sold it nine years later. After sixty-five years of failed businesses and working as an army mule-tender, aspiring lawyer, ferryboat entrepreneur, tire salesman, and amateur obstetrician, he finally made it happen as a restaurateur.

The people who bought his company were politician's sons.

They didn't know the first thing about the food business, he said. They kept his secret recipe, but they changed the gravy and mashed potatoes.

I was thinking about the house I had bought. It was my first house. I planted some trees there and built a fence in the backyard. These things were physical marks I had left on Louisville, but would the new owners change these things? Would that bother me all the way in New Jersey?

"I think eggs are the most abused item of food there is in the world today," said the Colonel. "Fried, scrambled, or boiled. Few folks know how to fry eggs right. They fry them too hard, fry them too hot."

"That's a good story ending," I told him.

He led me through the bar's kitchen, explaining everything that was wrong with it.

Five

When I got back to the kitchen there was a man sitting on a table smoking. "You s.o.b.," I said. "You think you're smart turnin' those eggs over on my plate."

"Don't call me an s.o.b.," he said.

I SPENT MY last summer in Louisville purging things from my closet and binging on Kentucky whiskey. I had never spent this much time drunk. There was a night that Colonel Sanders intro-

duced me to an aptly named drink called the Mind Eraser and I ended up finding somebody's credit card in my dryer.

Was I numbing the pain of leaving, and the fear that, like Lewis, I had done so little to further the happiness of the human race? I was turning thirty-two soon as well.

Lewis' breakdown had become a great in-joke between Colonel Sanders and me, but we both had our own fears and regrets. It came out one night that the Colonel was afraid of dying. "All my life I've cussed," he said. "I've taken the Lord's name in vain and it's bothered me. Here I am afraid of dyin' because of my cussin'. I've already gone a-half-way around the world to Australia to try to get help."

"We are leaving some things behind us," I said.

"That's a hell of a way to end a goddamn book," the Colonel said. But I meant it. I spent my nights in Schnitzelburg Pub and Lisa's Tavern, and my days clearing out my house for potential buyers and selling my stuff on ebay:

Vintage Spiderman Curtains

Probably the most awesome thing I ever owned. So awesome I hate to get rid of them, but I am likely not going to have windows where they are sending me.

John F. Kennedy Head (replica)

Rock it all night with this bronze-ish likeness of President John F. Kennedy's head and upper torso. Remember the young President's head as it looked before it was struck by an assassin's bullet.

Keep him over your bed so you can wake up and admire him each day. Toss him back and forth with your cousin Brian. This head is special. Some say it contains the spirit of JFK, but I've seen little evidence. Bidding starts at 57 cents, US. Good luck! Check out my other auctions. No more Kennedy heads, but good stuff for real.

There was something cleansing about getting rid of this stuff. I was going to be someone different. I was ending one long phase of my life, and what better way to seal the finality of my move than by taking as little with me as possible?

I understand now that I was trying to leave behind people as well. I saw those last nights in Kentucky bars as my last nights with Colonel Sanders. The future of our friendship didn't occur to me. I didn't know how to say goodbye to him.

Six

I had him down and I was mauling him, but I forgot about the new straw hat I had just bought for the picnic.

WHEN THE NEWS of Lewis' suicide reached us, Colonel Sanders and I didn't know what to say. We didn't know if it made it sadder, or less sad, that he had always been so unhappy.

I was staring at my face in a mirror that was also Tom Selleck's face.

This Magnum P.I. mirror was the reason we went to Schnitzelburg Pub. This relic of the 1985 Kentucky State Fair. It gave the place atmosphere – Magnum P.I. on the wall, Hank William Jr’s “A Country Boy Can Survive” on the jukebox, and a black eye on the old woman behind the bar. When I ordered a whiskey and coke, she’d pop open one can of RC Cola and crack ice cubes out of an old-fashioned metal tray.

It was like having my grandmother make me a drink.

I didn’t know what to say about Lewis. Magnum P.I. was no help. He smiled down at us from the wall like he did every night in Schnitzelburg Pub. Magnum smiled and the old woman with the black eye made someone a ham and cheese sandwich. Colonel Sanders and I shared a prolonged moment of silence for Meriwether Lewis.

Finally the Colonel said, “I just wouldn’t put my chicken in one of those deep grease fryers. I always fried my chicken slow in a cast iron skillet with an old flat iron on the lid to create pressure and make the chicken tender.”

“Yep,” I said. I wished he hadn’t said anything.

Seven

“You’ll get \$2 million, colonel,” he said. “And we’ll take over all the worries and troubles you’ve had.” Why the hell am I sellin’ out now? I asked myself.

WHAT WAS WRONG was that my house had sold, and I didn't know how to tell Colonel Sanders. My long departure had brought us closer together than ever before.

That night, though, I faded in and out of the conversation. The Colonel was drunk and lying again. His trip to that Australian cussing facility had worked, but swearing off cussing had caused him to emphasize his other bad habits of drinking and lying. I think he was telling me about the time he went on a road trip with Duncan Hines, who I didn't know was a real person.

"Well I could see him reachin' for a knife, so I grabs a stool. He come after me swingin' that knife at my belly. I backed out of the swinging doors into the dining room holding the stool out in front of me and cussin' him."

Then he was telling me about the night he broke up a gang war. "I jumped out of bed, grabbed my old hog rifle and ran out the door in my shirt and my underwear pants that I slept in. And there I was, me and my gun, shoutin' at those fellows across the street to stop their shootin'. One of them had been shot already and was lying in the back of a car. The others cleared out, but somebody called the sheriff."

And then I was done with it. "Bullshit," I said.

Sanders looked shocked. He was telling stories like he always did. But I was tired of listening. I'd had enough. I called out Sanders for lying. I picked up his autobiography. "Why can't you just tell the truth?" I asked.

I was tired of being lied to. Tired of something, at least. Maybe I really

was moving away from where I had been, trying to become somebody different, and I already missed this time in my life when Colonel Sanders and I laughed about strangers' conversations in bars. Maybe blowing up at the Colonel was a defense mechanism, me trying to convince myself that I'd left nothing good behind me.

Eight

Seems like to me God was either gettin' ready to punish me real good, or He was savin' me to use me. So I bought me a red velour hat, the finest hat I had ever owned.

IT WASN'T ALWAYS this tense between me and Colonel Sanders. One night that summer we sat in Louisville, Kentucky bars and the Colonel said, "So we're only gonna see each other once or twice a year from now on," and I said, "I guess so."

And Colonel Sanders looked like he wanted to say something else but he didn't. So I didn't say anything either.

A guy who I vaguely knew sat down with us uninvited and said, "Do you know what I think is the most exciting position to see a woman in?"

Boardroom executive?

Circuit Court Clerk?

"Spreadeagle," he said. "Peeing."

And that was it, number 97. The best and final story ending we

heard. I told the Colonel that I couldn't imagine anything topping it.
But maybe I was just tired of the game.

This wasn't the last night of the summer, but it feels like a better ending. We got drunk and ate burned pizza. We ran into an old acquaintance of ours named Jim Book. Colonel Sanders had finally finished his autobiography and I told him that's what he should call it: Jim Book.

Colonel Sanders took a picture of me with my Happy Retirement balloon. I took a picture of him in front of a tree strung with white Christmas lights, and in the picture it looks like the tree is on fire.

I wish that had been the night Colonel Sanders and I said good-bye. He visited me in New Jersey, but it was a useless attempt to preserve something better left in the past. That night the Colonel followed me back to my house and we hung a SOLD sign over the For Sale sign in the front yard. Until that moment, I had the SOLD sign in the back floorboard of my car, where I wouldn't have to think about it.

I gave Colonel Sanders my lawn furniture. I gave him four tiki torches and a statue of Buddha.

The Colonel smiled. "I've had my eye on that Buddha statue."

There are ninety-seven ways I could end this night, but the last thing I'll tell you is this:

I helped him load all my stuff in his car.

