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— Nichole Miller
Ham, Wry on Cheese

To Brie, or not to Brie, upon my cracker:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The salt and air of a barren wafer,
Or to take up knives toward a sea of St. Andre,
And by slicing, eat it. To refrain, to cut
No more, and by abstaining to end
The heartburn and the high cholesterol
That eaters are heir to; 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To forgo, to shun, to escape to
Sleep, perchance to dream- ay, that's the trick,
For in that sleep of abandon, such dreams may come,
For then when we've lost to the gentle night
Awe gives us pause; there's the respect
That quells the tongue of its desires.
For who could not forswear the holes of Swiss,
The temptations of the Laughing Cow,
The pangs of despis'd calories, the scent of Sardo,
The decadence of Gargonzola, and the byways
From the dietary regime, who will fardels bear.
The heavenly lipids of Volvet are sin, and all sinners
Would grunt and sweat under a weary life,
Of forced fortification. But to dream is an
Undiscover'd country, which, upon visiting
One is unbounded. This is the place,
Relish the ricotta, savor the sapsago,
For here we can taste those aged rounds,
And consume endlessly without price!
Thus our conscience can be relieved,
And thus the suppression of the day
Is coated o'er with a nightly cast of thought,
Easing actions by the day, of extreme devotion,
For by night the dreams will come to balance,
And release thy starved emotion. Soft you now,
Fair stomach, for by morn the mind
Will have thee full rewarded.

— Kyle Secrest
Untitled

Speckled browns
spots of rain
cover the cracks and creases.
Mud caked around the edges.
Black rubber sole
worn thin, too many
long roads, dirty roads.
As I walk with the
casket at Grandma's funeral
I feel the gravel
on the road
and I'm ashamed of my shoes.

— Steve Tisch
can you hear it

he used to take me there
when i lived in the south
to the woods
the deepest
darkest
scariest part of the woods
and sit me on his lap
as the wind swirled
trees danced lightly
as the remains of ropes
tattered
worn by time and weather
and the strain of human weight
twisted, lashed, coiled, then relaxed.

i always held onto him tightly
and listened to his heart
thought maybe it would tell me
why we were there

i figured he came here to think
to run away
to escape the wino on our street
or the hooker on our stoop
or mr. policeman standing in our face
but he never told me anything out there
except

listen

do you hear what the wind is saying?
sshhh, can you hear it?
it's saying
do dis'a way sista Harriet
go dat'a way brotha Nat
it even pushed they smell far away
so they had a little mo' time
listen, he said

and it'll lead you
if you listen
straight home
to Africa

then he would pick me up

hoist me high over his head
plop me on his shoulders
and strut home

nowadays
i sit in the woods sometimes
to get away
to escape the wino
still on my block
the hooker
still on my stoop
and mr. policeman
still standing in my face

and i listen

closely
to the wind

i can hear it saying
go dis'a way sista Orma
go dat'a way brotha Kwame
lead you people
out of the woods of genocide
and self annihilation

are you listening?

can you hear it?

— Cheo Ramsey
Table Dance

Nathan Browning had parked nicer cars. How this one compelled him to continue past the valet lot out onto Bayshore Drive, over to Key Biscane is a mystery. He fixed the rear view mirror and smiled, waving to Miguel, his boss, and the other valets who stood there trying to figure out what was happening. The tall silver street lights stood firm while the palm trees laughed and danced in the wind. Nathan wished the coconuts were ripe, and thought about the sweet taste of coconut milk and the way it tickles when dripping down his chin. He left the car running when he went inside 7-11 to get a carton of orange juice and something to eat. Leaning against the car, uniformed in black chinos, Chart House golf shirt, and weathered running shoes, he savored every bite of the microwave burrito. Until about two A.M., the car phone rang every 20 minutes or so. Maybe it stopped because the antenna was out of range, or maybe because they figured he’d stripped the car, sold the car, or simply died. As dawn began to climb over the car’s long hood, he fished through the glove compartment for sunglasses. He found a pair in a leather pouch, underneath a neatly opened letter.