I shut the car door.

I hugged him, and I looked away before I could see his face.

Nine

Like this story of my life. When the idea was first suggested, I could see no sense to it. Who'd want to read about me?

The next morning my next-door neighbor, having noticed the SOLD sign, stopped and talked to me on the sidewalk.

“So when are you leaving?”

“Today.”

“*Today?* But we barely got to know each other.”

It was true. Craig and I had lived side by side for two years, and all I knew about him was that he can play “Smoke on the Water” on guitar and that his old girlfriend used to yell at him about getting a job.

“I know,” I said. I felt guilty for leaving him.

“Well, hey, man, we should trade email addresses or something.”

We should trade email addresses. So that we can continue our thriving dialogue of factual statements about it being a good day to mow the yard, not as hot as it was yesterday.

This was a joke I would make behind Craig’s back, about his simple and pathetic and beautiful gesture of human contact. It made me sad, so I made fun of it. But I didn’t tell people about those invitations to backyard barbecues that I shrugged off, or about the bottle of wine that Craig gave me after I let him borrow my lawnmower.

And I didn’t tell people that on moving day, right after we loaded the last of our things in the truck, I ran back up the street and stuck a note to

Craig's door:

Craig,

You were a great neighbor.

mickeyhess@gmail.com

Craig was a piece of the landscape, as much as Schnitzelburg Pub and Lisa's Tavern and the Louisville skyline that had barely disappeared from my rear-view mirror before it started to thunderstorm.

And although I know that there's no chance my message survived, I like to believe that even if the words were soaked and illegible, the note was still clinging to the door.

** This story incorporates elements from the Lewis & Clark Diaries and from the Colonel Sanders autobiography Life as I have known it has been "Finger-Lickin' Good"*

TWITTER



William Clark

@TheYoungerClark Ever Westward

William Clark possessed many physical and mental qualities. Clark was an affable red-head. Clark died of natural causes.



TheYoungerClark

we suffered 16 men with their music to visit the 1st Village for the purpose of Dancing... I found them much pleased at the Dancing

14 June 1804



TheYoungerClark

Those people gave us to eat bread made of Corn

24 June 1804

**The Younger Clark**

Send out six hunters in the Prairie, they kill 5 Deer & jurk their meat all day.

19 July 1804

**The Younger Clark**

it was a most tremendous looking animal and extremely hard to kill. not to mention it had five balls

17 August 1805

**The Younger Clark**

this Chief gave me the following name: *Ka-me-ah-wah* or *Come & Smoke.*

19 August 1805

**The Younger Clark**

He now presented the pipe to me as if desirous that i should smoke, but when i reached my hand to retrieve it he drew it back

17 April 1806

**The Younger Clark**

his wife, whom i found to be a sulky bitch, was somewhat afflicted with pains in her back.

18 April 1806



The Younger Clark

our bacon which was given us we examined and found sound and good.

20 April 1806



The Younger Clark

we showed them many Curiosities and the air gun which they were much astonished at. those people begged much for Whiskey

25 September 1804



The Younger Clark

we gave them 1/4 a glass of whiskey which they appeared to be very fond of, Sucked the bottle after it was out & Soon began to be troublesome

28 April 1806



The Younger Clark

we had a dance this evening. Rivet danced on his head.

27 November 1806



The Younger Clark

The fiddle was played and the men amused themselves with dancing. They pass but few nights without amusing themselves dancing.

24 November 1806



The Younger Clark

Seven Ladies visit me to day.

29 November 1806

THE OLD MAN AND THE TREE

ANDREW HAD WRITTEN a story about seeing an old man drive into a tree. It was messy, even by English 101 standards, but it was the best thing I read all semester. The old-timer yelling at the neighborhood kids as they played football across his yard, then as they grew up and drove too fast around the curve in front of his house. It ended with Andrew and his friends, now college-aged, standing in front of their sportscars watching the old man drive slowly into a maple tree.

It was brilliant.

That year, my 30th year, I found myself spending far too much time with people ten years younger than me. I introduced all my friends as “my former students.” I met their parents. They met my wife.

That Fall I was invited to read, out loud, words I had written. In a woodshop outside Evansville, Indiana. The stage would be two work-

benches pulled together and covered with a blanket. They promised to pass around a Mason jar for gas money. It was an offer I couldn't refuse.

Andrew looked at his feet when I talked to him on campus, when I asked him to come with me and read his story about the old man and the tree. But he agreed. He was excited. Told me he'd been in plays in high school, which was sort of the same thing.

We ignored weather reports and drove across the state of Indiana, Andrew's mom calling periodically to provide ice storm updates and remind him to take his insulin, and my wife in the passenger seat playing old bands that she felt Andrew should hear to better understand the new bands he liked. The Pixies. The Smiths. Andrew told us about humorous things he had done at parties.

Inspired by him, I read the good people of Evansville some stories I wrote when I was 18, about stealing things and setting things on fire. Andrew read a story about urinating into a potted plant at a party. The audience cheered and awarded us with a Mason jar full of gas money, but we didn't get far.

An ice storm trapped us for three nights at the home of a sculptor who worked days at the literary woodshop. The sculptor made tater tots and coffee, stuck as he was with us, his unexpected houseguests -- two vegetarians and one diabetic. The diabetic and vegetarians watched old skater films while the sculptor chiseled away in the basement, his sulking girlfriend rarely emerging from the bedroom.

EVANSVILLE, INDIANA WAS encased in ice. Driving was

impossible and even walking was treacherous. Still, after a day and half, the sulking girlfriend insisted on digging her car out and getting away from the house and Andrew's running commentary on the photograph of her hot younger sister.

Through the kitchen window, Andrew and I watched the sculptor's girlfriend prepare for her escape. She chiseled away at her car like the sculptor in the basement turning wood and metal into little creatures and helicopters. She chiseled like she knew there was a car under there.

When the tires spun free, we latched onto her: "Take us to find food."

We came back with frozen pizza crusts, fake pepperoni, and fifteen sugar-free chocolate and chocolate-mint Dr. Soy bars, which Andrew insisted were awesome.

We played board games. I took a nap with my wife while Andrew tried to convince the sculptor's girlfriend to drive out and bring back her younger sister. I talked to the sculptor while Andrew watched soap operas with my wife.

Andrew and I sat up talking all night. We talked about what a good excuse diabetes is for missing class or turning in papers late. It's mysterious. People don't understand it.

We talked about Hemingway, Celine, Knut Hamsun, and other people we believed each other should read. We talked about rap music and played a video game in which we stole cars and smashed them into trees and buildings and banks.

"I never even work on the missions or anything. I just run around beating up cops." Andrew showed me a cheat code to get the tank and

we killed policemen, luring them out of their squad cars and blowing them up with bazookas. We got blown up too, in the end, but that's what we'd put on our tombstones:

Here lies Andrew:
"At least I took a lot of cops with me."

I liked Andrew. I liked how he walked kind of like Charlie Chaplin and would pull up his pants and tighten his belt mid-stride. How he hunched over and clutched his ribs when he laughed. I liked how he spent a lot of time on his hair, his deep voice, and how he muttered like a bitter old man.

If it made me feel cool to hang out with Andrew, it was in that way that feels like you've been drawn into somebody else's world, somebody infinitely more exciting than you. He had so much more promise than people my age.

2.

"YOU THINK MY insides are drying up."

"No."

"Then what's the hurry?"

"It's just, I don't know, I mean we just turned thirty. What do you see when you look into the future?"

"This, I guess."

"Just this? You don't think about watching our fu-

ture kid grow up, and graduate, and go off to college?”

“No. I don’t.”

“So this is it? Just this?”

“Yeah, I guess so.”

Upstairs in the sculptor’s spare bedroom, my wife and I continued what had become our ongoing discussion about the future.

“But someday you want kids.”

“Someday. Maybe.”

Downstairs we hear something expensive-sounding fall and shatter, then Andrew muttering, “Fuck.”

“What if our kid’s like Andrew?” I ask my wife

“It probably will be.”

3.

ANDREW TOLD ME that the key to underage drinking is to say “I left my I.D. in my server apron.” By his logic, kids under 21 can’t work as servers, so this excuse proves he’s of age. “It always works.” I never saw it work.

Instead, what I usually saw was the bartender telling him, “Well go get your server apron,” and Andrew running, and the rest of us wondering why he never came back.

As a show of solidarity, as a protest against unfair age-ism, I declared that I would not drink in any establishment that re-

fused my friend Andrew. That year the two of us took stances. We took on forces bigger than us. We drank root beer in restaurants and started our own reading series in Andrew's mom's basement.

Andrew's mom was an expert baker cursed with a diabetic son. Every Thursday night, our reading series served petit fours, torte, and three kinds of cheesecake. She made candy like I thought you could only buy in a Whitman's sampler. I was as close to Andrew's mom's age as I was to Andrew's, but as young as she was, she seemed like she'd been born a mom.

"Andrew got into NYU, you know."

"Mom, Jesus."

"He just wasn't ready to leave home yet."

"Mom, holy fuck, I can leave home, ok?"

OUR SERIES BECAME a success. Andrew invited his indie rock friends and fraternity brothers. He read stories about parties, and doing seven Smiths songs in a row on karaoke until someone unplugged the machine. He read the introductory chapter from a political philosophy textbook. But he made it so damn entertaining.

It was mind-blowing.

It was the best reading series in someone's basement in all of New Albany, Indiana.

But then the Icelandic rock star showed up.

The Icelandic rock star was fifty years old, if he was anything. People in Iceland agree that his band was, by far, the best Icelandic rock band of the century. In Iceland, the old rock stars become poets. But not the boring kind you

hated reading in college. I took him to an English Department party and the professors didn't even know how to talk to him. He stole a bunch of unmarked pills from the bathroom cabinet and threw up in the back yard.

When he showed up at Andrew's house and Andrew introduced him to his mom he said, "Hi, Andrew's mom" and then "Son, does your mom have any vodka?"

In the basement, Iceland's finest guitarist read poems about his youth, about stealing quarters from wishing wells. Andrew read a story about contracting something called herpangina, which his mom thought was a venereal disease.

By 2 AM, the rock star was snoring with his boots on an antique ottoman and Andrew's mom was saying she didn't care how famous he was in Iceland, she wanted him out of her house.

This was the end of our reading series.

4.

THAT YEAR THREE students had died on campus, which was making a lot of us nervous. There was an aneurysm, and an allergic reaction. Someone OD'd in the parking lot.

The English Department asked me to speak to Andrew. He had used diabetes as an excuse for missing his Chaucer exam, but it seemed like more than just an excuse this time. He was pale and skinny and weak-looking, but when Dr. Pederson insisted on driving him to the hospital, he knew he could still outrun her.

“We’re really concerned about him.”

“Will you talk to him?”

By the end of our first official student-teacher conference, Andrew had made diabetes sound hip and exciting. I learned of his dedication to outdoing his fraternity brothers, how they all chanted his last name as he followed each shot of alcohol with an insulin shot. “I have to keep close track of it -- if my blood sugar bottoms out, I just get kind of angry and confused. I freak out.”

“You should write about it,” I said. “Incorporate your illness into your stories. That way it’s not just all about parties, there’s something deeper to it.”

A week later he rode his bike 20 miles on an empty stomach and ended up locking himself in the garage thinking people were out to get him. His mom had to call the cops to break down the door, and Andrew got in five or six solid punches before he could be restrained.

5.

I READ IN a magazine at my wife’s doctor’s office that when most people picture their unborn kids, they don’t picture a newborn, they picture a three-month-old, smiling and cooing and holding her head up on her own.

Is it weird to picture her college-aged?

6.

AT THE ICE-SKATING rink, where we went for Andrew's twentieth birthday party, he and I circled for hours, dodging small fearless kids who could fall and rebound like their bones hadn't just smacked the ice. We talked about writing. Andrew was working on a new story. "I'm writing this new story about my dad and how he kind of used up my mom and moved on." Andrew's dad the pilot had left his mom and moved on to a new family, had a new baby and left behind his two teenage sons. In the story, Andrew's dad tries to bond with him by taking a roadtrip to the childhood home of his grandparents.

"So how do you and your dad get along now that you're older?" Andrew asked, and when I told him we never got the chance to find out, he got quiet. That's what I liked about hanging out with Andrew. Where older people would claim to know how I feel, Andrew would say "That must be awful. That's unimaginable."

7.

IT WAS THE second time someone had asked me to talk to Andrew. I could get through to him, people thought. We had some kind of connection.

This time it was his mom on the phone. "Is Andrew staying at your house?"

"No. Isn't he staying at *your* house?"

She sighed. “I haven’t talked to Andrew in a week. He doesn’t come home, he won’t return my calls. I’m worried about him. I know he isn’t taking care of himself.

“If you see him, will you talk to him for me? He’s going to lose the deposit on his dorm room in Manhattan.”

I did not know about Manhattan. Manhattan was happening behind my back.

Andrew had enrolled that semester in two universities: Indiana Southeast, in New Albany, and NYU in Manhattan. I knew about Indiana, and his mom knew about Manhattan. Neither one of us knew why he would enroll in two schools in two different states and not show up for classes at either of them.

“I’m sorry I bothered you,” his mom said, audibly crying. “I thought he talked to you about stuff like this. I thought he kind of confided in you.”

I thought so too, I thought. But I didn’t tell her that.

8.

ANDREW DIDN’T SHOW up to that class or the next one.

The semester went on without him. I taught new classes, full of new students, and the future became no clearer.

When Andrew resurfaced during NYU’s Fall break, having cost his mom double tuition and missed the first two weeks of two sets of classes, he was sitting on the floor outside my office, writing furi-

ously in a red notebook. He had grown a scraggly beard, but a beard, still.

We stared at each other, him looking like he didn't expect to see me at the door to my office any more than I expected to see him there .

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey.”

He kept writing.

“What are you working on?”

He shrugged. In my class at NYU we're supposed to rewrite one of our stories from the perspective of a different character.”

“Which one are you doing?”

“The Old Man and the Tree.”

“So you're writing it as the old man?”

“No, I'm rewriting it from the car's perspective.”

He closed his notebook and capped his pen. “I'm sorry my mom called your house,” he said. “She's crazy.”

I may have said some things about responsibility. I may have asked him how hard is it to pick up a phone, or skip one night of drinking.

But whatever I said, the words didn't sound right to me. And I could see that things were not going to be the same between us.

Time moved on. The Icelandic rock star went back to Iceland. My wife and I continued debating whether or not to have children. Andrew's mom went back to worrying about Andrew, and Andrew went back to New York.

I replaced him shortly with a personified car, a Corvette, and while it isn't the same as hanging out with Andrew, it's not bad. The Corvette and I can confide in each other. The Corvette never ages or moves away. The Corvette goes to bars and gets drunk.

A COOKOUT IN KETCHUM, IDAHO

“BOUGIE STUFF – at a barbecue? Where the hell the hot dogs and hamburgers at?”

“Can’t even get regular food.”

“Barbecues are ghetto, you know?”

Ernest Hemingway is flipping Gardenburgers, facing eternity. Guests are not arriving. His friends are dead, or live nowhere near here. It is July 1, 1961. By this time tomorrow, he will have shot himself in the face.

Hemingway has invited R&B sensations TLC. He is writing an article on them for Vibe magazine, drawing out tensions within the group. Rumors of an impending break-up. Only two of the girls have arrived, T and C. T-Boz and Chilli. Not the one that interests him, the one he’s excited to meet.

He brushes asparagus with olive oil, announces that dinner is

ready. Chilli eyes the grill, suspicious. “This is a little too ‘gourmet’ for me.”