He picked up the letter, and took a sip of warm orange juice. The letter, from Ms. Francine Hall, was addressed to Mr. Randall Aaron. Written on clean hotel stationary, the letter began by describing the silver water of the Dry Tortugas. Francine had only seen the image in flashes but thinking about it still gave her goosebumps. The shadow of Randall’s head dancing in and out of the face of the moon. The cool ocean breeze curling around her legs, causing her toes to clench into tiny fists. Randall Aaron, trying to preserve the wonderful expression on her face, grasped to contain himself, and clawed at the thin white sand that ran through his helpless fingers.
The next morning, a kid setting out beach chairs for the hotel noticed a gleam in the hot white sand. Reaching down, tan line showing as his shirt wrinkled up his arm, he picked up the watch, noticing the initials “RA” inscribed on the back. He put it in the pocket of his crisp white Bermudas and looked around, readjusting his Hawaiian flower shirt, and checking the green nametag that said “Sonesta Beach Club: Wyatt.” That night Wyatt wore the watch to a strip club, trying to impress the sad women with fake smiles and gold bikinis. One tall blond mare came over and rolled her fingers along the gold and silver watch band. As she pinched the straw, her eyes trapped his gaze and she took a long sip of his drink.

Randall Aaron’s wife raged when he returned from his business trip without the watch. Michelle James-Aaron gave the watch, originally her father’s, to Randall on their fifth anniversary. During WWII her father, Harvey James, got the watch by trading a ring, five marks, and a pack of cigarettes to a Russian. For their anniversary, Michelle James-Aaron had the watch redone and inscribed for her husband. She had told him to leave, exiling him until he found the watch, but on Friday she agreed to see “RA” again. They met at the Chart House restaurant on Bayshore Drive at 9:30 P.M.

Around 10:30, Miguel, the head valet, found Randall Aaron in the middle of his artichoke salad and informed him of the situation concerning his car. At 10:31, Michelle James-Aaron laughed so hard that she sprinkled the white tablecloth before her with red wine, and Nathan Browning paid the toll for the Key Biscane bridge.

— Miles Black
Swimming in the Dark

At 3 AM, when I'd get back from work at Big City Fish, the bathroom and kitchen lights were on and that was it. I'd get in the shower and rinse the feeling of work from my shoulder blades, then make a sandwich or heat up some spaghetti. I'd sit in front of the T.V., watching "Quantum Leap" or CNN with the volume on so low it made my chewing loud. The bedroom light had probably been off for two or three hours, and Vanessa was fast asleep. With the rest of the lights out, I used a flashlight to lead the way into the bedroom to keep from waking her up. I kept the orange flashlight on top of the refrigerator, next to the "Low-Fat Granola" and the "Golden Grahams." The flashlight was a cheap one that took two D batteries. They made the handle heavy and clanked around every time the flashlight moved.

I would stand there and stare at the dim beam pouring from the flashlight's cracked face, watching the dust swim around in the light. I felt like I was under water, surrounded by little shrimps and sea bugs that glow deep in the ocean depths. They feed on surface debris that floats down slower and slower as the ocean currents relax in the colder water. Deep in the ocean, things are a pale, quiet dark. In the kitchen, the beam silenced everything as I walked toward the bedroom.

Moving softly under the covers, I would slide my arm underneath her fragile neck, feeling her hair kiss my skin and give me goose bumps. As my other arm wrapped around her ribs, I drew myself as close as I could, trying to fit us together like two spoons. My eyes closed with colors and smiles and kisses, as the sound of her sleeping breath ran its fingernails gently down my back.

In the morning, I'd wake up to her staring at me as she got dressed for work or walked around lightly in her pajamas sipping coffee out of her little white mug. I could never move until she smiled or came over and gave me a kiss. Then I'd lift up the blinds with my finger, and roll over to look outside.

I still keep the flashlight up on the refrigerator, next to the "Golden Grahams," but the batteries have gone dead.

— Miles Black
Between Mouthfuls

Her parents told my father
she was a sleepwalker, that
it was dangerous to wake her
from her dreams in our
garden where she stole
our radishes, corn, and carrots
eating them raw, unwashed, with
her knees sinking into the
dirt, and the corn stalks
brushing her hair
with their dry husks.

One night I crouched
behind the cabbages, hoping
to see her gorging
her belly full and sore,

She was stooped down in
the mud eating an onion
like an apple, her crooked
teeth sinking through
the pearly flesh, white rings
wrapping around her tongue, her knees
bent low, ignoring the way her nightgown
slipped to reveal the slope
of her shoulder.

The sharp tang of
the onion smeared her lips
when she grabbed me, eyes
wide open, and kissed me
on the mouth.

The odor of the onion
bled from her
to me, making me want
to eat the world, gasping
for breath between mouthfuls.

— Amy Hicks
Family Tree

I stole the flash of my eyes
from my father, and his voice
of soft chants, I
take that too.

From my mother, I take hands
that licks wounds
and thighs that scream.

The choke of chalk resting
in the back of my throat, my sister
showed me the way to drink it, head
back, palms beating the ground.

I got the short end of the long legs of my unborn
brother.

My grandmother gave me the soul
of a seventeen year old girl
that refuses black and white
tight lipped smiles.
And from my grandfather, I learned to love salt licks and the scratching tongue against them. He taught me to dig arrowheads out from fine sand and to kept them in a box. I learned to pile rocks high for a proper burial and to eat the wind with my mouth open and my hands raised.

He said it was wise never to turn your back on the sun; you never know when it may dip low and set the land on fire.

He told me to watch carp swimming fat lazy circles around each other, and not once to think about my life.

—Amy Hicks
Rooming House

Perhaps, it was
the scream of the cattle
in the slaughterhouse
that trapped the roomer,
the fresh clean
stink of blood
that settled in the
backs of throats
metallic and sweet.

The roomer kept towels
against his window and door
to keep the stench out.
He made me take off my boots
because the blood stuck to the soles
leaving a trail of red footprints
on his bleached tile floor.

He bullied me, making
me bring him beer, can
burning my hands, the secret
two-knuckled knock, roomer's lips
like dried raisins
against mine.
I didn't want to, 
but my father made me. 
Didn't want to lose rent. 

I took the matter into 
my own hands, and threw 
the beer down the thirty 
foot drop of the outhouse pit 
which sucked up all three packs. 
Father knew it was me, crouched 
low behind the trees. 

We were poor, 
couldn't afford to 
lose, so he tied 
a rope around my stomach, and lowered 
me down. 

Blood rushed to my head, red 
stripe streaking my belly, fingers 
numb, looking for beer. 

— Amy Hicks
The Summer We Were Young

In the summer when
I was young my brother
would take me to the pond.
He never turned his head
when I peeled off my shirt.
He watched me dive in naked
and flushed.
The milky line of my body
echoing beneath the water.

In the summer when
I was young my brother
would give me quarters
to buy us popsicles.
He'd let the juice drip onto
my stomach until it formed
a sticky lake then he
lapped it up with a quick
flick of his tongue.
The red painted his lips
and made them cold.

My brother rubbed ice-cubes
on my knees, gliding
carefully over the scabs.

In the summer when
I was young my brother
gave me my first kiss.
He twisted his fingers
in my braid, and pressed
into my lips.

It was so quick.
I almost didn't count it.

— Amy Hicks
Little Boy Lost

he was in a field looking at the cracked ground and brown weedy grass and singing made up songs about life.

he picked up a piece of cracked earth that came out of the ground like a large puzzle piece—not crumbling at all. He tosses that clod of dirt into the air and watches it shatter like glass when it hits the ground.

an oak tree in the distance branched and twisted and seemed easy to climb, but he hated climbing trees. as he moved up into the branches, he hummed a made up tune with no words, just feelings telling him which pitches to hum next. he sat in the tree and let this noise move through him not having a single care in the world.

i wish i could go back to that field where that little boy sang so freely and without hesitation. i miss that boy. he hasn't been around much lately.

— Michael Mundahl
On Becoming A Tree

The moving leaves blow
the crisp wind and the voice
through my hair
as leaves blow along the
ground and cover my body
the voice whispers to me again

Sink! sink into the dirt
join us down here
keep your eyes open
you want to see while
you're down here

Decay, let yourself decay
let the earth consume you
the-roots know where you are
they will come find you

Move slowly up through the roots
joining others already there
fill the trunk with your spirit
spread your thoughts through the branches
(don't enter the leaves, or you'll fall again)
see how the veiny branches seem to touch
every corner of the sky?

— Michael Mundahl
Baby

I sit here in the waiting room 'till time is moving slower than the continents in motion. A man in the corner sits mumbling to himself and humming several sections of different songs as if they are all connected. Another man, consumed by the infomercial advertising “The Flowbee Haircutting System” which was being demonstrated on small animals, reclines on two chairs moved to provide him with a make-shift bed. A short woman talks to the man at the counter and speaks rather loudly about her job and why she is here.

I sit on the couch which has molded itself to every butt that has sat on it in the past few years. I am wringing my hands, wiggling my fingers, bouncing my legs, and biting my lower lip. A person comes up to me for the fifth time and asks if I need anything. I tell her that I am simply waiting for my wife and that I don't need anything. I move to a stiff-backed chair.

A woman emerges from a room down the hall and all the inhabitants of the waiting room glare at her. She smiles politely and heads toward the vending machines at the back of the waiting area. The mumbling man asks her if he will be seen by a doctor soon. She responds by letting him know that she has no idea and that the man the short woman was talking to would have a much better idea.