US Ambassador John C. Cabot has brought his nephews, fraternity brothers assigned to community service to keep their charter. They pick up Mary, Hemingway’s fourth wife, lawn chair and all, set her down and begin flexing their muscles.

T-Boz is making a list, and making a show of it. Macaroni salad. Collard greens. She is leaving for the grocery store, making a soul food run, as she puts it. Does anybody want anything? The guests nibble their Tofu Pups, afraid to hurt Hemingway’s feelings.

2.

HEMINGWAY IS TELLING John C. Cabot what he wishes he could say to his wife, to his guests here today. “No facility for speech-making and no command of oratory.” He coughs, thinks he’s maybe coming down with something.

Then she arrives. Her left eye blacked under like a football player.

The smallest fraternity brother takes a step toward her, but she extends her arm, catches him in the chest.

She is everything Hemingway imagined. Strong shoulders and camouflage pants. Tattoos. She smiles and Hemingway sneezes. He whispers something into John C. Cabot’s ear.

T-Boz returns with a plastic container of collard greens. Chilli

is carrying pork chops. The fraternity brothers have taken Hemingway's fishing equipment out of his storage shed. They are casting their reels across his backyard, hooking underwear from the clothesline. They link arms, begin singing in unison.

Left Eye reaches across Mary to take a spear of asparagus from Hemingway's plate. Hemingway turns on the recorder.

"We've never had merchandise out on the market," Left Eye says. She shows Hemingway the Old Man and the Sea lunchbox she carries as a purse. Aluminum likenesses of Santiago and the fish, sharks circling his boat. Hemingway blushes. "We've always wanted to have our own cereal. Or a jigsaw puzzle."

"Uh huh," Chilli says. "Get in the group, make that money."

Left Eye shakes her head at the offer of collard greens. "There are plenty of groups that have come out and did whatever they did and broken up."

Chilli closes the plastic container. "It's different when a group doesn't have chemistry. But when you cannot replace a member then, shoo, you need to work that thing out. That's like with us. We have chemistry. We're not just three girls thrown together."

T-Boz agrees. "At the end of the day there is the three. You have that unity."

Left Eye gazes across the back yard, watches Mary Hemingway untangle fishing line. The two larger fraternity brothers practicing the Heimlich maneuver on the smallest one. "It's about working it out, because everyone has their differences. We've had our ups and downs, but we are truly like

sisters.”

3.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY IS in his swimming trunks, standing waist deep in an above-ground swimming pool. T-Boz and Chilli are dancing with the fraternity brothers, causing John C. Cabot to knock over his Diet Pepsi.

Left Eye climbs three rungs to the top of the tiny ladder, sweeps her fingers across the water, staring at Hemingway. Neither one of them blink. John Cabot tells Mary Hemingway the things her husband is unable to say to her.

T-Boz and Chilli have learned secret handshakes. Fraternity brothers are shoving each other. One of them wears a shirt that reads “Bros before hos.”

4.

LEFT EYE WANDERS through Hemingway’s house. She pulls a long shotgun from a cabinet, aims it through the window at each of her sisters and makes kapow noises as she pretends to pull the trigger. Then she places it under her own chin, makes the same noise. She spins the globe in his study, licks her finger and stops the world spinning. Honduras. She logs onto the Internet, enters her credit card information. On her way

through the hall to the restroom, she pauses and runs a finger along Hemingway's Nobel Prize medal. She looks through his bathroom cabinets.

When she opens the door, there he is.

Left Eye pulls Hemingway into his bathroom. "There's something very important that I want you to put in the article. It would mean something to me, so I was wondering if you could quote me on this one."

Hemingway raises his eyebrows, turns on his tape recorder.

Left Eye sighs. "Sometimes it's hard for women to get along." She looks out the bathroom window at her sisters sitting together, sword fighting with the asparagus. She sighs again. "Whatever good or bad times we have gone through, the fact that we are still together and still a unit and a team – man, that speaks for itself. It's impossible to go through that much stuff and not be stronger than you were before."

She pauses. "But I cannot stand 100 percent behind this TLC project. My solo record. I can speak freely about the truth on my solo project."

Hemingway smiles. His eyes water. He still needs to pee. He speaks quietly. "Writing, at its best, is a lonely life. Organizations for writers palliate the writer's loneliness but I doubt if they improve his writing. For he does his work alone and if he is a good enough writer he must face eternity, or the lack of it, each day. He grows in public stature as he sheds his loneliness, and often his work deteriorates." He nods toward the window, toward everyone outside, T-Boz, Chilli, toward Mary.

"I'd rather cause the speculation than a problem at this point,"

Left Eye continues, looking over her shoulder.

He puts a hand on her bare stomach. This is both sexual, and to move her out of the way of the toilet.

Left Eye hugs Hemingway, places her head against his old man chest. White hairs tickle her ear.

“This will be my last interview.”

He is peeing as she appears outside the window. She disappears into his storage shed, then reemerges, hugs her friends briefly and walks away. She has purchased a ticket to Honduras, where she will be thrown through her Jeep’s windshield.

As Hemingway walks outside, the storage shed explodes into flames. In the commotion, Left Eye disappears. Hemingway is looking for her, to say something to her, but she only vanishes through the smoke.

Sirens. Fire engines.

T-Boz giggles and waves at the firefighters. Chillli winks and bares her shoulder. The two look at each other across the picnic table. “In my opinion, if one of us is gone, it’s over – until that person comes back.”

“Whatever she’s doing, she needs to put it on hold.”

Hemingway knifes a piece of his grilled portabella, stands there on his patio not eating, staring into the distance, white-haired.

“I’m so scared,” Chillli says. “God, please bless us once more. I don’t think our fifteen minutes are up.”

** This story incorporates elements from Ernest Hemingway's 1954 Nobel Banquet speech and Anthony DeCurtis' interview with TLC for Vibe Magazine, April 1999.*

PART IV.

REAL BUT UNLIKELY-SOUNDING RAP NAMES

Awesome Dre and the Hardcore Committee
Chief Groovy Loo and the Funky Tribe
Gigolo Tony and Lacey Lace

WHAT HANK JR. WISHES HE COULD HAVE
SAID TO HANK SR.

Versions 1-3

This is a partial transcript from “Hannity & Colmes,” October 14, 2005, that has been edited for clarity.

ALAN COLMES, CO-HOST: Welcome back to “Hannity & Colmes.”
I’m Alan Colmes.

Earlier today, Sean got a chance to sit down with country music legend
Hank Williams Jr.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

HANNITY: The one and only Hank Williams Jr. How are you doing, my friend?

HANK WILLIAMS JR., COUNTRY MUSIC STAR: I'm ready, man.

HANNITY: It's an honor to see you. Are you ready?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HANNITY: Ready?

WILLIAMS: Yessiree.

HANNITY: We're going to survive and we're going to be united. It's no longer about the yanks and rebels.

WILLIAMS: Yes. Bring everyone down here.

HANNITY: Hey, I want to pick up this thing here.

WILLIAMS: It's kind of an American thing.

HANNITY: Really incredible.

WILLIAMS: Twenty. That's all there is of these things.

HANNITY: Only 20 in the world?

WILLIAMS: Yes.

HANNITY: That's it?

WILLIAMS: That's it.

HANNITY: Your generosity is really incredible. Listen, I'm — this is your thing.

WILLIAMS: No, no, no.

HANNITY: Yes.

WILLIAMS: Sean, I brought you something. This is a whole different world now.

HANNITY: And why? Because...

WILLIAMS: Because we're going to do some good.

HANNITY: You've donated \$150,000.

WILLIAMS: Well, not enough. Not enough.

HANNITY: This thing, it's terrific.

WILLIAMS: That's right. It's just — it's basically one of a kind, you know. It's a beautiful thing. And I thought, you know, boy, what can I do? So I

mean, it's neat. It's hard to let it go. But actually, it's real easy. I'm ready, man. It's my time of year. We're going to do some good. I'm going to. I'm going to. I'm going to.