Yet another person emerges from a room down the hall but disappears down an adjoining hallway. The man watching TV changes the channel and lights a cigarette. The woman eating her Spicy Corn Nuts, Slim Jim, and Sprite retrieved from the vending machines viciously yells at the Flowbee man to put out his cigarette, then smiles with the friendliness of a Disney employee. A piece of nut has flown out of her mouth and sticks in the Flowbee man's hair. Returning to her chair, she tells me that deliveries can take hours depending on the frequency of contractions.

I stare back down the hallway. Waiting.

— Michael Mundahl
Cleaning A Buck

My father hung the carcass in the garage
its legs bound to a broomstick.
The naked body dangled, twisting coldly.

The only things I want to touch
are the antlers. Five points like
five hard fingers when I reach out my hand.

We cut the antlers into buttons for a deerskin vest.
When the hide returned from the tanner
there were too many wounds.

My father put the buttons in a box in the shed.
They rattle like coins, waiting to pay debts.

— Justin Breese
Eat Meat

When those vegetarians give scolding radish eyed looks
I smile and lick the blood.

I won't eat anything but meat. Rare.

Tear off the fur and fry it. Grill it with the heads on. Make gravy with the grease and eat it with your hands.


Tasting their last twitches.

— Justin Breese
Alan gets Religion

Alan rolled through the channels on his walkman as he gazed out the portholish window of the speeding, steely Greyhound bus he happened to be taking from his home in the less fashionable part of Rhode Island to LaGuardia Airport in New York City.

He was completely surprised, after settling on a station, to hear the first chords of famous rock group Local Anesthesia's new hit song "Love is Kind of Like a Handkerchief That Has Been Slightly Used," as this had been the #1 song on the pop charts for 23 straight weeks. He liked the soft, melancholy tone of the music but was a little confused about the true meaning, or even remote relevance, of the lyrics. He had heard the story, of course. It seemed that Local Anesthesia had not gone on tour for thirteen years because the group's lead singer, Dude, had spent the entire time crouched in the corner of the dining room in his mansion, convinced that he was a small, very rare, and in fact igneous rock found in Madagascar. When he arose from his inanimate state, the first words he muttered were the title and lyrics to "Love is Kind of Like a Handkerchief That Has Been Slightly Used." The critics hailed the song as a sacred work of rock art forged in Dude's mind throughout his thirteen year absence as a rock star and presence of a rock.

But, despite these explanations, the song still confused Alan. He had been confused about a lot of things lately, but he felt that he was physically and mentally moving towards spiritual enlightenment. He was headed for the first annual "World Religions Showcase" in posh Santa Clara, California.

As Alan stepped off the Greyhound and onto the grounds of LaGuardia International Airport, he looked up at the grey sky with disgust. He had always hated big cities, especially New York, where even the birds were rude. He was given a flower by a Moonie as he walked through the city within a city that was the airport. "He seems pretty happy," Alan thought, accepting the carnation, "maybe I'll be one of them. But we'll see."

Realizing he was in New York, Alan was not at all surprised to find that purchasing a ticket would be its own journey. "First or business class?" she asked, her fingers flying across her computer keyboard.
"Business, please" Alan replied in a low voice. Suddenly, her fingers stopped flying across the keyboard and she looked upon Alan with a surprised gaze.

"Did you say business class? Are you sure? I've been working all day here, and all the really cool people buy first class tickets. Don't you want to be cool, too?" she questioned.

"I'm a little old for that, I think," Alan said with a smirk.

"Fine then. How about chic, sophisticated, well-groomed? It only costs $35 more to be cool, and you get free peanuts and stuff."

Having been thoroughly convinced, Alan bought three first class tickets and checked his baggage.

A little later, he groaned as he looked out of his window in the airplane. The plane was in a mini traffic jam within the mini city, and the pilot had been waiting 43 minutes for takeoff clearance. Alan had traveled a lot in his job as sales representative for the Flavor-Full Popsicle Co. It wasn't the moving that made him groan, but rather the absolute and complete sense of no movement while he was on board a vehicle capable of going very, very fast.

Just then the pilot broke in. "The pilot of that plane that just went was smirking at me. I just know it. He thinks he's so special because they let him go first. Well I'm special too, you know. I was captain of my high school football team."

Alan rolled his eyes and decided he had better sleep on this flight. He picked up one of those mini-pillows made just for airplanes, dropped it, picked it up, and confused it with the scalding hot wash cloth he had just been handed by a pair of tongs connected to a stewardess.

She looked upon Alan, gave a sort of half smile, and asked, "What would you like for dinner? We have ham and we also have some ham."

"What about the fish the man behind me just ordered from that other stewardess?" Alan retorted.

"Oh, that," she replied somberly. "Yes, well I suppose that's nice too."

Soon forgetting this less than engaging conversation, Alan soon drifted off to sleep on his mini-pillow. He dreamed about his
mother. He woke up in a cold sweat. After resolving to get a little in
his stomach to avoid nightmares, he summoned the stewardess and
said "I've sort of noticed that everyone has their food. I was
wondering if I could get mine, the fish."

"Oh yes, the fish" she said, looking concerned. "I guess I might
as well tell you. The fifth moon of Gemini has altered its orbit, and
this has kind of put a kink in things. You see, I'm not psychically in
tuned to carry any sort of seafood product. Won't be for days."

Alan gave a long sigh and then nodded his head as if he
understood. He ordered 10 packages of peanuts and a stiff drink
instead. Boy those were good peanuts.

About an hour later, somewhere above Omaha, Alan felt a
buzzing in his head, a warm, tingly sensation. Was it the light of
God revealing himself and his true way to Alan? Or was it merely
that fourth stiff drink brought by the now slightly fuzzy stewardess?
He took two non-aspirin and drank a tall glass of water, and the
feeling went away by Utah.

— Todd Thompson
she screams
and struggles
pushing kicking fighting
no
no
no!
her lips vomit her pleas
but the words are deformed
by a bruised mouth
kissed and plundered by a tongue
she begs with dignity
already forced to her knees
but just her luck her tormentor is deaf.
the sounds around her in her assault her ears
leaving no part of her body untouched—
the sounds of zippers zipping, buttons popping,
flesh tearing, cloth ripping, soul separating.
she hears her own voice
screaming and struggling for breath
fighting against invading objects,
pushing away a choking sensation.
she screams no
   no
   no
as she is raped by the beast
and again by its ghost.

— Melissa Jenkins
migration to creation

when hell froze over
a flock of angels flew south

shedding their feathers
and spreading fear
don't below, their shadows
swallowed the people

one woman gazed in awe
and decided she too would soar

she hollowed all her bones
sucked out all the marrow

swallowed the light of the moon
and gave birth to herself.

— Melissa Jenkins
Mystery and Mastery

The pits maybe were gravel pits
and before that, the beaches of
the Kalamazoo River.
The dark water stretched
across the entire valley,
from the sand on which I stand
to the horizon
to the perfect distant trees.
Dogs were always a problem.
Big black foamy ones I heard.
Big Kids too.
The burly kind that raped our fort
of crate wood,
then shit on it for effect.

The kind we burned to beat up.
The pits held frozen bodies,
dead of sledding.
Held crusting washing machines made during The War.
Held crumpled, smashed first packs of cigarettes.

At the far section slept a sandy hill,
next to the worn out sheep farm.
We would run, leap, see who could dive the farthest.
I never won.
So I didn’t care.
I tried to let go, let my body soar, impervious
to a sandy tumbling crash.
But as the fall wind blew,
I would hold back just enough
to ensure a soft landing.

— James Keckler
The Trees of the Wood

I never knew the Bible could be so romantic. I didn't realize it could have an erotic tone. But it was just a memory rendered meaningless by the present. Jeremy had read the Song of Solomon one night to her: the King James version. And then they fucked—but it wasn't exactly that, or at least not only that. In her mind it was love, pure love—every definition of the word applied. Two human beings free and natural, extracting every bit of pleasure from one another that they could possibly get, just like animals in perfect harmony with nature. And we're all animals whether or not we want to believe it. God made us—male and female created he us. Right, Jeremy? Ain't that what it says? I am a lily among thorns you said. You are my apple tree among the trees of the wood. But Jeremy had changed, probably due to the fact that they had spent so much time together in the last couple of months. Ever since she had quit school. Of course, her mom gave her a really hard time about it, but Vicki didn't care. Fuck her. She's never given me anything but shit. Jeremy loves me. Didn't he? She didn't call what she received from Jake love; it wasn't that strong or at least not as positive a feeling. When he was mad at her she could feel his hate—at those times he practically raped her. But Jeremy never had such fits of aggression. Sometimes he tried to look macho around the rest of the guys but she was never fooled. She could see right through him. That's why she loved him. When he was drunk he was always bullshitting about poetry when he wasn't bullshitting about Superman and Clark Kent. He was some kind of prophet. No one else talked about poetry and the world and the meaning of things. There's no hope, Vicki, he had told her once. It's all going to hell. In a few years there won't be any food left. There's rape-death camps all over former Yugoslavia. No one cares about anything at all anymore. Some kids threw another little kid out a fourteen story window. That's why we enjoy beauty, Vicki. That's why. It's better to live in beauty. That's why we drink and fuck and read poetry.