(END VIDEOTAPE)

WHAT HANK JR. WISHES HE COULD HAVE SAID TO HANK SR.

2005, Hannity & Colmes

HANNITY: You're proud of your dad?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yes. Hank Williams, a lot of us in the blues or rock world I would say that really consider him the real king.

HANNITY: Absolutely. He started it all.

WILLIAMS: And 29 years old, that was a young — that's young.

1952, Country Song Roundup

Q. What is your favorite food?

A. Fried chicken.

Q. What is your favorite color?

A. Blue.

Q. How did you happen to learn to play the guitar?

A. An old Negro taught me.

Q. What are your hobbies?

A. Writing songs.

Q. What kinds of work have you done besides singing?

A. None

2007, Hannity & Colmes

HANNITY: Today we welcome Mickey Hess. How are you doing, my-friend?

MICKEY HESS, FAN OF RAP MUSIC: Doing fine, Sean. Thanks for having me.

HANNITY: You took – this was in your first year of college – you took a

course in the history of country music.

HESS: Yes, I did.

HANNITY: You weren't a real fan of country music, though, from what I understand, right? You thought taking this course would bring you closer to your dad?

HESS: I thought it would give us something to talk about.

HANNITY: And did it work?

HESS: Not exactly, no.

HANNITY: Your interests lied with rap music. Hip hop.

HESS: Yes.

HANNITY: And how did your dad feel about hip hop?

HESS: He felt that it did not sound like music.

HANNITY: Was your father himself a musician?

HESS: Yes, he played bluegrass guitar, a style known as the Merle Travis style, which lies somewhere between the drop-thumb style Maybelle Carter popularized and the Chet Atkins style, which, if I'm correct, was a variation of the Merle Travis style. My dad's favorite musician was Chet Atkins.

There's also a picture of my dad in front of Merle Travis' grave.

HANNITY: I like that name, Merle.

HESS: I do too. I didn't realize that until I said it a few times just then.

HANNITY: Maybelle isn't bad either.

HESS: All my dad's brothers and sisters have names that begin with M, like his name, Mike. Most of their kids have M names too. Both my sisters, and all my cousins except for two.

HANNITY: No Merles or Maybelles, though?

HESS: No. Neither one of those. He didn't name us after his heroes, I guess.

HANNITY: Well, it sounds like you learned a lot about guitar styles in your country music class, at least. Even if it didn't bring you and your dad together.

HESS: I took a Beginning Guitar class a few years after that. That was maybe a better approach. This was only a year or two before my dad passed away, but there were a few nights we both sat in the kitchen and I'd show him the basics I learned in class and the things I learned by downloading guitar tabs. There were a couple that I could tell really impressed him.

HANNITY: Had he ever tried to teach you guitar?

HESS: Not really. I think when I was young I kind of rejected things he was interested in, and he never made much of an effort to involve me. I asked him once when I was in high school to teach me guitar, but neither one of us had the patience. Also, I think guitar was so easy for him, and he was so good at it, that he had no idea how to explain it to someone.

When I took the guitar class, my youngest sister started playing too, around that same time. So it was like this thing that my dad loved more than almost anything, and finally, after so many years, here's his 27-year-old son and his 18-year-old daughter taking an interest in it.

HANNITY: That's nice.

HESS: It was.

1952, Country Song Roundup

Q. Do you come from a musical family?

A. No.

2007, Hannity & Colmes

HESS: It was hard to get him to talk sometimes.

HANNITY: Your dad?

HESS: Yes. We didn't know what to say to each other. I know now that he was an entirely different person when he wasn't around his family. A lot of his friends I met at the funeral didn't even know that he had a son. And the stories they told sounded like a much better version of the Mike Hess I knew. He sounded like he was a lot of fun.

HANNITY: What are your favorite memories of him?

HESS: He drove a lawnmower into a tree once. I was three years old. I was sitting in his lap.

HANNITY: My goodness.

HESS: But that's the thing. I don't even remember it. I just remember the way it's been described to me. I feel like a lot of my stories about him are that way. They're not even memories.

HANNITY: There must be something. What about –

HESS: He pulled out his own wisdom teeth. He tied a string around a mole until it dried up and fell off. He didn't like going to the doctor.

HANNITY: No, he didn't like going to the doctor.

HESS: A customer sneaked his car out of my dad's body shop without paying, and when he saw the car at the Science Hill Pool Hall a few days later, he got a tire iron out of his trunk and smashed in all the parts he had fixed for him.

HANNITY: But these stories still don't involve you. Do these feel more like genuine memories?

HESS: I remember him sitting at the table drinking coffee. I remember him being angry a lot. I think I was generally kind of afraid of him.

HANNITY: Did he tell you he loved you?

HESS: He did. And he told me he was proud of me once. I think. When he died I didn't want to tell anybody, like any of my friends. I just wanted to wait out having to see any of them until I felt better about it, however long that took.

HANNITY: It's been four years now.

HESS: I know. I told them. I wrote a stock email a few days after the funeral and changed the salutation for each person so it didn't seem so generic. I don't remember exactly what I wrote, but I tried to give the impression that it was all I wanted to say about it ever. I had friends who wrote back and offered to listen if I wanted to talk, but I never took them up on it. And I quietly resented the friends who didn't make such an offer.

HANNITY: He died suddenly, didn't he?

HESS: Yeah. He was playing guitar at his friend's party -- a pig roast. I never asked anybody what happened to him, but so many people wanted -- or needed -- to describe it to me. He had put down his guitar and said his arm was hurting. He said he was feeling cold. They all tried to take him to the hospital, but he wouldn't let them. He didn't want to go. He made them drive him back home and they sat there with him in the kitchen until he finally convinced them to leave. "You boys go on home. I'll be fine."

His friends, afterward they all felt like they could have saved him, but what could they have done? He thought he could tough it out. So they left him there in the kitchen and it was probably two hours later when Mom heard him fall.

HANNITY: Do you feel like he should still be here?

HESS: Yes. I mean, he was only 54. Not that young, I guess, but it's less than twice my age. I'm more than halfway there, you know? I think that given the chance he would have taken better care of himself. He never got to be a famous guitar-player.

HANNITY: You're proud of your dad?

HESS: Oh, yes. And, Sean, I know my favorite memory of him. It's April Fool's Day, my first year of college.

HANNITY: Absolutely. This is the car prank?

HESS: This is the car prank, yes.

HANNITY: Terrific.

HESS: A running joke – no pun intended – around our house was how my uncle Mark would jog up the hill to our house. Mark lived down the hill from us, and whenever he needed to borrow a tool or help out in my dad’s garage out back of our house, he wouldn’t just walk up the hill, he’d come running.

And you know, I had driven home for the weekend and it was Friday afternoon and no one was in the house except me and my dad. And like usual we didn’t know what to say to each other, so we’re sitting there at the kitchen table and my dad asks, “Have you pulled any April Fool’s Day pranks today?” I shook my head. “You want to play one on Mark?”

So he goes to the phone and dials it, and I hear Mark say hello and my dad screams, “*Run up here and help me I got a car on fire!*”

HANNITY: And Mark comes running?

HESS: And Mark comes running. We barely had time to walk back to window before we see him run up the hill and shoot past us. After about a minute he comes panting back to the house and Dad says, “April Fools.”

HANNITY: Classic.

HESS: Yeah, it was great. This was a man whose favorite story seemed to be “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” when I was growing up. It was the only children’s story he liked telling. He told it when I faked a fever to get out of school, or when my sisters and I got too loud in the house – “When I hear somebody yelling that loud, I think they need help or they’re hurt or something” – he told it a lot.

HANNITY: And did Mark continue to run up the hill after the April Fools Day prank? Or like that story, did he learn to be suspicious of any emergencies up at your house?

HESS: Well that’s where it ends, really. I, I wasn’t there. The night he died. I wasn’t there, but I know my mom called Mark at like four or five in the morning after she heard my dad fall in the hallway. Right after she called the ambulance. I think she said something like “I can’t get Mike to wake up. Mike passed out and I can’t wake him up.”