But all he said was thanks. Thanks. That's what you tell a store clerk. Not a real person. He didn't even touch her. He just got up and left. He smiled. But it wasn't a genuine smile. It was the kind you give to someone who's paid to help you. So you really don't mean anything by it. Except she wasn't paid. She was a worthless piece of shit. A slave. A Pooch. A smelly little tagalong. But who—or what—did she really cling to? Jeremy? Jake? Herself? Who? The fact
that she did not know perplexed her to the ineluctable point of crying. She sobbed, feeling utterly crushed, cut off from the world. She wasn't a part of it anymore. The love of Jeremy was what held her to the ground. Once, the sex was blended with affection. The fucking was good. Didn't God make fucking good too, Jeremy? You hypocrite. You bastard. You know you don't believe in anything. So don't pretend for a second that you do. The world isn't good to you, Jeremy. And not to me either. I'm afraid to move. If I move, I'm history. If she moved, she'd throw up. If she moved, she'd be aware. If she moved, she'd know she were still alive. And she wanted to be deceived. You told me the truth, you lousy no-good bastard. Better to escape. And we all escape anyway. We have to. Whether we believe it or not. If we believe the world is good, we're wrong. Because it's nothing but a ball of horseshit. And if we believe the world is shit, then we're honest and wise. But still unhappy. We're all unhappy. There's nothing that can make us happy. Not life. Not death. Not anything. Jesus. You knew how to make my night. You knew how to distract me from the truth. You'd discuss the stars. See that one up there? You know what that one's called? Sirius. I'm serious. Ha ha. The dog star. Gimme a kiss, Pooch. A big sloppy kiss. With your tongue. Like a dog.

—Joan'll be here in a minute.

What? What was that? Oh, he said Joan. She suddenly felt very strange. Her spine tingled. She could have sworn that they said Jonah. But so what? What about him? Oh, come on Vicki. You know damn well what. You remember everything. How many other guys in your life did you stay up all night with, just talking, yet feeling completely satisfied? Just one. The rest would bore you sooner or later. Even Jeremy. How strange. But he said Joan. Not Jonah. Used to be a very common name. Now you don't hear it very often. Joan joan joan. Perfect name for the perfect wife who'd stay home usually and go out with her husband to the fair every year with their fucking kids letting them ride the stupid little boring kiddy rides unless one of them was already cynical and wanted to be an adult and rode the octopus or the tilt-a-whirl instead. I'm not gonna end up like that. I'm just gonna end up— she smiled to herself— dead. And that's it. With a sign that says "please somebody bury me." Probably no one will. The fucking vultures will eat me. Or some fucking coyote will come around. Or a wild dog. I'll be useful. I'll have a purpose even after I'm dead. Yeah... So why not drink yourself to death?

Jonah. He was always a fuckin priss. Where the hell is he now?
Probably at home. Reading Shakespeare or some stupid shit like that. Have a drink. No thanks. Have a smoke. Uh—naah. What? You gonna just say no like the little kids' commercials tell ya to? No. I don't wanna talk to him. Do I? I don't want to talk to him anymore. She pictured the way he looked when she last talked to him. The stately profile. God. He looked like a President of something. Thomas Jefferson or George Washington. Held his head high. He wasn't always like that. Remember? Shit. He used to try to disappear when anyone was around. You could tell. He'd just crouch up into a little ball. All through our freshman year he was like that. You wondered how he walked around. Because he never looked up. You asked him somethin and he'd get red in the face and his voice would quiver. But when you got to know him, he'd just start rattling off ideas. Stuff I never heard before. Real fuckin radical ideas. But he'd never accomplish anything. Just grow old and sit on his porch. Drinking coffee. I wonder what he's like now? Haven't talked to him in so long. Never bothered to walk over to his house. Just too much of a priss for me. Probably still a virgin. Little church boy. She started to feel the effect of the vodka now, acutely. It was making her sick. Gotta throw up. Make me feel better, so she opened the car door and vomited. Now I can get up—so she raised herself slowly and got out of the car, slamming the door behind her.

The fair. God. What a strange atmosphere. When everybody gets together to have fun once a year. But hardly an orgy of anything. So how do they have fun? Ride. Play games. Blow all their fuckin money. Weird. I smell elephant ears. Why don't they make them any other time of year? They're so yummy. Everybody likes them. So why not? She looked over at the family which was sitting next to the car. The man who had said "Joan" looked at her. She looked away, then turned her head to glance at him again. He was still looking at her. What the fuck? Did I puke that loud? What are you looking at, asshole? She rose her arm and put her nose into her armpit. Christ. I stink! Smells like man's b.o. pH balanced for a woman. Need a fuckin shower. Where should I go? I wonder where the hell they are? OK, Jeremy. Who ya fuckin now? Someone prettier than I am? Someone younger? Are you molesting some little girl because she knows what beauty is better than I do? You and your beauty bullshit. I bet you say that just to get a piece of my ass. Because I was easy. Right? Because I didn't control myself. I puked all over your carpet and you cleaned it up. Such a nice boy you are. Shit. She walked around for awhile. In a circle. the fireworks are about to start. Sometime today. Sometime soon. Before Christmas.
Come on... I don't think people should see me like this. Swaying back and forth and shit. A cop'll come up and wanna smell my breath. Can't allow that. Kicked out or somethin. No no. We can't allow that, miss. Fuck you and your miss. You just want to have sex with me. Don't you? Well. That can be arranged. Have fun. Sure.

She fell down. Nice boy. Jonah was nice too. He was always a nice boy. A little too much. A prissy ass. Goody two shoes. Showed up for a lot of parties. But never drank. Named after a book of the Bible he told me. Strange to be named after a book. But it was also a person I guess. Gorgeous smile. Remember when we were little kids together? Oh yes. We'd walk to kindergarten together. He had on red socks and so did I. Why didn't he wear white socks like the other boys. He was always complaining about them. He hated wearing them. His mother made him. Fuck. I know how those legends go. She said they looked nice on him. Maybe someone'll fuckin' analyze him someday and discover: all his prissy ass shit goes back to those damn girl socks. He liked me. Didn't he? Yeah. He always smiled at me. Said Hi. You could just pet him like he was a kitten. The kind that would never play or claw you. Just purr. A sick kitten. A gentle, nice boy. His dad was always hugging me. I swear he wanted to get into my pants. Jonah never touched me that way. He held my hand. He kissed me on the cheek.