HANNITY: And Mark ran up the hill?

HESS: And Mark ran up the hill.

WHAT HANK JR. WISHES HE COULD
HAVE SAID TO HANK SR.

2005, Hannity & Colmes

HANNITY: Hard to be the son of the legend Hank Williams.
Easy?

WILLIAMS: Well, you know

HANNITY: I know

WILLIAMS: It's just kind of

HANNITY: I know. We've got family tradition and we know
you're proud.

WILLIAMS: Well, they stick you out there when you're eight.
And 10. Oh, yes.

HANNITY: That's tough.

WILLIAMS: And 10. And 12. And you say, golly, OK. And you know, this is, well, you know, it's just kind of something a kid goes out and does.

2007, Hannity and Colmes

HANNITY: More stories for us, Mickey Hess?

HESS: I did listen to country music when I was a kid. Everyone did. It was seeing some kind of resurgence. My friends and I were made to dress up as the Oak Ridge Boys for some kind of elementary school talent show. A girl wore a cowboy hat and lip-synched to Barbara Mandrel and all the boys were in love with her after that. It seems like our talent shows were devoted mostly to lip-synching. None of us played any instruments or knew how to sing for real, but we got insanely good at lip-synching. A lot of class time was devoted to it. Most of fifth grade. But there was a older kid named Shawn who would clog-dance with his mom, wearing matching fringed suits, and he generally won the talent shows. A few years later, we were all listening to 2 Live Crew.

HANNITY: Did you listen to Hank Williams Jr?

HESS: That song "A Country Boy Can Survive"? I used to love that. Think-

ing about it now, though, the whole song seems to contradict itself. It's about Hank and all his friends, like most of his songs are. His rowdy friends are coming over. His rowdy friends are settling down. This one, though, seems to go back into the past further than the others. It's about how Hank and his friends pride themselves on living in the country and all the survival skills that growing up there gave them. Like Hank Sr. said, "You have a smell a lot of mule manure before you can sing the way I do." That may not be an exact quote. But anyway, Hank Jr. brags about how Southern boys can survive because they're polite and religious ("We say grace, and we say ma'am") and they all know to grow their own tomatoes and things like that. But then his friend goes to New York City and gets mugged and stabbed – he ventures out of the country just once and gets killed in the city, so it doesn't sound at all like a country boy can survive. It just sounds like the country's safer.

HANNITY: Those homegrown tomatoes didn't do much for him on the mean streets of New York.

HESS: No, they didn't, Sean. I do love Hank Jr's revenge fantasy, though – "I'd like to spit Beechnut in that dude's eye." That'll show him.

HANNITY: Beechnut?

HESS: Beechnut chewing tobacco. What better way to bring the South up North? Down South all the barns have Beechnut ads painted on their roofs. Most of our houses too.

HANNITY: But that isn't how the song goes, you know. The friend who was killed was actually Hank's city friend, a friend who had lived in New York his whole life.

HESS: Oh.

HANNITY: Yes

HESS: Still

HANNITY: But we should move on to your hip hop studies. I understand you've published a book.

HESS: My dad had a beard and a similar body type to Hank Williams, Jr, and he used to play this up. He wore dark sunglasses and a big white cowboy hat with feathers attached to the sides. He used to ask us if we were ready for some football.

HANNITY: Fantastic.

HESS: My dad had two friends, Richard and Roger. He also had a friend named Worm, but I think he wasn't as close with him.

HANNITY: I'm getting the sign from my producer ... we have

HESS: From the time I was five years old, my dad's friend Richard used to greet me by asking, "How are the ladies treating you?" He was always

drinking and driving and wrecking his car and then offering to help my dad fix it. For all his outlandishness, though, he seemed to me like the saddest man in the world. The three of us would be in the garage, Richard and my dad banging out dents and me sweeping the floor, when suddenly Richard would tell us he needed to step out back and get ahold of himself.

HANNITY: Mickey Hess, hip hop enthusiast. Thank you for being here with us.

HESS: I knew this phrase from television. *Get ahold of yourself*. Men in black-and-white movies sometimes said this right before they slapped a woman. I knew it had something to do with uncontrollable crying, so that's what I pictured poor Richard doing behind the garage every time he came to visit my dad.

HANNITY: It's been a real pleasure having you here.

HESS: I was a sensitive kid, so finally I had to say something. "What's wrong with Richard?" I asked my dad.

"What's *wrong* with him?"

"What makes him go back there and cry so much?"

"What?"

"He says he has to get ahold of himself."

“He doesn’t go back there to cry,” my dad said. “He goes back there to pee.”

HANNITY: Terrific. We’d love to have you back on the show sometime.

HESS: My dad had another friend, Danny, who showed up a day late for his funeral. It’s true. A chandelier fell on him in Las Vegas and he got all kinds of money for it but it fucked up his brain and he can’t tell time anymore.

HANNITY: I’m Sean Hannity. Join us tomorrow on *Hannity & Colmes*, when our guests will be Barack Obama and/or the great Charlie Daniels.

HESS: So there he is in his suit a day late and we’re pushing aside flower arrangements and stuff so he can sit down on the couch. And we’re just kind of sitting there. It’s me, and my mom and sisters, and we’re obviously exhausted. And then there’s Danny, telling us about a chandelier falling on him and what he ate for breakfast last Saturday, telling a story about how when he and my dad were teenagers they once tied two stray cats together and threw them over a clothesline.

Hannity & Colmes theme music playing

Fadeout

Silence.

WHEN SOMEBODY NEEDS HYPNOTIZED

JOHN STEINBECK HAS taken up hypnotism. He travels between Midwestern campuses, entertaining students who are otherwise trapped and bored.

“Squeak like a grateful and apologetic mouse! Roar like a lion! Comment on the nature and the direction of literature!”

The students obey his commands. For \$17.50 they can purchase a videotape of the things they did while hypnotized. Dancing on tables, making out wildly with strangers. They can watch the manifestations of their subconscious, ego removed.

Winning the Nobel Prize in Literature has done something to Steinbeck. He has become bored with writing, as if there are no new heights he can reach. In the world of hypnotism, he is considered a hack. This gives him a unique satisfaction.

The auditorium at Indiana University looks like a cut-rate ski

lodge. Wood-paneled walls and electronic fireplaces. Video games from the 1980s.

Sometimes a student will not close her eyes. She will believe herself too strong to participate. Other times students will pretend they are hypnotized when they aren't, as if they've been waiting to act this way, to be someone they're not, or to be who they see as their true selves, uncensored.

Steinbeck has instructed the hypnotized students to reenact last year's Superbowl, the one he lost money on. "Be cowardly and stupid. Leave the field on the eve of our greatest potential victory!"

2.

A REPORTER FROM the student newspaper has invited Steinbeck to a party in his dormitory's multipurpose room. The rap group Three 6 Mafia will perform. Steinbeck declines, citing his age as if it precludes such activities.

The reporter nods too quickly for Steinbeck, as if he has been too easily convinced. He asks Steinbeck to autograph his Rage Against the Machine CD, hands him a Food Not Bombs pamphlet.

Steinbeck is packing equipment into his van: his PA system, his extendable wand. "Will you write any more novels?" the reporter asks.

Steinbeck shakes his head. "I hold that a writer who does not passionately believe in the perfectibility of man has no dedication nor any membership in literature."

The reporter will misquote this statement. Steinbeck's picture will appear in the student newspaper, his mouth caught in mid-sentence, standing in front of his van with the airbrushed slogan "Whenever Somebody Needs Hypnotized, I'll be There."

3.

STEINBECK IS STAYING in a hotel whose name gets longer with every corporate merger. He is listening to his Ipod, watching television with his laptop open on the second twin bed. He drifts to sleep despite this stimulation.

When he opens his eyes, a woman is standing in front of him.