Yes. I will remember every bit of it. She lay down flat on her back. Phoof! The first fireworks. Applauds and hoorays from the fairgoers. Every bit of it. Yes. He's sitting here besides me. I will think so hard that he will be lying right here. Won't he? In my mind he will. Just like the time... Yes, I remember the time. How long ago was that? 10 years? More than half of my life. He never sang, Ooo, the stupid Polack bitch, Vicki Wojtowicz, either. We went to Grand Rapids for the Fourth of July. Ah, yes. A clear night. Stars shining everywhere. That afternoon was hot. Remember our moms playing cards together? What were they playing? Double solitaire. What they always played. Didn't like go-fish or old maid like we did. Never played hide and seek like we did either. Couldn't understand why they didn't like sprinklers or the sandbox and all the neat things you could do with them. Buried Princess Leia. Never found her again. Dug and dug but never found her. We thought we knew precisely where she was. But we were wrong. That was a fine summer. You and me. And Melissa. And Laura. And Darrell. And Jeff. And George. What ever happened to them? Darrell. Gone. Just a memory now. He taught us how to play Dungeons and Dragons before anyone even thought it was satanic. We were so excited. We were addicted.
And we were just little kids. My mom always made us mustard and cheese sandwiches. Remember that, Jonah? Times have changed. Mustard and cheese. And your mom always made tortillas that she learned how to make from Mrs. Salas. She'd put butter and cinnamon sugar on them. Do you remember? And how we wanted to make candles? Remember what we did? Where we got the idea? Your family had that station wagon. Went all over in it. We left the crayons in the back one time. Totally melted. God. That was a hot summer. And George was fuckin crazy. He'd put baby oil all over his body instead of suntan lotion. Dangerous. But nobody cared. He got fried. He thought it was fun for some reason. And Darrell introduced us to milk in Pepsi. He was five years older than we were. Can you believe it, Jonah? We've known him ever since we were four. He was nine then. And Jeff was seven. And George was six. I remember the terrible fight you and George got in. It never came to anything but him, calling you a lesbian. Didn't even know what one was. So your mom was forced into telling us. We just said Oh. A perfect expression. Everybody was always calling everyone else gay back then. Ooo, the new insult. The new word around school. Rock Hudson died. You were afraid of getting AIDS. It's hilarious now. You didn't have a sex life or do drugs. You were never adventurous enough to even climb trees. But we still became blood brother and sister. Because you thought I was too pretty to have a disease. You used that word, "disease," like it was a new word for. You did that a lot. I thought I knew what it meant. And I was right. But I'd never thought about saying it. And in second grade we fell in love. In third grade again. Love was a different feeling then. I'm not sure what it meant to us. We looked it up in the dictionary: a warm feeling... I didn't think so at the time. But now I think that's what it was. That was one definition. We didn't understand the others. Do you remember all this, Jonah? Does it mean the same to you as it does to me? Now I don't even talk to you anymore. I haven't said a word to you in at least a year. We see each other on the street all the time. I sit out on Jeremy's porch smoking a cigarette and you just walk by. We don't say anything. No hello. No smile. If we're not indifferent, then we're exchanging scowls or frowns. Things change I guess. Is that a good way to describe it? How true is it? My mother's always despised me so that hasn't changed. But things between us have changed. We seperated. Which one of us has grown the most? Which one of us is the most mature? Should we judge by experience or action or what? Or should we just not judge at all? Oh. I remember it all now. Everything we've ever done together. An hour ago I
wouldn't have. Is that so strange? These beautiful fireworks. The really noisy ones too. They bring it all back. We were lying on a bridge in Grand Rapids. The debris fell on us and we panicked. It stung like hell too. You got a piece in your eye. Luckily a little one. But you rubbed it sore. Your mother scolded you about it. Some guy running by gave you a hat. He probably stole it off somebody's head as a cruel prank. You took it home. It was one of those neat ones that lit up like Christmas around the visor. Your older cousin was making fun of the prostitutes on the sidewalk. Or at least they looked like whores. But we didn't see them solicit anyone so we can't be sure. Can we? God. I swear that was the best night of my life. You were my boyfriend then. But we never kissed on the lips because we both agreed that that was gross. We kissed on the cheek and hugged and said "I love you" a lot. When did we break up? I don't remember. Sometime in fourth grade, wasn't it? Or before. I don't know. Why? You said your parents made fun of you about it. You said someday, when we were older, we'd get back together. But it never happened. And it never will. And I remember. It was the day you showed me the apple tree you found in the woods. A real apple tree. That made me happy. But what you told me ruined me. Oh, where are you now, Jonah? I know, you still live at home. You're going back to college in the fall, aren't you? And I'm going nowhere. Just hanging out in St. Jude. Piss-ant town. I have to tell you the dream I had that night. A weird dream. I dreamt that the apple trees were made of all apple. No bark. No leaves. Just apple. And God was in his heaven and everything was right with the world. God. I hate that expression. But that's how I felt. What does it mean? She felt the heaviness of her drunk body against the ground. What does it mean? You're smart. She closed her eyes and let mind go empty.

—Hello? Miss?

Vicki woke:

—Huh?
—I'm going to have to ask you to leave now. It's over.
—What?
—The fair's over. He reached out his hand, Come on.
—but I have a ride.
—who's your ride?
—Jake Angstrom.
—Oh. Well, does he work for the fair?
—No.
—No? But only the workers’ cars are still here.
She let officer help her up. The car was gone. Gone! Those bastards! They left her. I can’t believe—
—Madam? Have you been drinking?
He reached down to grab the almost empty fifth of vodka.
—Huh? No—huh uh—
The officer looked at her sternly, and tightened his grip on her arm.
—Don’t lie to me, miss. How old are you?
—Twenty-two.
He laughed.
—Come on.
—Where are you taking me? Her head was pounding painfully.
—Home.
—I don’t have a home.
—Damn it, he said, annoyed, I’m taking you home. Or else to jail to spend the night. I’m sure you don’t want that, do you?
She struggled.
—Let me go!
The officer slapped her across the face. She fell to the ground. I can’t believe he did that. This is shit shit shit—
—Now, get in the car, calmly, and tell me where you live.

She staggered onto Jeremy’s porch. She had nowhere else to go. I could go over to Jonah’s, and then she giggled sardonically. God. Like those upstanding Christian citizens would want to take in a lousy drunken whore with a shitty hangover. Jeremy, you’re such a bastard. Where did you go after I sucked your dick? Did you have your hands down some pretty bitch’s pants on the paratrooper? Or did you fuck someone on the ferris wheel? No. No that, she laughed to herself. I know you couldn’t have gotten it up so soon afterwards. I know you too well. You were probably just smoking weed with Jake or playing some goddamn game. Right? She crawled to a corner of the porch, rested her head as comfortably as possible against the wood, and fell into a dreamless sleep.

—Chris Wells