Your bathtub, she says, pointing to the five inches of water left standing, trapped by Steinbeck's clogged drain. She smells like the bottle of lemon-scented cleaner she uses to prop open the door.

"It's you," she says. On television, two local newscasters are chuckling at images of Steinbeck wearing a sequined cape, but this is not what the housekeeper is talking about. She pulls a worn copy of *The Grapes of Wrath* from her back pocket.

Steinbeck flips through the dog-eared pages, sees what she has underlined, her notes back to him in the margins, sometimes in Spanish, sometimes in English. The book is still warm from her pocket.

On TV, Steinbeck has convinced two sorority sisters that they are

actually chickens. The weatherman shakes his head.

Steinbeck cannot gauge how old his housekeeper might be. The years seem to wear on her face, but not her eyes. She sits on the twin bed next to Steinbeck. He scoots to provide her more room.

“Hotels,” she says. “They want you to get in a uniform. They don’t want you walkin’ around dressed up, lookin’ like them.”

Steinbeck takes a towel from her stack, folds it into a swan.

“They get so many towels, they can’t use ‘em all. But you gotta put up all those towels.”

Steinbeck wants to make her forget her pain. He removes the Nobel medal from around his neck and begins to swing it rhythmically in front of her eyes.

The housekeeper shakes her head. It is his words she wants. She points to the pages of *Grapes of Wrath*, to the words that Steinbeck believes have lost their power. “You know what I wanted to do all my life? I wanted to play piano. And I’d like to write about my life, if I could sit long enough.”

Steinbeck replies with words that don’t sound right to him. He hopes they sound right to her. “The writer is delegated to declare and to celebrate man’s proven capacity for greatness of heart and spirit – for gallantry in defeat – for courage, compassion, and love.”

Steinbeck pockets his medal. She closes her eyes, dreaming things she will write about in the morning. Steinbeck plunges the bathtub, scrubs it with lemon-scented cleaner, then tucks in the covers and leaves her to sleep.

4.

THE DORM PARTY is over, busted up by the campus police. Three 6 Mafia, the party's entertainment, are sleeping in the dorm's multipurpose room. Steinbeck adds his hotel blanket and pillow to their circle of sleeping bags.

But Three 6 Mafia are not sleeping. After years in obscurity, they have just won an Oscar. The adrenaline has yet to wear off. They are ordering pizza, getting high on cough syrup. Juicy J hands Steinbeck his Ipod and the group crowds around him to watch the video footage of their big moment. "Did you see the way we ran out there on the stage?"

"It felt good," DJ Paul remembers. "I was trying to keep from looking in the crowd, because I was nervous."

Paul and Juicy take the Ipod back from Steinbeck, and huddle together on a Three 6 Mafia sleeping bag, reliving the Oscars.

Steinbeck remembers feeling this excited about writing, once. Project Pat, Juicy's older brother and tonight's opening act, shakes his head at their recent success. He hands Steinbeck a bottle of cough syrup and tells him, "I was locked up. And when they got signed and went gold, I was just getting out." Juicy and Paul high-five, play their Oscar footage again. "You know," Pat continues, "90 percent of Memphis is black. It's like crabs in a bucket and that's for real. Nobody wants nobody to have nothing."

Steinbeck chugs his syrup and grimaces. "The ancient commission of the writer has not changed. He is charged with exposing our many grievous faults and failures, with dredging up to the light our dark and dangerous dreams for the purpose of improvement."

“I’m gonna be honest with you,” Pat says. “I just want to get this money. I want to sell me some millions. I’m my own man. I’m just gonna do this myself. Like Pac. He came out of jail and he sold five million. Man, that’s love. That’s what I’m trying to do. I’m trying to get a piece of this money out here because once you do that, you’ve done did it.”

Steinbeck does not react well to the cough syrup. Project Pat throws him over his shoulder, carries him down the concrete hallway to the restroom. Steinbeck traces his fingers across the cold drab walls. “Humanity has been passing through a gray and desolate time of confusion.”

On the floor, after throwing up, Steinbeck cups his head in his hands. He is thinking of the woman in his hotel room, the way she fell asleep so quickly, how his words sedated her instead of inspired her to action. “In my heart there may be doubt that I deserve the Nobel award.”

Pat leans back against the sink, puts a hand on Steinbeck’s shoulder. “Sometimes you’ve got to come out of an environment and sit yourself down and think about what you really want to do. Because life is real and you can die out here. White, black ... you can die.” He pauses. “I’m an entertainer and I’m for the people. So if the people like it, I love it.”

“The skalds, the bards, the writers are not separate and exclusive. From the beginning, their functions, their duties, their responsibilities have been decreed by our species.”

Project Pat nods. “That’s the main thing. You’ve got to have a good market-

ing thing going. And I just feel that the first album wasn't promoted right. I was a first-time artist coming out. It did well, but then, you know, I was looking at it like I could have sold more."

Steinbeck describes the beautiful housekeeper he left sleeping in his hotel room. The hope she showed him for the perfectibility of man. The glimmer in her sad eyes. How she smelled like chemical lemons. He sighs, "In the endless war against weakness and despair, these are the bright rally-flags of hope and of emulation."

Project Pat shakes his head, suggests that this woman is probably robbing him right now, stealing his Ipod, his laptop, and his extra socks. Steinbeck refuses to listen, but Pat is speaking from experience.

"Man, we didn't have nothing. You're talking about sleeping on the floor with coats, windows busted out, no heat working. It wasn't a big apartment. You did what you could. We might break in a friend's house, eat they food, take a couple of they CDs. You might take a couple yams, just maintain and get by."

** This story incorporates elements from John Steinbeck's 1962 Nobel Banquet Speech, Studs Terkel's Working, Murder Dog's interview with Project Pat, and MTV Movie News' interview with Three 6 Mafia.*

FAQ:
SEDUCING WOMEN MAKES
MY FINGERS ACHE

(Questions from Seduction FAQ, Answers from Typing Injury FAQ)

How do I approach women?

By placing your arms straight in front of you and spreading your fingers as far as possible.

When is the best time to hug, kiss, or shake hands after meeting a woman?

Really, do it every three minutes. Hold for at least 5 seconds and repeat 3 times.

How can I hide my nervousness around a woman?

Every 20 minutes, get up and bend your spine backward. The elbows should

form a 90 degree angle while hanging at your sides from the shoulders.

What does a woman want to see in a man she just met?

A good chair makes a big difference. If you don't like your chair, go find a better one.

How does height influence success with women?

If you are short, this may be impossible. The best remedy is to raise the seat height and prevent your legs from dangling by using a footrest.

What do I do if she says she has a boyfriend?

Pull your chin in to look down -- don't flop your head forward.

How do I treat or deal with a woman who doesn't call back or cancels dates?

For just about every part of your body, there's a fancy name for a way to injure it. Let your elbows swing free.

What is wrong with me?

You're typing too much. You're never really giving a chance for the blood to get back where it belongs, because your muscles never relax enough to let the blood through. Stress, poor posture, and poor ergonomics only make things worse.

I've seen ads for penis enlargement products. Is it really possible to enlarge my penis?

You absolutely need to go see a doctor. As soon as you possibly can. You really want adjustments for height, back angle, back height, and maybe even tilt.

If ordinary guys get laid why do I need all this information?

Humans were not well “designed” for this. Drugs can reduce the pain.

NOTHING HAPPENS

1.

I AM STANDING in front of a very famous staircase. I am standing in the Seelbach Hotel in Louisville, Kentucky, where a historical marker informs me that the hotel's main staircase inspired the description of a staircase in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Impressive.

The Seelbach has posted a sign proclaiming that Fitzgerald wrote part of *The Great Gatsby* right here in the Seelbach. Right here in the hotel bar. Which part, I am thinking, and how do they know?

Fitzgerald stayed in Louisville for a night or two, and he made more of an impression than I did in twelve years. This revelation was depressing.

I had only been gone a year, but it was long enough that I felt like a tourist in my old hometown. I was staying in a hotel and star-

ing at historical markers in places I'd never visited when I was a Louisvillian.

I moved to Philadelphia for a teaching position.

I was invited back to read, out loud, a paper I had written about rap music. This is a thing people do.

2.

I DECIDED I would love rap forever during a Cub Scout hike to Wolf Creek Dam in Southeast Kentucky. We were eating Dinty Moore Beef Stew out of pop-top cans while sitting on logs in our uniforms. One of the scouts had brought a tiny radio and tuned it in to the local hard rock station. Aerosmith came on but it wasn't Aerosmith. It was Aerosmith's guitar cut off and staggered and looped, with Run DMC shouting rhymes over top of it.

Larry, the Assistant Scoutmaster, nudged me with his elbow, a wide grin on his face. "This is beef stew eatin music, ain't it?"

It sure was.

3.

DURING A GONE period of my life I spent hours every day in a coffee shop. I went there first thing in the morning when I woke up, before combing my hair, before washing my face, before doing anything other than waking up and

putting on clothes.

What did I do at the coffee shop?

I drank coffee and typed my thoughts into a portable computer. Sometimes my thoughts turned into stories about rappers hanging out with Nobel Prize winners. Other times they turned into reference books about hip hop music.

A publishing company hired me to write a reference book about the 24 most important hip hop artists of all time.

Can I do 25? I asked.

No, they said. 24.

When that book was completed, they hired me to write a reference book about the hip hop scenes of different U.S. cities. Again, there were to be 24 of them. There was something they liked about that number.

I wrote so many books at that coffeeshop that they used to have a cup of coffee waiting for me on the counter by the time I closed the front door behind me.

I drank so much coffee that my head used to hurt while I walked to the coffeeshop. I couldn't tell if it was caffeine withdrawal or the dread of more caffeine.

Other people sat in the coffeeshop with me. There were art-school students with bumperstickered plastic toolboxes, real estate agents pacing around talking on cell phones, buying and selling the properties surrounding the coffeeshop.

I wasn't there to be seen, though, I was there because I could not work in my house. It felt too empty, too lonely.

It was rare that I'd take the time to put in my contact lenses before I left home to write, so my fellow coffeeshop patrons were a blur of dreadlocks and business suits.

Once, I stopped typing and looked up to stretch. A red-haired woman was staring very intently at me from across the shop. I went back to typing, but looked up a few minutes later and she was still staring.

I realized she was drawing me.

So I started writing a story about her.

3.

IF SOMEONE WANTS to put up a plaque, I wrote this story in:

Voodoo Donuts in Portland, Oregon

Café Gelato in Lawrenceville, New Jersey

Higher Grounds in Philadelphia, PA

Atomic Saucer in Louisville, Kentucky

5.

STICK ME IN any city, this is what I do. I write stories. I sit alone and avoid eye contact. Coffee shops close and I move on to new ones. I sit in the same place every morning, no matter where it is that I'm sitting.

I never had much sense of setting. I have even been criticized

for it. It was 1996, and a young Mickey Hess had written a story with no setting and submitted it for critique in a creative writing class he was taking.

Worse, the entire English faculty was observing this class, as they were using the workshop discussion of my story as a teaching demonstration for a man who was applying to become a faculty member. “I don’t get any sense of where I am in space and time as I read this story,” he professed, enunciating carefully. “I can see the characters, but it’s like they’re floating around in the ether.”

I wrote this down: Characters. Ether. Asshole.

The man auditioning to be a creative writing professor said some other things, critical things, and then asked me if I had any questions.

I didn’t.

When he handed back my story, I saw that he had written at the top of it “Nothing happens nowhere.”

Nothing happens nowhere. I tried to give his comment some consideration. He was, after all, an expert, a published author teaching writing at a small college on the other side of the country. “Anything happens anywhere,” I thought. “Everything happens everywhere.” And I skipped the rest of my classes and went to the library. What did I do there? I found that uptight motherfucker’s book and I signed it with his name, under the dedication, “I shit square turds.”

5.

LOOKING BACK WITH the wisdom and perspective I've gained in the years since, I'm thinking maybe I wrote off his comment too quickly. After all, I never have much of an idea of where I am in the world. My sense of direction is so miserable that I often ask people to drive me around to look for my car.

I have exited houses into a common backyard and had no idea which house I came out of. I have entered homes that were not the one I came out of.

I have extracted a beer from the refrigerator, searched through a drawer for a bottle opener, and pulled up a seat at the kitchen table.

I wandered out of the back yard of one party and through the back door of another. One of the strangers at the kitchen table asked me, "So how do you know Darren?"

"Who?"

"Darren. It's his party."

"I think maybe I was at a different party."

5.

ONCE, I BURST through the door of my friend Luke's upstairs neighbors, whose door, to be fair, looked exactly like Luke's door, only one floor up. Intending to catch Luke off guard, I flung open the door

without knocking.

This was the kind of prank I would play, in my younger days.

Luke's hockey-playing neighbors sat perplexed and frozen, with a half-rolled joint on their coffee table.

7.

AT THE SEELBACH Hotel in Louisville Kentucky, I was prepared to read my paper about rap music in front of a panel of other profsors. I would thank the audience for coming. I would ask if they had any questions.

But when I woke up after my first night in the hotel, I found that the 20th Century Literature Conference had been canceled due to inclement weather. I looked outside. The streets were clear. There was no precipitation in the air. The conference had been canceled due to a weatherman's prediction of inclement weather.

Kentucky snow days, I have missed you.

Instead of reading my paper about rap music, I took a walk through the tourist district of my old hometown, where the locals were stockpiling bread and canned soup in preparation to barricade themselves in their homes and wait out the impending ice storm. Other than these scavengers and the bewildered professors stranded here with no one to hear them read their papers, the streets are deserted. The public schools have been canceled. City workers have been sent home.

On the corner of Fourth and Chestnut in Louisville, Kentucky, a

historical marker informs me that on this very spot, the monk Thomas Merton had a sudden revelation that he “loved all these people.” Standing here on the corner of Fourth and Chestnut, he saw the people of Louisville “walking around, shining like the sun.” I am standing where Merton stood. I am trying to feel what he felt.

This morning in Louisville, Kentucky I do not see anyone shining like the sun. I see literature professors who cannot appreciate a snow day. When it was announced that today’s conference sessions were cancelled, they launched a grassroots campaign to hold the conference right there in the upstairs lobby of the hotel.

I am pretending I am not one of them.

11.

AFTER I MOVED to Philadelphia, I had a series of dreams about Louisville, Kentucky geography. I would drive around town, kind of watching myself from above, planning the shortest routes from Bardstown Road bars to used bookstores across town. The dreams were very strategic. It felt like I was auditioning for a job as a taxi driver.

One night I left work after a long day of writing and teaching and couldn’t figure out what street I was driving on. I thought I was still in Kentucky – it was so much a part of me that it was the default setting for my sleep-deprived mind.

These Kentucky dreams are me clinging to the past. Even in an unconscious state, I am trying to remain who I was.

After a few months, I don't have them anymore.

About the Cover

Cover drawing by Andy Sturdevant, an artist and writer living in Minneapolis. His drawings have appeared in many of the best-loved magazines and websites of the Upper Midwest, including *The Rake*, mnartists.org, and heavytable.com. See more of his work at www.andysturdevant.com

Cover design by Steve Sachs, who is often perceived by other people as a musician and/or a visual artist. It's been said that perception is reality. If you'd like to discuss music, art, perception, or reality with Steve, please visit his website: <http://cargocollective.com/stevesachs>

The cover design incorporates elements from Joe Buck's artwork for the album *De La Soul is Dead*.

About the Author

Mickey Hess was featured on the A&E Biography channel's much-lauded Vanilla Ice episode. He is the author of *The Nostalgia Echo*, *Big Wheel at the Cracker Factory*, *El Cumpleaños de Paco*, *Nobody Likes a Smartass*, and three books about hip hop, including *Hip Hop in America: A Regional Guide*.

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